

Allbrook House and
Roehampton Library
Assessment of Listability
Prepared for
Wandsworth Council
August 2015



Alan Baxter

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Executive Summary

Allbrook House and Roehampton Library are due to be demolished under the Alton Estate Masterplan (October 2014) and draft Roehampton Supplementary Planning Document (March 2015), which were produced in consultation with Historic England (then English Heritage) and a wide range of local residents, community groups and other stakeholders. A listing application for the buildings was submitted in July 2015.

This report assesses the listability of Allbrook House and Roehampton Library, and demonstrates that their architectural interest, historic interest and group value is not sufficient to meet the criteria for listing, for the following reasons.

Relationship to Alton Estate masterplan

A slab block with a piazza at the entrance to the Estate was part of the original 1953 masterplan. However Allbrook House and Roehampton Library as built in 1959–61 were a significantly and deeply flawed compromise on the original concept, and the least successful part of the LCC Estate.

Setting

The poorly-resolved urban context of Allbrook House and Roehampton Library is a critical failure in its architectural design, creating ill-considered, dark and unpleasant spaces at ground level, which encourage anti-social behaviour. This is especially apparent when compared to the dramatic open landscape of the Highcliffe slab blocks.



The poorly-resolved urban context of Allbrook House and Roehampton Library

Influence

Allbrook House and Roehampton Library were not influential buildings. They were not published in the architectural press and there is no evidence of them being influential on other buildings. The earlier phases of the Alton Estate were widely published and celebrated in 1956–59, but this pre-dated the detailed design and construction of Allbrook House and Roehampton Library in 1959–61.

Original brief

An important part of the original brief was the provision of a public 'piazza': this vision was eroded by the cumulative adjustments made to the location and massing of Allbrook House and Roehampton Library after the early 1950s masterplans, so that by completion in 1961 it was clearly not successful in this respect.



The filled undercroft creates unsafe, hidden spaces

Group value

The group value of Allbrook House and Roehampton Library with the listed buildings on the estate is fundamentally limited because of their architectural differences, later date and lack of visual or spatial connection.

Innovation

Allbrook House is a commonplace and derivative 1960s building. It simply copied some aspects of the Highcliffe slab blocks without their most successful and celebrated features.

Alterations

The extent of alterations to Roehampton Library mean that today it survives only as a basic architectural shell with none of its original fixtures and fittings.

Designers

John Partridge and Roy Stout are post-war architects of some note but Allbrook House and Roehampton Library are not important buildings in their careers.



The buildings respond awkwardly to the sloping site

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Context and purpose of report

This report was prepared by Alan Baxter Ltd for Wandsworth Council. It assesses the case for adding Allbrook House and Roehampton Library, part of the Alton Estate owned by Wandsworth Council, to the statutory list.

Historic England (HE) issued their consultation report for the buildings on 10 August 2015. This was based on an inspection that took place on 20 July 2015 following an application for spot listing. It contains the factual information upon which HE's recommendation, as to whether the building should be listed for its special architectural or historic interest, will be based.

Alan Baxter Limited was commissioned by Wandsworth Council to provide a response to Historic England's consultation report. This report is based on a full inspection of the exteriors and publically-accessible interiors of the buildings. It was not possible to inspect an interior of a residential unit within Allbrook House.

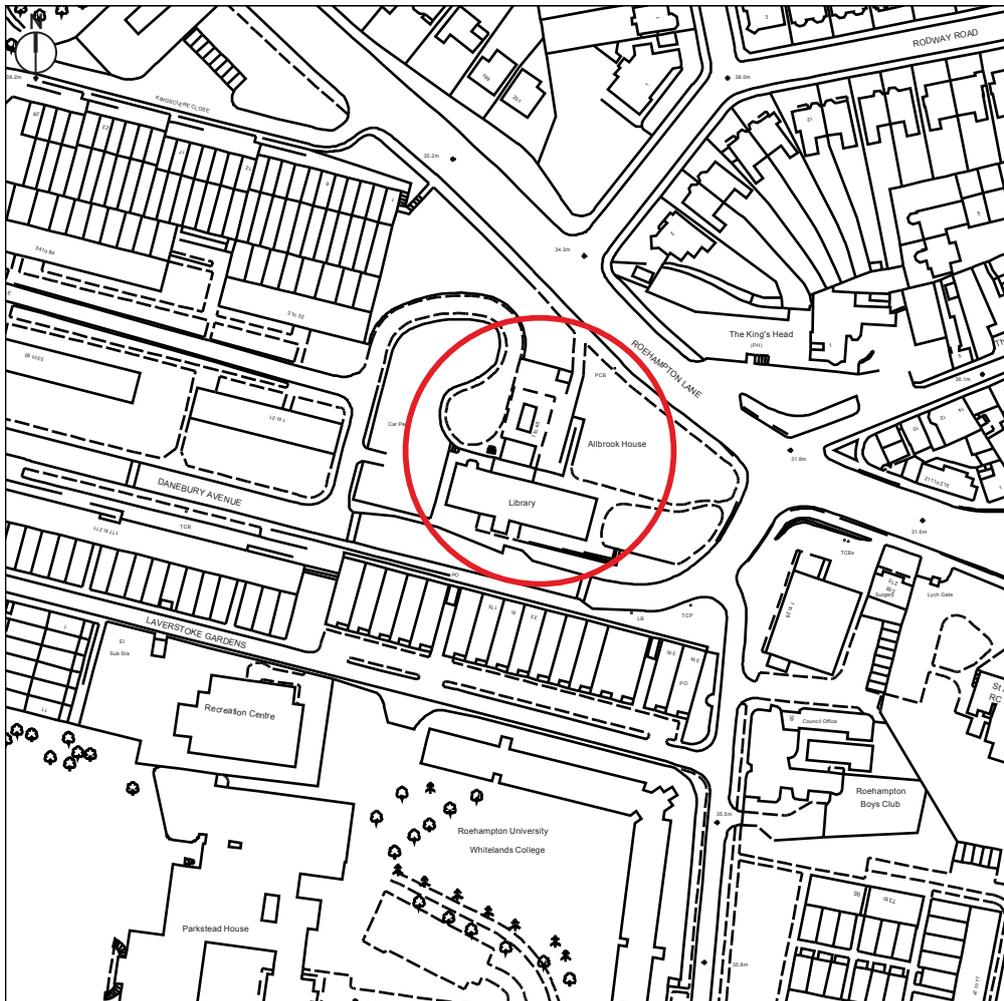
By examining the architectural and historic interest of Allbrook House and Roehampton Library in relation to Historic England's published listing selection guides, this report demonstrates that they do not meet the criteria for listing.



Location plan

1.2 Designations

Allbrook House and Roehampton Library are located in the London Borough of Wandsworth. They are not within a conservation area but are within the setting of both the Roehampton Village and Alton conservation areas. The Alton Conservation Area is designated for the interaction of the post-war estate and pre-existing buildings with a designed landscape. The Roehampton Village Conservation Area protects the core of the area's historic development since the seventeenth century.

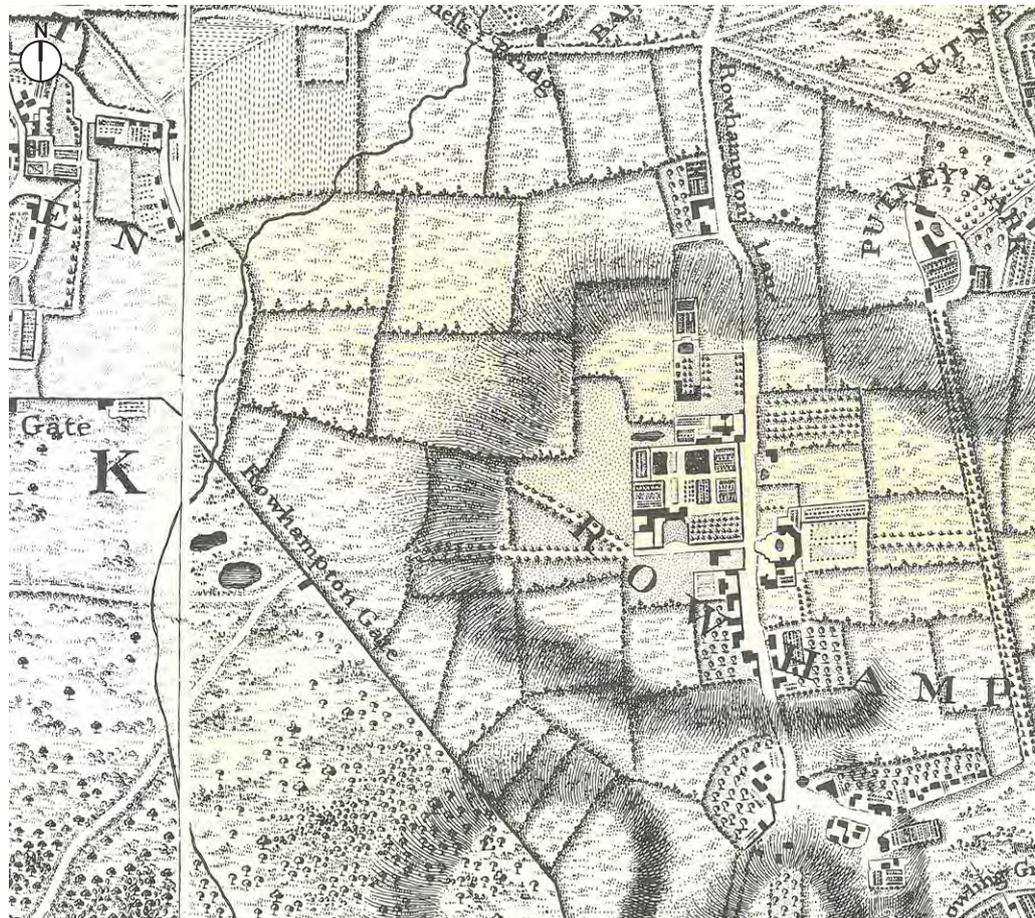


Site plan

2.0 Historical Development

2.1 Alton Estate

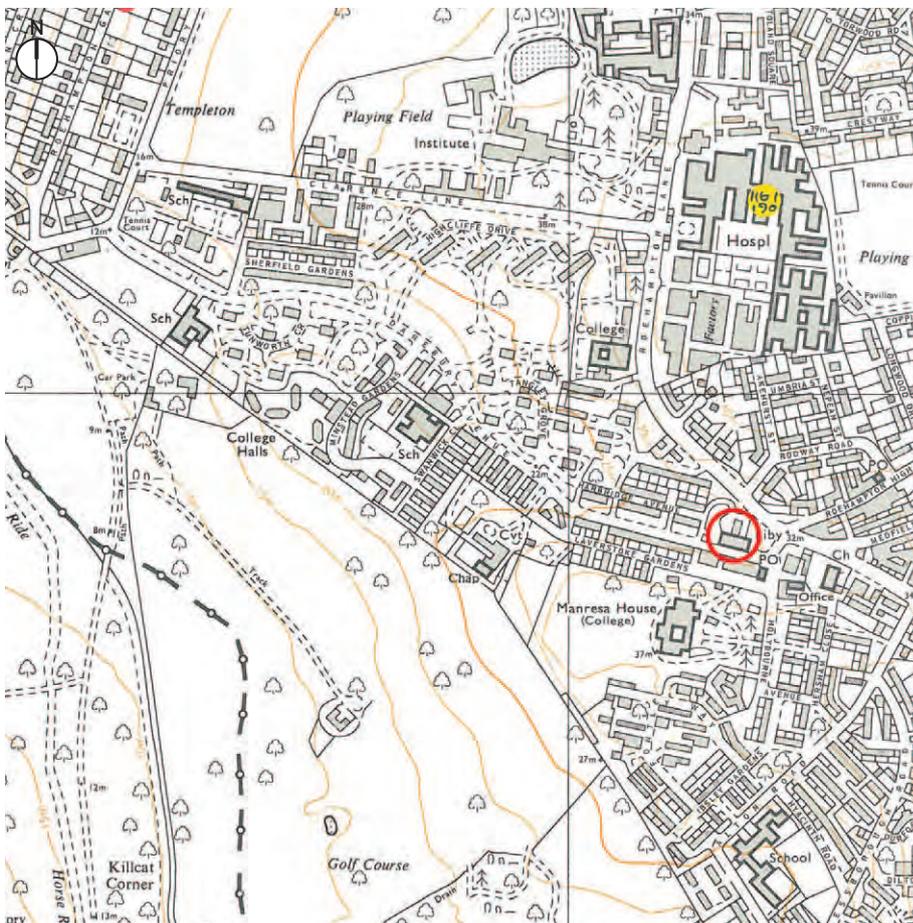
The Alton Estate was designed and built by the London County Council (LCC) Architects' Department from 1951. The architects followed European modernist principles and the County of London Plan (1943), which stressed the idea of 'mixed development': incorporating a range of housing types to accommodate all ages in one community. The Alton Estate is an important example of where these factors came together on a historic site, incorporating the existing landscaping of several large eighteenth-century houses and their gardens on the edge of Richmond Park, to create visual interest in the landscape by setting clusters of high and low rise housing blocks in open parkland.



Roehampton as depicted in Rocque's map of 1745



1894-1913



1976

Because of the size of the site acquired by the LCC, it was split into two parts, Alton East and West (known during development as Portsmouth Road and Roehampton Lane respectively). These were designed by different teams of architects with slightly different philosophies. Alton East was mostly built in 1952–5 under the influence of Scandinavian ‘new humanist’ ideas and included ten 11-storey point blocks with lower houses and maisonettes. The point blocks are all listed grade II.

Alton West was built later, mostly in 1954–9, by architects who prized the ideas of the prolific French modernist architect Le Corbusier. The five distinctive Highcliffe slab blocks followed the lead of his *Unite d’Habitation* in Marseilles and are described in Pevsner as “the most important innovation of the estate” (Cherry and Pevsner: 2002, 690). They are all listed grade II*, and can be seen as the high point of the LCC slab block typology which had been developed at the Loughborough Estate, Brixton (1952-56) and Bentham Road, Hackney (1955-59), neither of which are listed. In addition Alton West included several groups of point blocks, terraces (the bungalows for the elderly are listed grade II) and a shopping parade at the entrance of the Estate to Roehampton Lane.

Allbrook House and Roehampton Library are sited at the beginning of this shopping parade, at the junction with Roehampton Lane. This was the final phase of the Estate and was designed and built in 1959-61.



A Highcliffe slab block in its celebrated landscape setting

2.2 Designers

Like the rest of the Alton Estate, Allbrook House and Roehampton Library were designed by the LCC Architect's Department, under the leadership of Robert Matthew until 1953, Leslie Martin to 1956 and then Hubert Bennett.

Allbrook House and Roehampton Library were included in the first masterplans of the early 1950s and delivered as part of Alton West. The team for this initially comprised Bill Howell, John Killick, John Partridge and Stanley Amis, who went on to form a distinguished practice (HKPA). They worked under the leadership of Colin Lucas, a pioneering pre-war designer of modernist houses. They were later joined by others including Roy Stout, whose name appears on the contract drawings for Allbrook House and Roehampton Library and who would also go on to form a successful practice, Stout and Litchfield.

Recent statements made by Partridge and Stout suggest that the final concept for Allbrook House and Roehampton Library was developed by Partridge in the late 1950s and worked up into detailed design by Stout (Partridge 2008: 119–20, and Historic England 2015: 3, after a conversation with Roy Stout). Partridge left the LCC in 1959 but Stout saw the building through to completion in 1961.

John Partridge (b. 1924)

John Partridge is best known as a founding partner of Howell, Killick Partridge and Amis (HKPA) with Bill Howell, John Killick and Stanley Amis. The four architects worked together at the LCC from 1952 and after their practice was founded in 1959 it developed a reputation for well-considered modernist buildings especially at universities.

Many of the architects' buildings have been recognised by listing. From their LCC days working on Alton West, the five distinctive slabs are grade II* and the bungalows for the elderly are grade II. A terrace built by Killick and Amis at South Hill Park, Hampstead, for themselves and four other families at the same time is also listed grade II.

Eight of their buildings as a formal partnership are listed: seven at universities and one at a hospital. Each project was led by one partner, and Partridge is known to have been in charge of the grade-II* Hilda Besse Building at St Antony's College, Oxford.

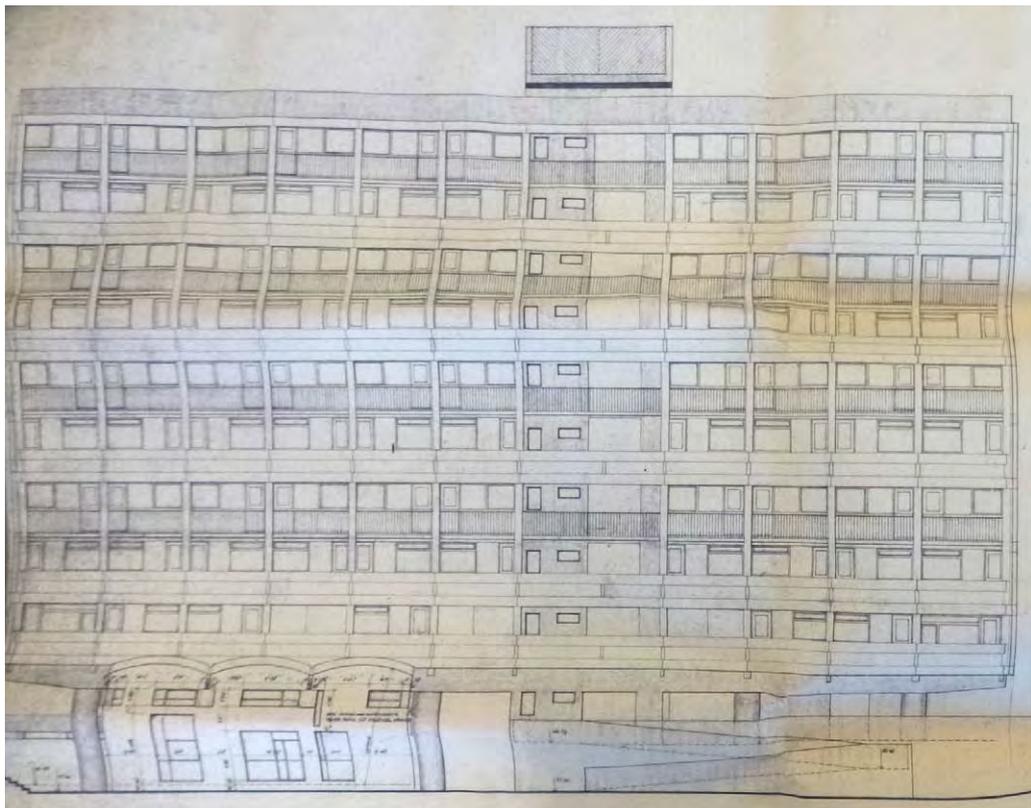
Roy Stout (b. 1928)

Roy Stout graduated from the Architectural Association in London in 1955 before joining the LCC where he worked on Alton West. He drew up the designs for Allbrook House and Roehampton Library under John Partridge and remained at the LCC until the building was completed in 1961.

In 1962 Stout entered into partnership with Patrick Litchfield and the pair was responsible for many interesting private house commissions of the 1960s and 1970s in London and the South of England. Two of these are listed; one, The New House in Oxfordshire of 1964, is grade II*.



Allbrook House and Roehampton Library in its drab streetscape today



Contract drawing of Allbrook House and Roehampton Library, 1959 (LMA)

2.3 Planning and layout

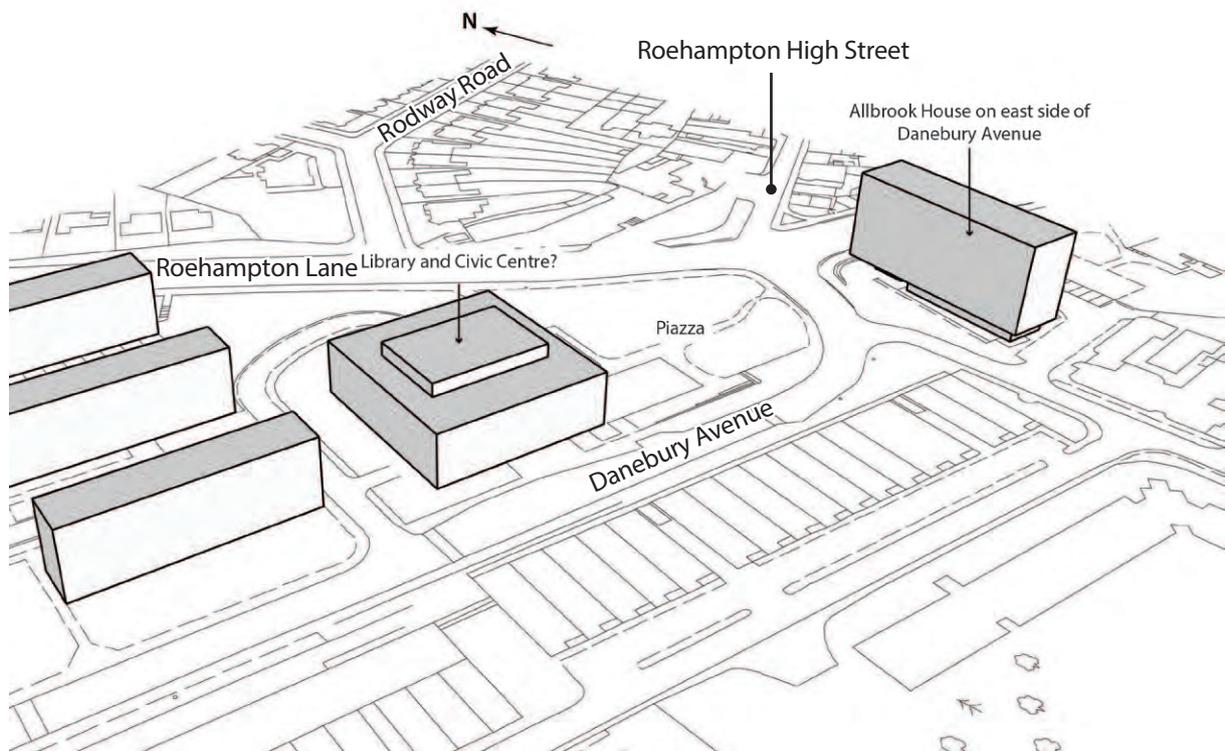
Allbrook House and Roehampton Library underwent several design changes between the early 1950s Alton Estate masterplans and completion in 1961.

In the 1953 masterplan it appears that the central idea of Allbrook House and Roehampton Library was as a marker block, public facility and piazza signposting the entrance to the estate from Roehampton Lane. It was this idea that was described at a lecture in 1956 as “the planning reasoning for the slab block and library site”, but was gradually eroded by the cumulative adjustments to its location and massing (AAJ: 1957, 143).

The apparent sequence of these changes is illustrated below with illustrations based on images taken from the LCC collection in the London Metropolitan Archives.

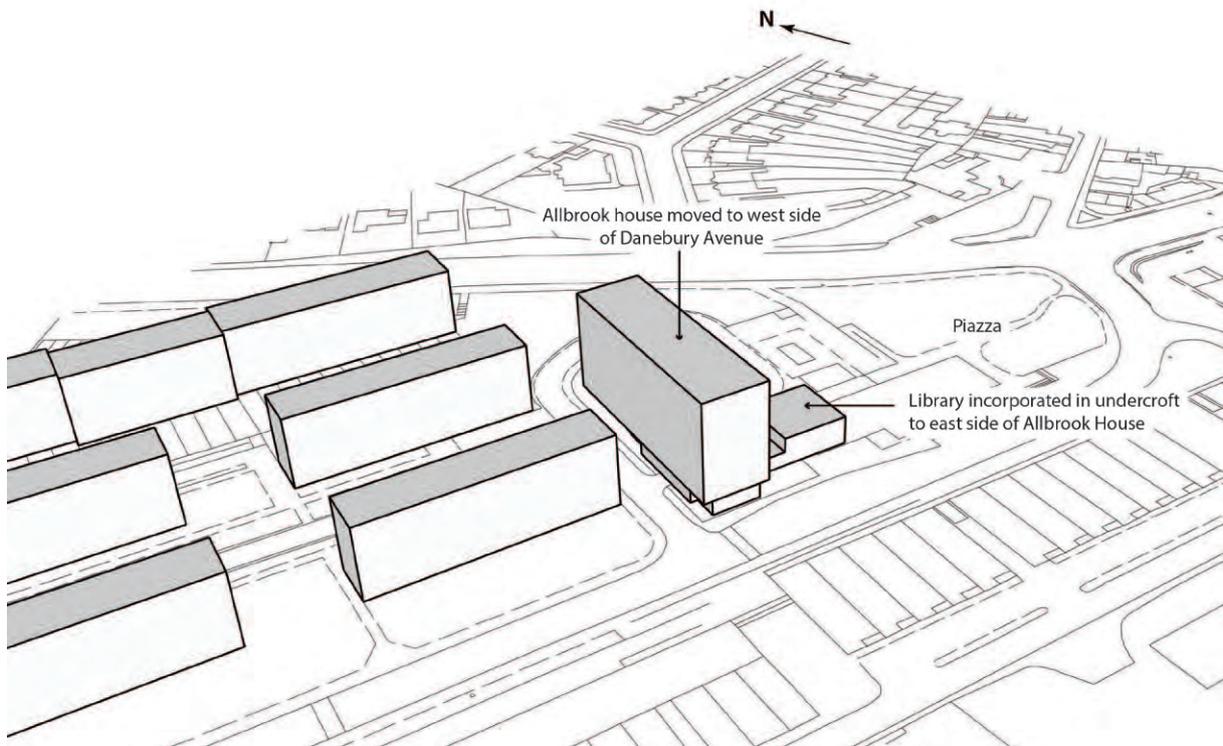
July 1953

A model of the whole site from 1953 shows a slab block by Roehampton Lane but in a different location to where it was eventually built. The block in the model is sited on the east side of Danebury Avenue, by the existing St. Joseph's Church. The library is not shown beneath the block but there is a low rectangular building behind it. This may have been intended to incorporate the library, possibly as part of a larger and more ambitious civic complex that was never executed. There is a large open space or piazza between this building and Roehampton Lane, creating a clear desire line between the existing Roehampton High Street and the proposed entrance to the new estate.



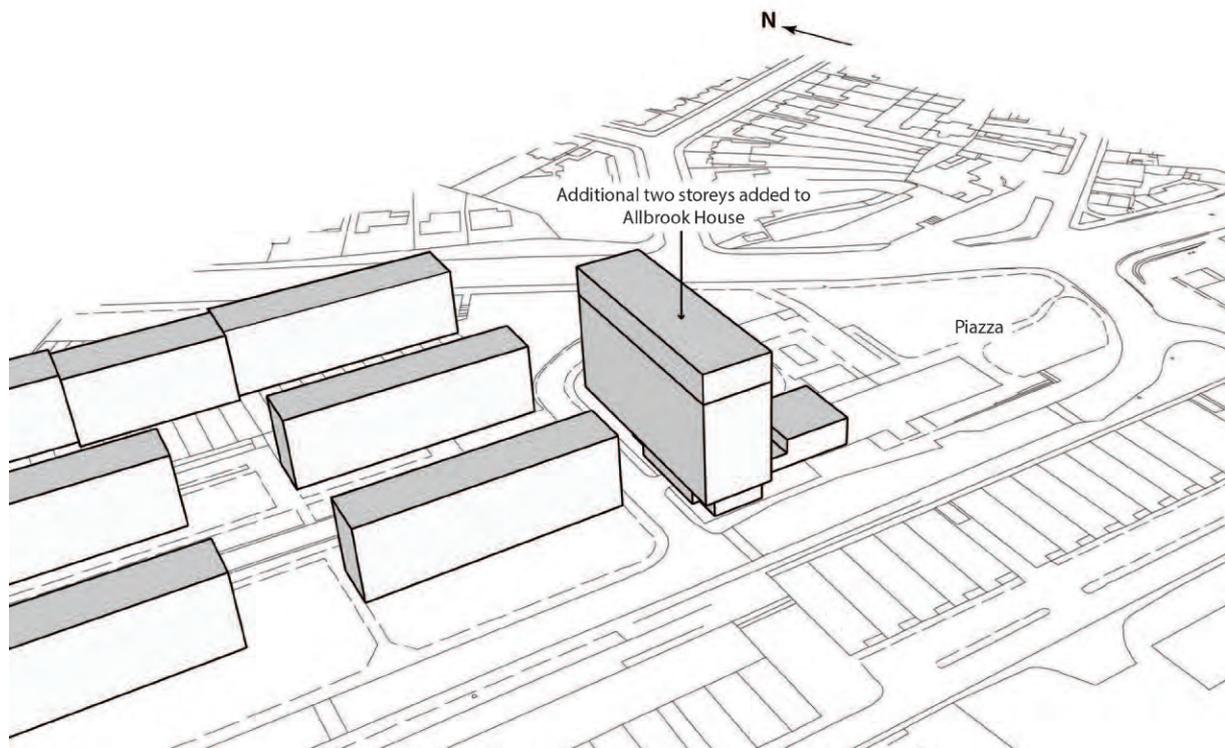
1959 (8 storeys)

A model of the site dated 1959 shows a slab block of 8 storeys raised on piloti to the west of Allbrook House today. A low building like the existing library extends underneath it, but does not protrude from the rear (west) of the slab block. There is a long low building where the slab block was located in the previous 1953 model. The open space has shifted to the front (east) of Allbrook House.



1959 (10 storeys)

A revised model of the site also dated 1959 shows the same arrangement but a slab block of 10 storeys instead.

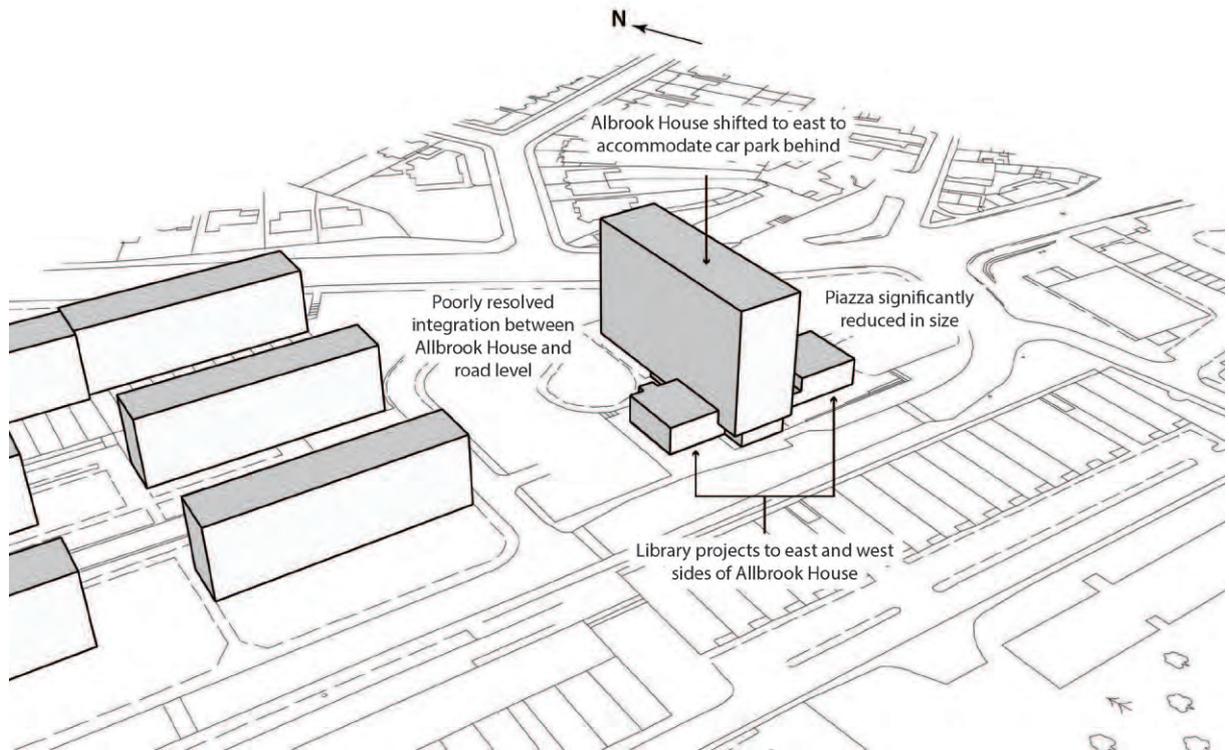


c.1964

An aerial photograph taken shortly after completion shows that the building as constructed was 10 storeys high and was moved further east than in the 1959 model to allow room for the landscaping and car park area behind it, and reducing the open space on the Roehampton Lane side. This changed its relationship to the library building, leaving Allbrook House straddling the library which extends to the front and rear of the slab block. The relationship with Roehampton High Street is also altered, blocking a clear desire line into the Estate.



2.0 Historical Development



2.4 Design and construction, 1959-61

Contract

The contract for Allbrook House and Roehampton Library survives in the London Metropolitan Archives. It is dated 18 December 1959 and records the agreement between the contractor Wates Limited and the LCC. The drawings are by Stout and signed by Bennett.

Allbrook House

The design of Allbrook House appears to follow the general pattern of the five Highcliffe slab blocks. Like them, it is of reinforced concrete construction, part board-marked cast in-situ and part prefabricated including exposed aggregate panels. The grid-like ten-storey façade is composed of 40 two-bedroom maisonettes and five two-bedroom flats, supported on piloti (columns) that create a ground floor undercroft. A circulation core with lift shafts and a stairwell lead to access decks on the east front.

There are also however some differences between Allbrook House and the Highcliffe slabs and it is important to understand these here. In terms of overall configuration, Allbrook House is 11 bays and ten storeys, rather than the 16 bays and 11 storeys of the Highcliffe slabs. The ground floor of both building types is occupied by an undercroft, but Allbrook House has a storey of flats at first floor, then eight storeys of maisonettes above, while the Highcliffe slabs have ten storeys of maisonettes. According to Historic England's conversation with Roy Stout, this is because "the planners asked for an additional floor of single-storey flats in compensation for a building demolished elsewhere" (Historic England 2015: 3, after a conversation with Roy Stout).

The architectural detailing of Allbrook House also differs from that of the Highcliffe slab blocks:

- the gallery balustrades are perforated rather than glazed
- the west elevation has brise soleils
- the piloti are fewer and larger
- the end bays are cantilevered

The critical difference between Allbrook House and the Highcliffe slab blocks however is their siting and surroundings, as elaborated on elsewhere in this report.

Roehampton Library

Roehampton Library was designed for the library service, Wandsworth Metropolitan Borough. It follows Wandsworth's guidelines for a rectangular plan with adaptations to incorporate Allbrook House (*Library Association Record* 1962:52), which stands perpendicular above. As a result it is of two parts either side of Allbrook House, with a lower flat-roofed link block carrying beneath its undercroft. This link block houses the library entrance on the south side and incorporates two piloti from Allbrook House.

The library is of reinforced concrete post and beam construction; the two main parts have roofs composed of several thin shell concrete domes, creating a wavy roofline. The contract specification describes how these 15 concrete domes were cast in-situ, four inches thick, and trowelled smooth. As stated in the specification, the domes incorporated circular glass lenses and rainwater channels. This idea for the roof appears to have originated with Partridge; the Historic England Consultation Report states that this "was developed by Stout from an initial sketch by Partridge in which a grid of vaulted roof lights illuminated bookcases planned on the bay divisions" (*Historic England* 2015: 3, after a conversation with Roy Stout).

Thin Shell Concrete Roofs

The use of thin shell concrete roofs dates back to the second century when the Romans used mass concrete for the Pantheon. This stunning feat of engineering was made possible because, like arches, concrete domes are inherently strong when acting in compression, enabling large spans without internal supports.

In the twentieth century modern thin concrete shells came into use with the development of reinforced concrete. By forming the dome in steel reinforcement bars before casting the concrete, its tensile strength was greatly improved. This technique was used on vast scales in post-war architecture to create roof spans and forms such as Smithfield Poultry Market, London, of 1961-63 (pictured below), far more impressive than that of Roehampton Library.





Allbrook House and Roehampton Library shortly after completion (LMA). Note the retained tree, later removed



The thin shell concrete roof of Roehampton Library as seen from Allbrook House shortly after completion (LMA)

2.5 Subsequent history and alterations

Allbrook House

The London Borough of Wandsworth acquired the Alton Estate under the Greater London Council (Transfer of Land and Housing Accommodation) Order 1980, which came into operation on 31 March 1980. At this time the Conservative Government was reducing investment in new social housing and there was a drive to regenerate the failing post-war estates. As published in *Building Design*, a £6 million programme of refurbishment to the Alton Estate was carried out towards the end of the decade by architects Phippen Randall & Parkes.

This focussed on the 23 slab and point blocks and consisted primarily of rectifying problems with the building services and double-glazing windows, both by retrofitting the original steel frames and installing new UPVC units. Allbrook House has replacement UPVC glazing in the existing openings, except in the communal stairwell, and the majority of the doors are also replacements.

As set out in Area Housing Manager Danny Edwards's note (submitted as a separate response to the consultation), today Allbrook House has ongoing maintenance issues relating to its defective roof, spalling concrete and poor thermal efficiency. This is in contrast to other buildings on the Estate which, as recently stated by Peter Carolin, "have worn exceptionally well" (Carolin 2008: 107).

Roehampton Library

The completed library was published in *Library Association Record*, where it is described as having features including Muninga wood block hardwood floors, bespoke bookcases and a wax resin mural by Bill Mitchell (1962: 52). The careful use of glazing to balance light and privacy, as in the high-level strip windows, glass brick walls and rooflights was a common trend in post-war library design. A plaque in the entrance hall states that the building was opened by Miss Noel Streatfield, a very popular children's author, on 28 September 1961.

In reality the unusual thin shell concrete roof turned out to be fundamentally impractical. Despite the incorporation of drainage channels and rainwater goods within the concrete, there were water ingress issues and there is also evidence to suggest that the integrated glass lenses did not function properly. They are now over painted and early photographs show that roller blinds had been fitted, presumably to reduce glare. In 2000–02 Wandsworth developed plans for a replacement roof structure to solve these issues but it was never implemented.

The interior today dates wholly to a comprehensive refurbishment in 1999–2002. All doors and most windows are replacements in their original apertures. Internally the only surviving historic features are the general plan-form, structural beams and domed roofs, with glass lenses painted over. The originally shiny 'mineralite'-rendered exterior of the building is over-painted and the glass brick walls have been removed or enclosed.



The interiors of the Adult and Children's Libraries shortly after completion. Note the bespoke bookcases, wood block floor, and roller blinds beneath the rooflights (LMA)



The highly-altered state of Roehampton Library today

2.6 Critical responses to the Alton Estate

Publication and influence

The Alton Estate was generally published in architectural journals between 1956 and 1959 as the Highcliffe slab blocks of Alton West were built and completed. It was at this time that the Estate was so widely visited and influential on an international scale.

John Partridge has stated: "Towards the end of my time at the LCC I found myself showing many visitors around the scheme [...] At the peak time there were two or three thousand visitors a year from many different countries" (Partridge 2008: 120). Partridge left the LCC in 1959, before Allbrook House and Roehampton Library had been constructed.

The photographs that accompany these publications show an empty site where Allbrook House would later be built. At the time it was still being designed. By the time it was completed in 1961 it was no longer an exciting development and doesn't appear to have received any contemporary press coverage.

The Highcliffe slabs were consciously modelled on Le Corbusier's notion of buildings-in-landscape, and were arranged with careful regard to both their parkland context and to each other. This concept of blocks in landscape was a key design principle for both Alton Estate design teams, and is the aspect of the Estate that was most widely celebrated in its critical reception.

Pevsner described the Estate accordingly in the *Architectural Review* as being in the eighteenth-century English tradition of picturesque landscape (Pevsner 1959). This argument is repeated by Peter Carolin in a recent article for the Twentieth Century Society (Carolin 2008: 106). In Ian Nairn's famous tribute to London's buildings, the entry for the Alton Estate states (Nairn 1966: 201):

There is just one moment where the vision really works - and, after having said all this, , it is only fair to say that this is such a majestic setpiece that it is worth a special visit. Half way along Danebury Avenue, the main road through the Estate, the ground rises on one side into a triangular green with big old trees, part of the landscape taken over from the old Roehampton. Around it, in magisterial order, are five of the Corbusian slabs - identical in design but not in appearance, because each is seen at a different angle. Here, and here only, the magic works.

In contrast Allbrook House sits as an isolated slab block in a poorly-resolved and drab streetscape.

Later critiques

During the later 1960s and the 1970s the 'mixed development' principles that the Alton Estate represented were thoroughly out of fashion and high rise buildings like Allbrook House were criticised for their pursuit of a utopian ideal before everyday practicalities (especially housing families at height and the lack of public transport connections and local amenities). Furthermore, it was becoming clear that, if not properly maintained, their pioneering concrete construction was at risk of quickly deteriorating.

The historic and architectural interest of the wider Alton Estate began to be recognised by experts in the late twentieth century: Andrew Saint of English Heritage wrote a report on the Estate in 1989, which was updated by Elaine Harwood in 1996. This was part of a general reappraisal of post-war architecture and culminated in the listing of 10 point blocks, five slab blocks, three terraces of elderly people's bungalows and two sculptures in 1998. The report does not mention Allbrook House and Roehampton Library, suggesting that they were not considered a significant aspect of the Estate.

The Alton Conservation Area was designated by the London Borough of Wandsworth in 2001. Its boundary excludes Allbrook House and Roehampton Library.

3.0 Urban Context

3.1 Introduction

The relationship between Allbrook House and Roehampton Library and their urban context is a critical failure of their architectural conception. This was the outcome of changes in design which eroded the original idea of the relationship to a piazza marking the entrance to the Estate.

3.2 Location

Allbrook House and Roehampton Library are situated in the junction between Roehampton Lane and Danebury Avenue, at the entrance to Alton West. There is a split-level carpark to the rear, leading to Harbridge Avenue behind, and a triangle of green space to the front.

Allbrook House is orientated perpendicular to Danebury Avenue, so that its street frontage is occupied by the long and largely blank elevation of Roehampton Library. This must be walked around to reach the steps or ramp leading to the communal entrances of Allbrook House. The Danebury Avenue shopping parade opposite is a low-grade concrete structure of ground-floor retail with residential units above.



Allbrook House and Roehampton Library relate poorly to their urban context on all sides

3.3 Topography

Roehampton Lane rises as it travels north past Allbrook House and Roehampton Library, while Danebury Avenue sits lower on the hillside. This means that there is a transition in levels across the site, with several steps in 'ground' level.

To fit Roehampton Library in the undercroft of Allbrook House it was necessary to excavate the ground level beneath it, so that it steps down from Danebury Avenue. It then slopes up to the level of Roehampton Lane, so that further steps or a ramp are required to reach the communal entrance level of Allbrook House. This is a half-storey above Roehampton Library, and the base of Allbrook House is not accessible from ground level at any point.

The communal entrance of Allbrook House does not correspond to the surrounding streets or public space and is not visible from the undercroft, leading to a difficult and fragmentary pedestrian experience. It has been necessary to include a substantial ramp in the carpark to the rear to access this half level.



The change of levels across the site leads to unsatisfactory and poor-quality urban design

3.4 Undercroft

The undercroft at ground level of Allbrook House is filled by the sloping topography, the deck carrying the half-storey carpark and entrance level, and Roehampton Library. The treatment of this and the associated landscaping, including concrete retaining and boundary walls and an unremarkable boiler house, is of very poor quality.

The overall effect is to create ill-considered, dark and unpleasant spaces at ground level, such as the narrow passageway in the awkward junction between Allbrook House and Roehampton Library. These spaces are hidden, unsafe and encourage anti-social behaviour.



The filled undercroft creates ill-considered, dark and unpleasant spaces at ground level

3.5 Carpark

The carpark to the rear of Allbrook House and Roehampton Library is an important aspect of the buildings as experienced today, but was a late and ad hoc addition to the brief which was not incorporated in the design until after 1959. This is likely to have been in response to the inadequate car parking provision for the Estate's earlier buildings, which was soon recognised by the LCC.

The carpark is split-level, with a sweeping ramp curving to the first floor level of Allbrook House and concrete boundary and retaining walls. The effect of this is to create a fragmentary pedestrian experience, including a spiral staircase descending from the rear exit of Allbrook House to the ground floor undercroft.



The carpark to the rear of Allbrook House is poorly-designed and isolates the building from its setting

4.0 Listing Criteria

4.1 Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990

The Act places a duty on the Secretary of State to compile lists of “buildings of special architectural or historic interest”.

4.2 Department for Culture, Media and Sport

Principles of Selection for Listing Buildings (March 2010)

Paragraph 9 of this document lays down principles for what constitutes special architectural or historic interest.

- **Architectural Interest.** *To be of special architectural interest a building must be of importance in its architectural design, decoration or craftsmanship; special interest may also apply to nationally important examples of particular building types and techniques (e.g. buildings displaying technological innovation or virtuosity) and significant plan forms;*
- **Historic Interest.** *To be of special historic interest a building must illustrate important aspects of the nation’s social, economic, cultural, or military history and/or have close historical associations with nationally important people. There should normally be some quality of interest in the physical fabric of the building itself to justify the statutory protection afforded by listing.*

A building may be listed for either architectural or historic interest, or for both. In addition, a building can be listed for its group value. As Paragraph 10 explains, this is an assessment of the exterior of the building to determine whether an individual building might have architectural or historic interest based on its relationship with other buildings.

The guidance expands on the principles of what makes a building listable. Paragraph 12 deals with age and rarity. It states that “the older a building is, and the fewer surviving examples of its kind, the more likely it is to have special interest”. For buildings constructed after 1945, such as Allbrook House and Roehampton Library, “particularly careful selection is required”.

4.3 Historic England

Historic England’s Listing Selection Guides provide further guidance on the criteria for listing specific types of buildings. The relevant Guides are *Domestic 4: The Modern House & Housing* (April 2011) for Allbrook House and *Culture and Entertainment* for Roehampton Library, supported by the *Introduction to Heritage Assets: The English Public Library 1945–85*.

Listing Selection Guide. Domestic 4: The Modern House & Housing (April 2011)

The principal benchmarks for listing the modern house and housing generally are: “imagination, scale, ambition and ingenuity [...] quality of craftsmanship or the striking use of materials”. Further considerations are “Planning and lay-out, decoration, relationship with setting, reputation of the designer [...] the extent to which the original design has survived unaltered”.

For social housing specifically, there is a need to understand a building with the context of its funding and legislation. In this respect, “Buildings need to be judged against their original brief” rather than how suitable they are for living today.

The specific considerations for designating post-war housing set out especially high standards for listing, which can be summarised as follows:

- intactness of design
- influence of design
- demonstration of a development in housing
- fulfilment of brief.

Other points to note are that interiors of post-war housing are rarely of special interest, and that, while alterations are important to consider, the scale of large blocks means that new glazing may not unduly detract.

Listing Selection Guide. Culture and Entertainment (April 2011)

This is a diverse building category but two important considerations are the impact of the street frontage and “the quality, rarity and/or good survival of the interior”. As for Housing, “Post-war buildings will require stringent assessment”. The key criteria are “architectural quality, innovation and social significance”. Historical associations with famous events or individuals or social trends may add interest but this will also need to be very carefully assessed.

For post-war libraries, specific considerations are:

- subtle detailing
- planned vistas
- high-quality fixtures
- group value with other civic buildings.

Introduction to Heritage Assets: The English Public Library 1945–85 (September 2013)

This document gives additional background to inform the assessment of post-war libraries. Section 5.6 below examines Roehampton Library within this architectural-historical context.

5.0 Assessment of Listability

5.1 Context and methodology

This chapter assesses Allbrook House and Roehampton Library against the selection criteria set out in the previous chapter. It begins by summarising their architectural and historic interest (5.2 and 5.3) as well as any claims to group value (5.4) before breaking this down into a more detailed discussion of each building (5.5 and 5.6).

Allbrook House and Roehampton Library are being assessed for listing by Historic England after an application was submitted. Historic England (as English Heritage) has already assessed the buildings that form the LCC's Alton Estate at least twice: leading to the listing of the slab blocks, point blocks and bungalows in 1998; and when consulted on the designation of the Conservation Area boundary in 2001 and 2010. Allbrook House and Roehampton Library would have also been considered at these times.

Because Allbrook House and Roehampton Library are two different building types, each must be assessed against the relevant Listing Selection Guide (as described in 4.3 above). Because of their similarities, a key factor in the discussion of Allbrook House is a comparative analysis with the five grade II*-listed Highcliffe slab blocks.

5.2 Summary of Architectural Interest

As is made clear throughout this report, the architectural interest of Allbrook House can only be properly understood through a comparison with the Highcliffe slabs. Allbrook House copied some aspects of their design but this report establishes that the overall concepts as executed are vastly different. Allbrook House represents a commonplace design approach for its date. It is of some architectural interest as a well-detailed and composed post-war slab block.

The key point is that aesthetically in terms of massing and layout it is the significantly poorer cousin of the Highcliffe slabs. Unlike them, which gain so much architectural drama from their setting, its relationship with its site is fundamentally unsatisfactory. It lacks their more elongated and elegant form and relates only to a dreary urban streetscape in place of the dramatic landscape of Downshire Field. Furthermore there are no significant views through the undercroft, which is occupied by Roehampton Library and a carpark.

Due to its awkward and compromised site here, shoehorned into the ground storey of Allbrook House, it is questionable whether Roehampton Library was ever a successful architectural design. Nonetheless it no longer possesses even the modest architectural interest that is illustrated in historic photographs. It has lost all of its glazing, internal decoration, fixtures and fittings, so that all that survives is the basic and altered architectural shell.



The ground floor undercrofts of Allbrook House (top) and a Highcliffe slab (bottom). Note how the Highcliffe slab provides clear, open views of its green landscape setting, while Allbrook House creates a dark, oppressive and disorientating environment

5.3 Summary of Historic Interest

It is clear that Allbrook House is of some historic interest as part of the LCC's Alton Estate, an important early post-war housing estate, and indicative in a wider sense of the era's radical commitment to social housing. However when the facts are examined objectively it must be viewed as a minor, late and altered component of that scheme with evidently much less historic interest than the majority of buildings on the estate, which were completed beforehand.

Roehampton Library is of some historic interest both as a post-war library and as one that was part of an LCC housing development. When built it had some of the traits indicative of post-war library design—such as the careful use of natural light and public art—but was ultimately compromised as a design by its location, which like Allbrook House was not as intended in the early masterplans.

Furthermore Allbrook House and Roehampton Library have some historic interest by virtue of their designers John Partridge and Roy Stout. Both were notable post-war architects whose buildings have been recognised by inclusion on the National Heritage List for England. However the key point that precludes listing on the strength of the designers is that in neither the case of Partridge nor Stout can Allbrook House and Roehampton Library be seen as important works in their overall careers.

For Partridge, the earlier Highcliffe slabs were his seminal early buildings as a designer; for Stout, his involvement in Allbrook House and Roehampton Library was merely to execute the detailed design and contract for a building designed by Partridge within a pre-existing masterplan. Equally Allbrook House and Roehampton Library are not indicative of the turn that the work of either architect would take after leaving the LCC for private practice.

5.4 Group value

There are two aspects of Allbrook House and Roehampton Library's possible claims to group value. The first is the connection between Allbrook House and the Highcliffe slabs of 1955–59, which are grade-II* listed. It is worth expounding on this relationship because they are clearly of the same architectural family and broadly by the same designers, but there are some key differences which make them less of a group. As set out in 2.6, formally they are not identical, and in terms of siting as discussed in 5.3 above there is an important contrast to the detriment of the architectural success of Allbrook House.

Second there is the question of Allbrook House and Roehampton Library's wider group value with the other buildings of the LCC's Alton Estate. This is critically reduced by both its location, which is divorced both physically and visually from the heart of the Estate around Downshire Field, and date, as the last phase to be designed and built. Therefore it cannot be said to have group value with those elements which have rightly been recognised by listing for their careful integration with and manipulation of a pre-existing historic landscape within the dramatic geography and vistas of Downshire Field. For these reasons Allbrook House and Roehampton Library are not listable on the grounds of group value.



Allbrook House as seen from the east, down the bland streetscape of Danebury Avenue



Three Highcliffe slabs in their spectacular landscape setting

5.5 Allbrook House in detail

Planning and layout

By far the most critical failing of Allbrook House is its problematic siting and the lack of design response to that siting. In the 1959 plans Allbrook House had been moved to the other side of Roehampton Lane and incorporated with Roehampton Library; it grew from from eight to a more imposing 10 storeys; and by completion in 1961 the provision of public space had been halved to accommodate a carpark on the west side, causing attendant difficulties for its interaction with the streetscape.

Relationship with setting

Fundamentally the integration of housing block and public library was not successful in architectural or urban design terms. The poorly resolved ramp or stair access between street level and the communal entrances to Allbrook House has a significant adverse effect on the experience of the building for its residents. This is especially pronounced when compared with the Highcliffe slabs which were set on open parkland with a clearly navigable entrance via the undercroft.

The public space or piazza that had been intended to accompany Allbrook House and Roehampton Library in the masterplans was left as an afterthought in the final design. The surrounding area feels like a poorly laid-out compromise, with none of the drama of the Highcliffe slabs in the parkland, nor a proper engagement with Roehampton Lane and Danebury Avenue as a local urban centre at the entrance to the Estate.

Influence and importance

For its date (1959-61), using the terms of the Listing Selection Guide, Allbrook House is not “influential; or a particularly good example of a development in housing”; rather it is a commonplace building of the 1960s, designed and built in the manner of the Highcliffe slab blocks, and no more immediately redolent of Le Corbusier than the many similar blocks that were to be built on London housing estates during the course of that decade. Crucially, Allbrook House itself was not published when completed in 1961.

Fulfilment of brief

Masterplans are by their nature fluid outlines intended to guide development rather than instruct it, and it is important to recognise that other aspects of the estate were also adjusted before completion, most notably the orientation of the Highcliffe slabs away from Richmond Park after a high profile public inquiry. However the tinkering with the Allbrook House design was far more significant in terms of both degrees of deviation from the original masterplan and the adverse effect of this on the architectural success of the completed building, so that it cannot be seen to adequately fulfil the terms of its original brief.

5.6 Roehampton Library in detail

Detailing and Fixtures

Roehampton Library is an unusual building, especially in terms of its external form and street frontage. Its most defining feature in this respect is the roof composed of thin shell concrete domes. However, while this wavy roof form is an interesting detail, the fact of the matter is that it functioned very poorly in terms of light and water control.

As discussed in 2.6 and depicted in photographs in the London Metropolitan Archives, when built Roehampton Library possessed many features which marked it as a post-war library: considered natural lighting, high-quality finishes, fixtures and fittings, open and easily legible internal planning, and public artwork. However, today these are all lost or not visible (the glass brick walls and flooring may survive under later finishes), so that all that remains is the concrete structure that has been heavily altered both internally and externally.

Historical Associations

Roehampton Library bears some further historical associations: as stated on the plaque in the entrance hall it was opened by Noel Streatfield, a very popular children's writer, and in a more general way it is indicative of the client-architect relationship of the LCC Architects' Department as the designer of Roehampton Library within the Estate masterplan and Wandsworth as the library service. However given the low architectural interest of the building these minor points are not sufficient to warrant listing.

Group value with the Estate

Group value with other civic buildings is an important consideration for listing post-war libraries, and Roehampton Library is part of a large planned LCC housing estate development. However it is in a very different architectural language to the surrounding LCC buildings. In fact, its poorly resolved integration with Allbrook House suggests that it is a later addition beneath the building, rather than one joined-up architectural design indicative of the historic development of the Estate.

6.0 Conclusion

The assessment undertaken by Alan Baxter Limited has concluded that Allbrook House and Roehampton Library, dating to 1959–61, are not of sufficient interest to warrant listing.

The relationship between Allbrook House and Roehampton Library and their urban context is a critical failure of their architectural conception. This was the outcome of changes in design which eroded the original idea of the relationship to a piazza marking the entrance to the Estate. Allbrook House and Roehampton Library as built were a significantly and deeply flawed compromise on the original concept.

They are of some historic interest for their building types as part of the LCC's Alton Estate, but this limited interest is reduced by their date and alterations following the original masterplan. Their architectural interest is modest overall and their claims to group value are considerably outweighed by their date and location.

Taken together, therefore, the factors considered in this report mean that Allbrook House and Roehampton Library are not of sufficiently high interest to meet the exacting standards for listing post-war buildings.

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Appendix Consultation Report

Case Name: Allbrook House and Roehampton Library

Case Number: 1428574

Background

Historic England has received an application to assess Allbrook House and Roehampton Library for listing.

Asset(s) under Assessment

Facts about the asset(s) can be found in the Annex(es) to this report.

Annex	Name	Heritage Category
1	Allbrook House and Roehampton Library	Listing

Visits

Date	Visit Type
20 July 2015	Partial inspection

Annex 1

The factual details are being assessed as the basis for a proposed addition to The National Heritage List for England.

Factual Details**Name: Allbrook House and Roehampton Library****Location**

Roehampton Library, 2 Danebury Avenue, Roehampton, London, SW15 4HD

County	District	District Type	Parish
Greater London Authority	Wandsworth	London Borough	Non Civil Parish

History

Following the Second World War the Valuer's Department of the London County Council (LCC) was tasked with addressing the chronic shortage of housing, and the favoured solution was the creation of large estates with designs dictated by economy and speed. Sir Robert Matthew was appointed Architect to the Council in 1947, and fought to return the task to the Architects' Department, which was achieved in 1950. With this reorganisation came a renewed vigour and enthusiasm for rebuilding war-torn London, and the authority became known as one of the most progressive, bold and radical public architects' departments of the period.

Land at Roehampton had been acquired for new housing in the late 1940s, and the initial plans developed under the Valuer's Department were abandoned and a fresh start made in 1951. The shape and topography of the site required two different approaches, and the planning and design of each was undertaken by different teams of architects, responsible for Alton East and Alton West. The library and Allbrook House stand at the junction between the two, adjacent to Roehampton village, and were planned as part of the Alton West development, the project team for which was led by Colin Lucas and consisted of John Partridge, Bill Howell, John Killick, Stanley Amis (later the successful private practice: HKPA), Roy Stout, co-architect for Allbrook House and the library, and JR Galley joined the LCC and Alton West team later in the '50s.

Alton West was planned and built upon the gardens of three C18 mansions along the edge of Richmond Park, all of which were renovated as part of the development and incorporated into the estate. The mix of slab blocks, point blocks, low-rise terraces and bungalows meant a high-density of housing, meeting a range of needs, could be achieved, whilst creating a visually interesting and varied estate, retaining the picturesque landscape of the earlier mansions. The design of the five slabs that crown Downshire Field is directly driven by Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseille, to which a number of the project architects made a pilgrimage. The façade is a grid with each unit articulated by the horizontal balcony or access deck and vertical posts, and proportions were based on Corbusier's 'modular', but anglicised using the Fibonacci series relating to scales in feet and inches. The slabs stand on pilotis and are a single unit in depth, meaning the narrow-fronted maisonettes have a deep plan and a double aspect, and each has a private balcony overlooking the bosky landscape. Allbrook House is a slightly modified version of the design.

The inclusion of a slab block and library were part of the overall plan for Alton West from the outset, intended as a 'marker' to the entrance to the estate and noted on plans as 'Block 21'. The specific design was not finalised until later in the 1950s and was the final element of the plan to be built, between 1959 and '61. John Partridge, assisted by Roy Stout, was responsible for the final design, though Partridge left the LCC before building started. The maisonettes appear to be laid out in line with the LCC type plan MA.B3.

In a discussion at the Architectural Association in 1956, HJ Whitfield Lewis, the Principal

Housing Architect at the LCC explained the planning reasoning for the slab block and library site: Danebury Avenue was intended as a continuation of Roehampton High Street, and the piazza around which the library, shops and other amenity buildings are located was intended as an important public space and a main entrance to the new estate, with the slab of Allbrook House acting as a focal point.

As noted, the design of Allbrook House is based on the design of the slabs to the west (all listed at Grade II*), though has 11 bays and ten storeys rather than 16 bays and 11 storeys. The budget for Allbrook House was slightly more generous than for the earlier slabs, permitting innovations such as the cantilevered end bay and brise soleil above the balconies. The balcony and access deck balustrades of Allbrook more closely resemble those perforated panels of Corbusier's Unité, demonstrating that great influence. The library intersects the plan of the slab at the roadside end, and stands structurally independently amongst the pilotis, stepping up to a higher level at either side. The design was developed by Stout from an initial sketch by Partridge in which a grid of vaulted roof lights illuminated bookcases planned on the bay divisions.

The estate was well-received by the architectural press: GE Kidder Smith in 1961 described it as probably the finest low-cost housing estate in the world. It came to serve as the showpiece for post-war British public housing architecture (Pepper, 1998), receiving many thousands of visitors following its completion. Critical acclaim for the development continued in the following decades: Alistair Cooke wrote in 1980 that Alton West was the most elegant and harmonious housing estate to go up since the Second World War, and regarding the slabs in particular, their list entry notes that the expression of each maisonette as an individual element in the facade marked a new rigour and sophistication in the LCC's pioneering design.

The housing block is little altered: windows and most doors have been replaced and the inward-facing concrete surfaces have been painted. The library too has had its windows replaced; the thick frames and glazing bars do not follow the original pattern, and the roof lights set within the vaults have been blocked. The library was originally rendered in mineralite, which contained mica to produce a slightly sparkly finish; this has been over-painted, and on the rear elevation partially removed. Internally, the shelving has been modernised and the staff quarters and offices have been reordered.

Details

Allbrook House, a slab block of 40 maisonettes and five flats, and a public library, 1959-61, by John Partridge with Roy Stout as the final stage of the development of the Alton Estate West, designed by the architects' department of the London County Council.

STRUCTURE and MATERIALS: the slab block has a reinforced concrete frame of nine storeys, based on a 12' grid. Supporting pilotis and the base to the frame are cast in situ on the ground floor, upon which prefabricated elements – beam ribs, balcony units and staircases – were built, with cross walls and the walls of the lift shafts and stair tower cast in situ, bearing distinct board marking. The pre-cast cladding units have an exposed aggregate finish of Dorset shingle and Derbyshire spar in white cement.

The library is built amongst the pilotis at the south end of the slab and is structurally independent. It has a concrete and steel frame; elevations are roughcast rendered and the vaulted roofs are concrete with pre-cast units containing circular glass blocks.

PLAN: the slab block stands perpendicular to Danebury Avenue on the north side of the road, and is orientated roughly north to south. The library, orientated roughly east to west in line with the road, crosses beneath the first floor of the slab, creating a T-shaped plan. There is a raised concrete concourse following the rising topography towards the north side of the site; it provides pedestrian access to the entrance to the housing block and has a sweeping vehicle access ramp and car parking on the west.

EXTERIOR: the east and west elevations of the slab have projecting grids of 12 bays that are strictly articulated by vertical posts between storeys, and by the horizontals of balconies on the west and access decks on the east. The horizontal elements indicate the form of the housing

units: single-storey flats on the first floor, and two-storey maisonettes above. The lifts, stair tower and lift lobbies occupy the seventh and eighth bays; on the east this is expressed by the omission of the vertical posts of the grid, behind which are the gaping openings of the double-height lobbies and the walls of the stairwell. On the west elevation there is a complete break in the frame and in the seventh and eighth bays is the recessed wall of the stair and lift tower, punctuated at access deck-height with pairs of windows, and pairs of ventilation outlets in between. A blind cuboid on the roof contains the lift machinery and services. The facades of the maisonettes and flats are smoothly rendered and have strip glazing, except at access deck-level where they are partially glazed with recessed doorways. The top floors of the maisonettes on the east elevation have narrow fire escape balconies with steel balustrades. Between the storeys on the west elevation there are concrete panels forming brise soleil above the balconies. The balcony and access deck balustrades are concrete panels perforated with rows of lozenge-shaped openings.

The north and south elevations are blind and clad in aggregate panels illustrating the pattern of the storeys.

Access to the flats and maisonettes is at concourse level via doorways at the base of the lift lobbies on the east and west elevations. The pilotis occur beneath every other bay, and at concourse level have storage units behind them. At road level, the library is built within them.

The library is a single-storey building and consists of a low, flat-roofed central section beneath the slab, which steps up to form loftier halls at either side. The main entrance projects centrally from the south elevation, and is framed by the slab's southernmost pair of supporting pilotis, and the cantilevering base to its first floor. High level strip windows light the entrance lobby and the low central section of the library. The roof-line of the building steps up at either side of the slab, where the roofs are formed from a series of shallow vaults: three by three on the east, two by three on the west. These taller sections have irregular glazed openings with a mix of horizontal and vertical emphasis. Rows of small holes follow the arched line of the roof.

INTERIOR: the circulation spaces within the housing slab are uniformly detailed and unadorned, expressing the materials and structural elements. Deeply textural board-marked concrete forms the internal surface finishes of the stair and lift lobbies. The stair is a continuous dog-leg that rises the height of the building; it is plainly detailed concrete with a simple steel banister. Within the paved lift lobby are rubbish chutes, richly detailed in grey terrazzo.

Within the library the pilotis of the slab are incorporated into the walls to the rear of the issue desk. The concrete frame is expressed through columns and beams, and all surfaces are smoothly plastered. In the higher-roofed sections at either end the ceilings are deeply coffered between the vaulted roof panels, in which the circular glass lights remain visible. Rows of small holes, as on the exterior, follow the curve of the vaults. Furnishings and the partitions within the low central section are modern.

SUBSIDIARY FEATURES: the concourse, car parks, and the pedestrian and vehicle ramps to the concourse-level are enclosed by concrete walls with a sloping top.

There is a small cuboid-shaped boiler house to the north of the building.

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Map**National Grid Reference:** TQ2223773805

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