



Squatters are usually portrayed as worthless scroungers hell-bent on disrupting society. Here at last is the inside story of the 250,000 people from all walks of life who have squatted in Britain over the past 12 years.

The country is riddled with empty houses and there are thousands of homeless people. When squatters logically put the two together the result can be electrifying, amazing and occasionally disastrous.

*SQUATTING the real story* is a unique and diverse account of squatting. Written and produced by squatters, it covers all aspects of the subject:

- The history of squatting
- Famous squats
- The politics of squatting
- Squatting as a cultural challenge
- The facts behind the myths
- Squatting around the world

and much, much more.

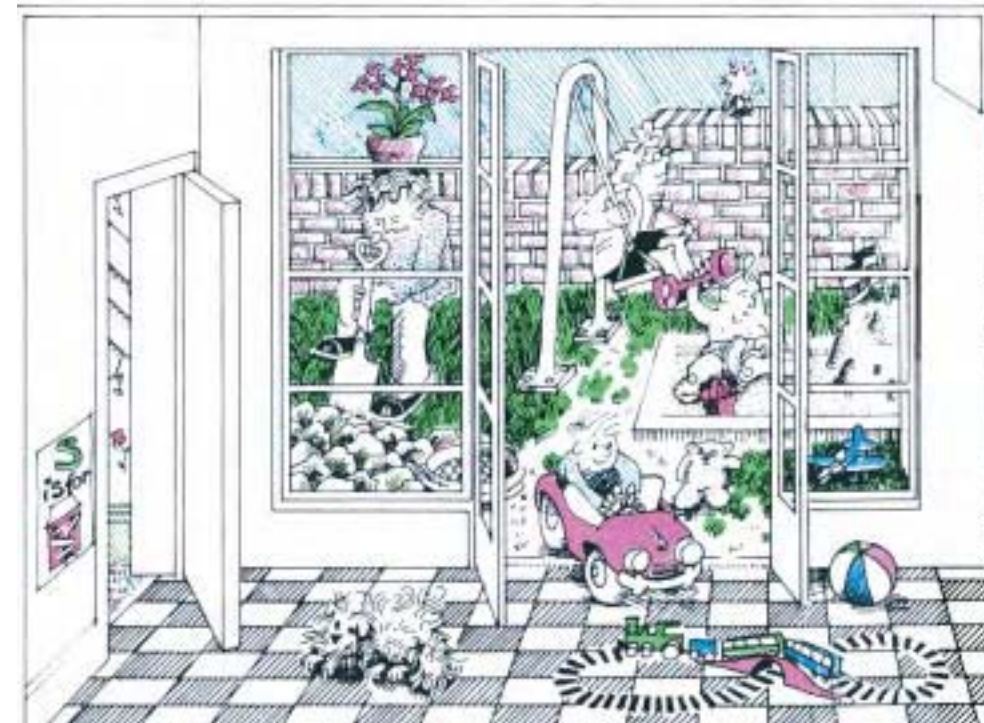
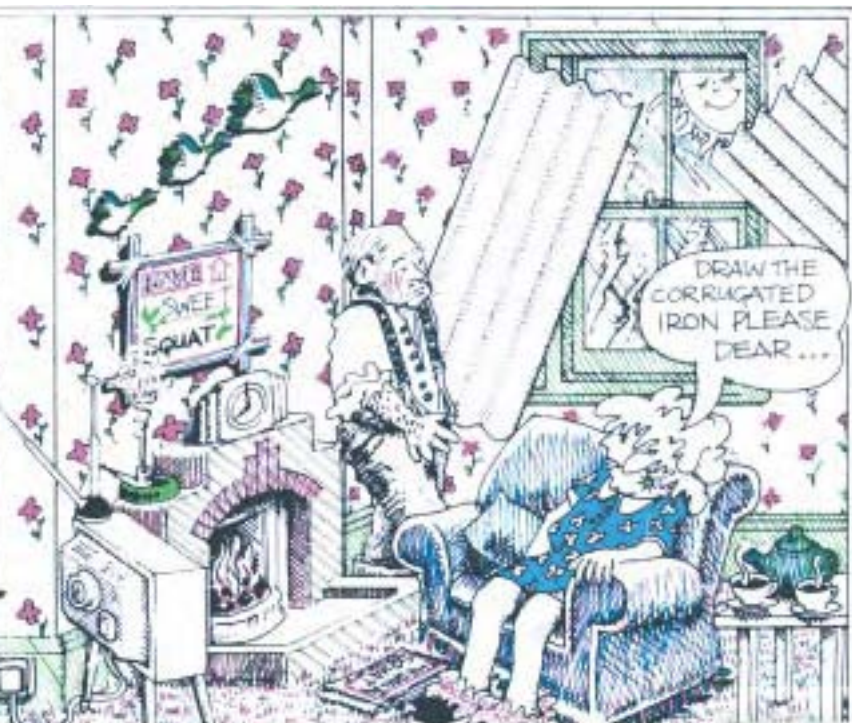
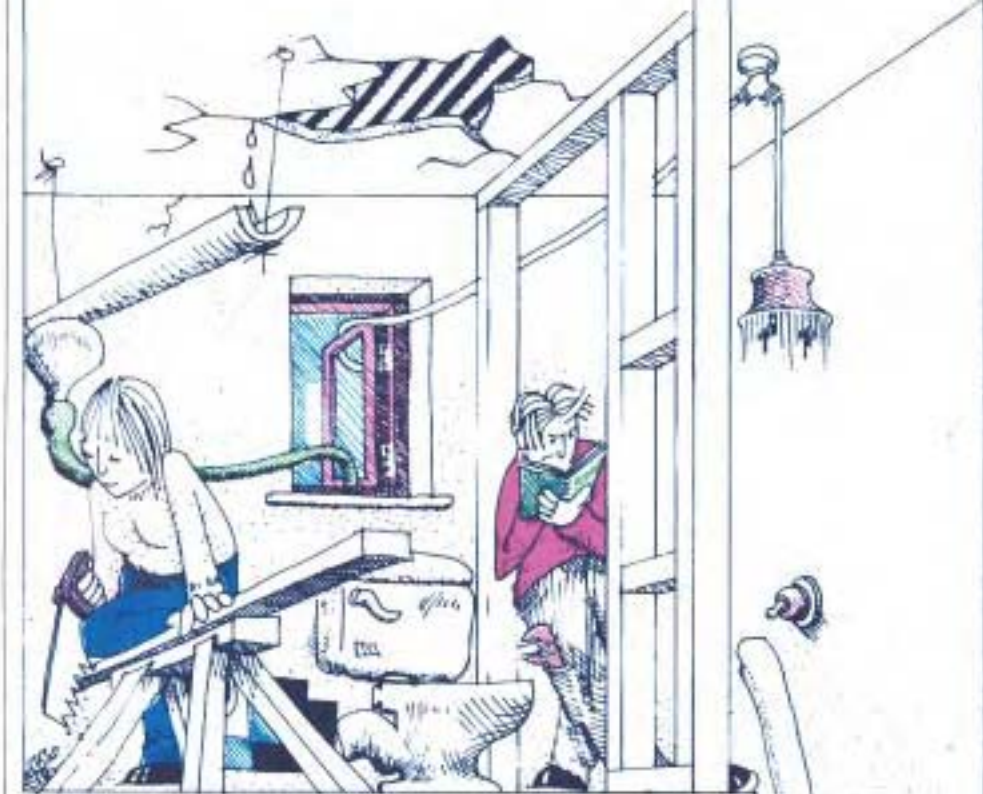
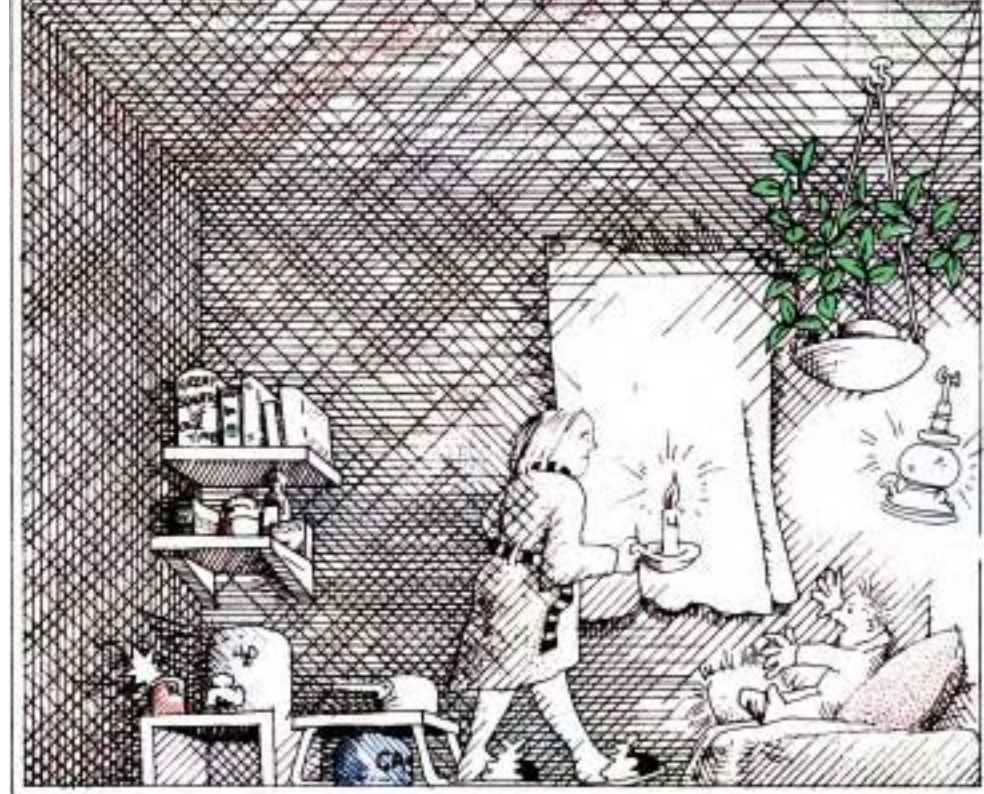
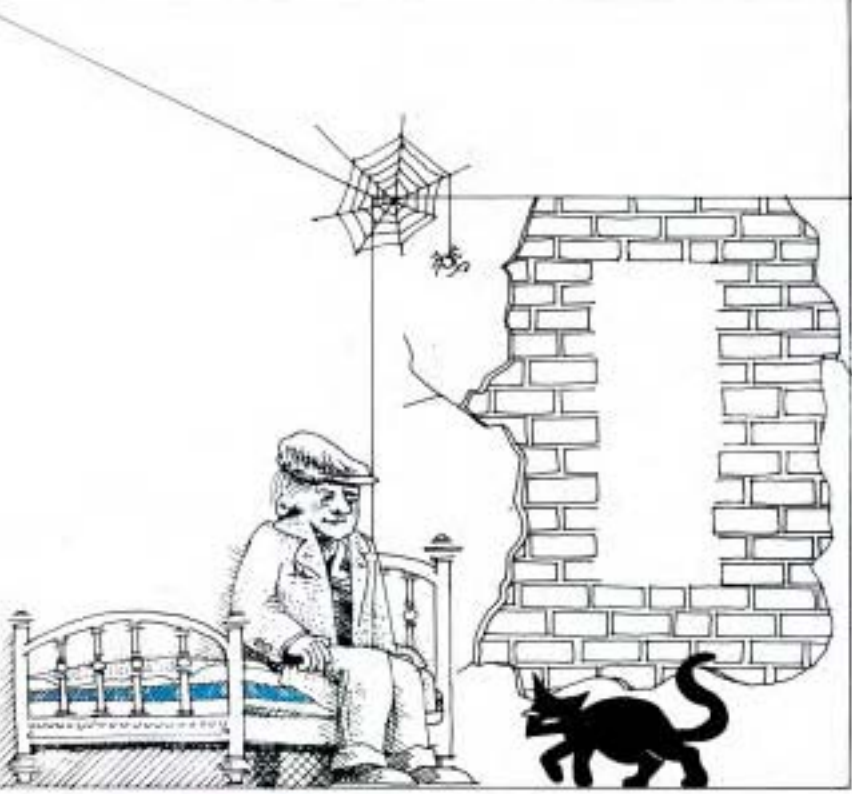
Contains over 500 photographs plus illustrations, cartoons, poems, songs and 4 pages of posters and murals in colour.

Squatting: a revolutionary force or just a bunch of hooligans doing their own thing? Read this book for the real story.

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# SQUATTING

the real story

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# About this book

*SQUATTING the real story* grew out of a series of meetings of squatters in London starting in November 1977. It was decided to produce a book representative of the diversity of squatters and squatting. Most of the people who worked on the book are current or past squatters but they have not attempted to reach a consensus on the importance, relevance or politics of squatting. Views expressed are therefore those of the individual authors.

This book was made possible by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation which provided a grant for information collection and research while generously leaving authors freedom to express their own opinions. The material collected is now at the Self-Help Housing Resource Library at the North London Polytechnic (2-16 Eden Grove, London N7, tel: 01-607 2789 x 2065). The Library continues to collect information on squatting and self-help housing and would welcome any leaflets, photographs, newspaper cuttings etc, which readers may have festering unwanted in their bottom drawers.

Strenuous efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of the information in this book but the authors, editors and publisher cannot be held responsible for any mistakes that may have unaccountably slipped their attention. Any corrections, omissions or complaints should be sent to the publisher for use in future editions.

Although this book should be of use to prospective squatters, it is not intended as a do-it-yourself guide to squatting. Anybody needing basic information on how to go about it is advised to read the current edition of the *Squatters Handbook*, available from bookshops or direct from the Advisory Service for Squatters (2 St Pauls Road, London N1, tel: 01 359 8814), price 30p plus 15p postage.

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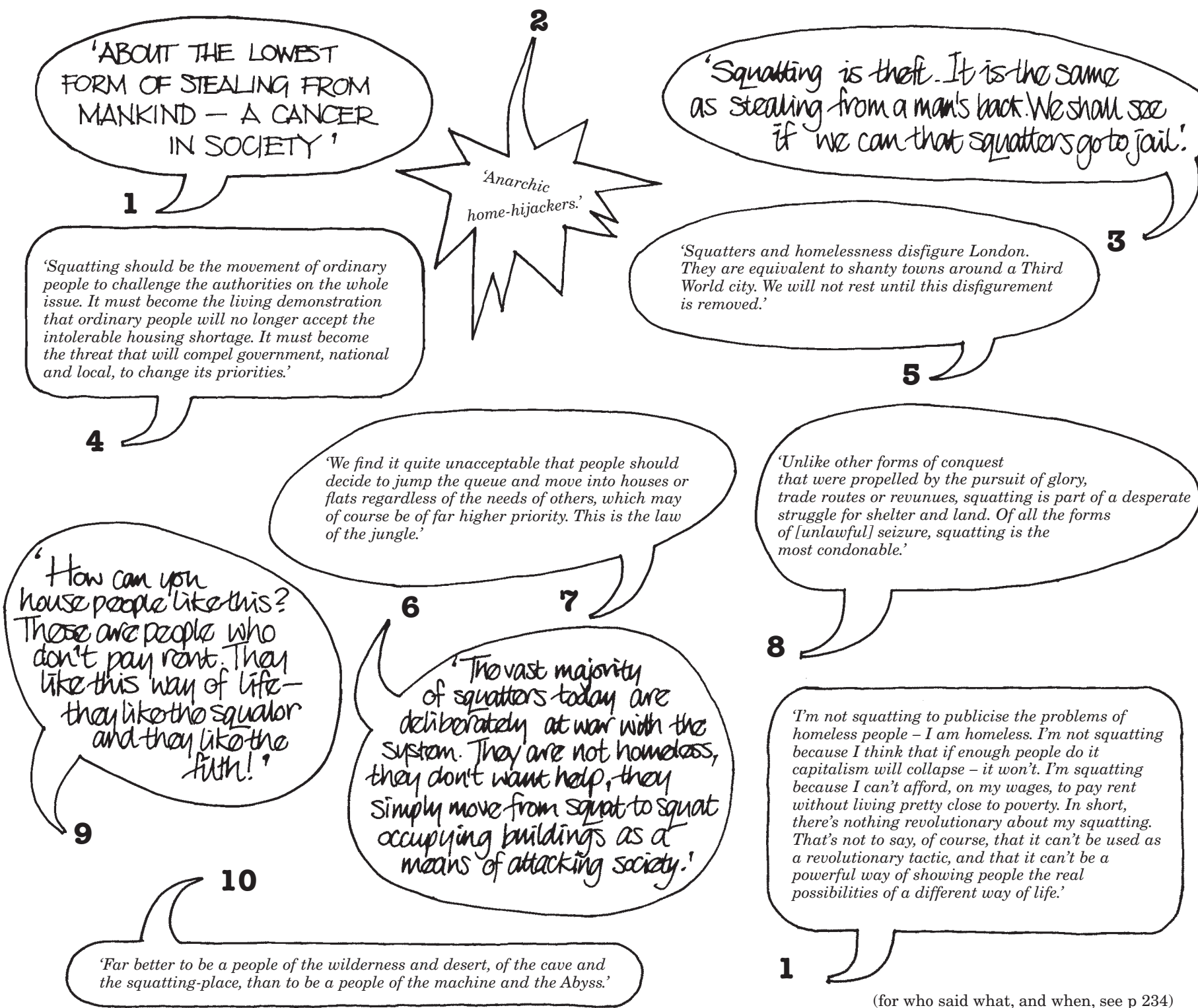
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# Introducing squatting

by Nick Wates



Adam Harvey 1979



Ray Morris 1979



Radio Times Hulton 1946



Mike Wigg 1979



Tony Sleep 1979



Lawrence Feuchtwanger 1975



Aden Kelly 1973



Mike Wigg 1979



Illustrated London News 1946

Since 1968, over a quarter of a million people in Britain have walked into an uninhabited house owned by someone else and proceeded to set up home, without seeking permission and without paying rent. By doing so, they have become squatters. Some have been thrown out within hours. Others have stayed for months, even years, before being evicted by bailiffs or leaving under threat of a court order. A few have managed to establish permanent homes.

Most squatting has occurred in old flats and houses in the larger towns and cities, but every conceivable type of empty property has been squatted — from luxury flats to dilapidated slums, from country cottages to suburban semis, from old churches to disused factories.

Squatting is an ancient practice, and has occurred at some stage, in different forms, throughout the world. Yet the last 12 years in Britain has seen a spectacular rise in the number of people who have taken over empty buildings. No longer does “squatting” describe the isolated actions of numerous individuals. Instead, it has become a social movement of great significance, whose impact upon housing policy has already been considerable, but whose potential has yet, perhaps, to be fully realised.

## The causes

A lack of adequate housing, combined with the existence of empty property, is the essential condition for squatting. The housing shortage has become a permanent and chronic feature of British society, and there is every sign that it is getting rapidly worse. A home is one of the most important elements in our lives. Bad housing can ruin both physical and mental health, can place unbearable strains on personal relationships, and can disrupt people's ability to work and to earn a living. Yet millions of people in this country are still badly housed or, worse, have nowhere they can really call home.

There will always be times when property has to be empty for short periods; when, for example,

it is being repaired, or when people move house. But a tragic feature of modern Britain is the vast amount of perfectly habitable property that is needlessly left unused — much of it for long periods of time.

This glaring contradiction between widespread homelessness and abundant empty property is the basis of squatting. But the link is not direct, and other factors intervene to determine the scale and nature of the squatting movement. On the one hand, it will depend upon the extent to which property owners and the state are prepared to use the police, the courts, and straightforward harassment, to defend established property rights. On the other hand, the success of squatting depends upon the ability of squatters and other homeless people to organise effectively and to obtain support from other sections of the community.

The current phase of squatting, which began in 1968, is part of a much wider flourishing of community-based social and political action, fired by the failure of established political channels and organisations to express the needs of people at a local level. Nowhere has this failure been more apparent than in the field of housing. Despite endless election promises, no political party has succeeded in ending homelessness, or in reducing the amount of empty property. The disillusion that this failure has produced has prompted thousands of people to take the only course left open to them — to take direct action in pursuit of the housing they need.

## The achievements of squatting

### Thousands housed

The most obvious achievement of squatting is the housing of thousands of people who would otherwise have been homeless. Tens of thousands more, living in overcrowded or slum conditions have obtained better housing. With between 30,000 and 50,000 people squatting at any one time, the amount of housing brought into use is equivalent to a town the size of Folkestone.

### Focus for organisation

Squatting has provided the homeless and the badly housed with an effective means of pressuring the authorities to improve their living conditions. There are no housing ‘trade unions’ through which the less privileged can effectively fight for their interests. The homeless cannot go on strike, and they have only rarely received adequate support from tenants’ and residents’ associations. In the absence of alternative ways of making their voices heard, squatting provides the homeless with a means of taking the initiative and with a focus around which to organise politically.

### Pressure on government

Squatting has won some concessions from the authorities. Occasionally, specific campaigns have forced councils to house people they had previously refused to help, and to use property which would otherwise have remained empty. Generally, however, the impact of squatting has been less apparent, but both the threat and reality of squatting have led to a number of reforms.<sup>1</sup>

- Councils and other property owners have been prompted to make better use of their empty property by improving their efficiency or by handing houses over to organisations capable of using them.<sup>2</sup> Thousands of people have been housed by councils ‘licensing’ empty short life properties to recognised groups of homeless people. These schemes were introduced only after militant squatting campaigns.

- On several occasions, squatting campaigns have provided the impetus for councils to buy empty property from private owners, both by voluntary agreement and by compulsory purchase.
- Squatting has led many councils to re-examine their housing provision, and to press the government for more resources. For instance, many schemes have been established specifically for single people whose housing needs have been persistently ignored.

- Central government has been nudged into sending circulars to councils urging them to make better use of their empty property, and while councils have mostly ignored the circulars, thousands of



empty properties have been brought into use.

- It was in response to squatting that a Private Members’ Bill was tabled in Parliament in 1976 to allow the requisitioning of private property left empty for more than six months. Although the proposal was defeated, the Labour Government embarked on a policy of encouraging councils to purchase property which had been neglected or left empty by its owners.<sup>3</sup> (In the event the policy was short-lived due to public expenditure cuts.)
- Pressure from squatting also helped to put the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act on the Statute book in 1977. The Act places a legal obligation on councils to house certain groups of people, such as families and the elderly.

- Squatting was partly responsible for the renewed enthusiasm, particularly by the 1974 Labour Government, for housing co-operatives. Squatters have been in the forefront of the recent movement for co-operative housing, with at least 50 groups of squatters forming themselves into permanent co-operatives.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Challenging the planners*

The impact of squatting has not been limited to the field of housing. Planners, too, have been obliged to take account of squatters’ demands. Squatting has proved an effective way to challenge property speculation, bureaucratic incompetence, public spending cuts and planning megalomania. By moving into areas scheduled for demolition, squatters have frequently brought new life and heart to declining and demoralised communities, enabling them effectively to oppose councils and developers. And, by their willingness to defend potentially usable buildings from behind barricades, squatters have been able to force owners to alter demolition plans or face the possibility of violent confrontation and consequent bad publicity.

#### *Publicity*

Squatting has, on occasion, proved extremely effective simply as a means of publicising the issues surrounding empty property and homelessness. If carefully planned and organised, the occupation of an empty building, even for a few hours, can gain wide and useful publicity.

#### *Choosing how to live*

Some people have found that, as well as providing a roof over their head, squatting is able to satisfy their needs for self-determination,

independence, experimentation and creativity. Squatters are not plagued with landlords, council housing officers, planners or mortgage companies breathing down their necks, and many people have taken advantage of this to experiment with alternative ways of living.

Many squatters live communally, sharing the facilities that are available to them. This is often forced upon them by circumstance, but after a while many people have found that they enjoy the absence of the traditional, tightly-knit family group. Apart from the economic benefits of sharing accommodation, communal living provides companionship and support. Single people, couples, families, gays, old people — all have shared together in squats. Few of them would have had the chance to live this way were it not for squatting. Little shared accommodation is provided by councils, housing associations or the private sector, and that which is available too often fails because of rigid and centralised management systems. Shared living in squats, on the other hand, has often proved more successful because of the combination of self-management, self-selection and the freedom of the inhabitants to physically adapt buildings.

#### *Base for projects*

People have used the free space provided by squatted buildings to develop a variety of projects which could not have supported market rents. Radical magazines, political organisations, and women’s centres have all found a base in squats, and squatting has provided a seed-bed for small enterprises such as craft workshops, print shops and bakeries. Vacant land has been squatted to create city farms and gardens; a whole host of socially useful, but commercially unviable, enterprises have flourished as a result of squatting.

#### *Freedom to build*

Squatters have to do their own repairs and maintenance. Virtually derelict buildings have been renovated by people with no previous experience and few resources. Learning basic building skills has enabled people to go beyond choosing wallpaper and making curtains in creating their homes. Despite the insecurity, some squatters have undertaken imaginative low-cost conversions to adapt buildings to their needs, a form of ‘user-control’ that is normally only available to wealthy owner occupiers.

#### *Cohesive communities*

Where considerable amounts of property are left empty in the same area, squatting communities have sometimes developed. Racial and other minorities have chosen to live together in order to maintain cultural traditions, and sometimes to defend themselves against racial attacks. Other areas have attracted people who wish to experiment with new forms of community life. Some such communities have been chaotic and oppressive, and have failed to cope with the problems of anti-social behaviour. Others, held together by a common struggle against the property owners have created co-operative environments with rare quakes of cohesion and enthusiasm. Different forms of community ‘self control’ have evolved, and a variety of alternative ‘welfare services’ have been spawned: crèches, food co-ops, community workshops, claimants unions, therapy groups. Such communities have often provided supportive environments for people with physical or mental disabilities, or people who simply feel inadequate, many of whom might otherwise have found themselves in institutions.

#### *Control from below*

So as well as spotlighting the shortage of housing, Squatting challenges the nature of what housing is available and shows that there are alternatives. In particular it demonstrates the desperate need for more devolution of power at every level in the housing system. The difference between how people live when they have a measure of choice and how they are forced to live when everything is administered from above is astonishing; squatting clearly shows that people’s satisfaction with their environment has as much to do with their control over that environment as with the rigid physical standards that administrators seek to impose. Some squatters have been demanding not simply that the state should provide housing but that the state should provide the resources for people to house themselves.

The experience of collective action, mutual aid, campaigning, repairing houses and communal living has had a lasting effect on many people. While some remember their days as squatters as a nightmare of discomfort, insecurity and fear, many others recall the excitement, humour, sense of liberation and the comradeship of squatting. Some have become politically active, some have changed their lifestyle, and some have gained the ability to tackle problems which previously seemed insoluble.

#### **Squatting attacked**

Of course, squatting has not been viewed in this positive light by those in power. Instead it has been seen as a threat to ‘law and order’ and the democratic process, and above all to the sacred rights of private property.

Ironically, isolated squatters do not in practice pose a serious threat to private property rights, since they can easily be evicted through the courts. But as a movement, squatting subverts the authority of owners and administrators, and there is always the possibility of the movement escalating, and even extending the principles of direct action into other fields.

Squatting has therefore been attacked from many sides.

- Private property owners have consistently lobbied for tougher measures against squatters, and they have enjoyed the almost unanimous backing of the media. At times, it is true, the spread of squatting has been accelerated by publicity, and certain campaigns have benefited immensely from sympathetic coverage. But the political stance of newspaper owners, combined with the commercial need for sensation, has led the media largely to ignore the causes and the benefits of squatting. Instead, squatters have been attacked at times with almost religious fervour. They have been accused of every conceivable evil, from having lice to being workshy. Lies, deceit, half-truths, fabrications, even infiltration with journalists posing as homeless people — every trick in the armoury of the popular press has been brought to bear against the hapless squatter. A popular mythology has thus been created that all squatters are parasitic deviants who steal people’s houses and constitute a threat to everything decent in society. Surveys<sup>5</sup> have consistently shown that these images are totally false, but they are sufficiently widely accepted to encourage much hostility towards squatters.
- Public authorities and politicians of all major political parties have always attacked squatting, seeing it as a ‘problem’ to be stamped out, rather than as a symptom of the housing crisis. While sometimes tolerating it for pragmatic reasons, councils have consistently tried to discourage squatting. Houses have been boarded up, gutted or even demolished to prevent people using them. Service authorities have been instructed, to disconnect gas, water and electricity from

squatted houses. Publicity campaigns have been waged to discredit squatters, with accusations that they jump waiting lists, smash up houses, hold up development programmes and cost councils money. Once again, surveys have shown the reality to be completely different but the accusations have served as a convenient smokescreen to hide some of the failings of councils’ housing programmes. Many councils evict squatters long before buildings are needed, on occasion using hired thugs to carry out their work illegally. Little attempt has been made to understand the positive aspects of squatting, and councils’ responses have been almost totally negative.

- Successive governments have advised councils on how best to ‘contain’ squatting and have introduced anti-squatting legislation. Legal restraints have been progressively strengthened, culminating in 1977 with the Criminal Law Act which, while not making squatting illegal, does make it slightly more difficult.

#### **The need for organisation**

Common needs and common enemies mean that squatters have to organise themselves and gain support from others if they want to do more than obtain temporary crash-pads.

The vast majority of squatters do not see their actions in political terms, their sole aim being to provide themselves with somewhere to live. They often have no contact with other squatters, hide their status for fear of hostile reactions from neighbours, and are usually evicted after a short stay only to squat somewhere else. But some squatters have organised themselves, and at a local level have often been extremely successful in protecting their interests.

On a wider level, the movement has been politically fragmented. Libertarians, anarchists, marxists, liberals, trotskyists, socialists, communists, social democrats and conservationists — including prominent members of the Labour, Liberal and (on one occasion) Conservative parties — have all taken up squatting.<sup>6</sup> Each has seen it as a tool for change, but change in very different directions.

Despite this broad spectrum of support, no political party has taken a consistent interest in squatting. Even those on the left have largely ignored it. The explanation lies in the rapidly changing and volatile nature of squatting, which

makes it difficult to organise. While political groups may plan specific actions to achieve specific goals, they can never control squatting in general. There will always be people who will squat in a different way, using different tactics to achieve different ends.

At the same time, the actions of one group of squatters inevitably affects the prospects of others. Much squatting has been undertaken by individuals acting in isolation. But this has only been possible because of the collective strength of the movement as a whole, which has established the legal and political framework within which squatting, in all its variety of forms, has developed.

Both the uncontrollable diversity and the interdependence of squatting must be understood if some of the mistakes and confusions of the past are to be avoided in the future.

#### **Future prospects**

The present Tory government intends to cut housing expenditure by half between 1980 and 1984, and has no plans to curb the amount of property left empty. So an increasing number of people will have no better option than to squat empty property to get a home. Indeed, after a decline in squatting at the end of the seventies due to the concessions granted to squatters and to uncertainty about the Criminal Law Act, by 1980 squatting was already on the increase again.

But as this book goes to press (Autumn 1980) the organisational level of the squatting movement has reached a low ebb. If the new wave of squatting is to be more than simply the multiplication of isolated occupations, then squatters must reorganise: they must learn from the experience of the past, and must develop means to provide collectively the legal, financial and other essential back-up services.

Equally important will be the ability of squatters to obtain wider support for their actions; from tenants and residents associations, community groups, trade unions, political parties and the general public. If the experience, energy and creativity of the squatting movement can be linked up with the strength of all the millions of others who need to see housing put back at the top of the political agenda, then ‘decent housing for all’ might come a little nearer to being a reality.

Next time you pass a boarded up house, think about it. •



# The Squatters

## Chapter 2

Who are the squatters? Why do people squat? The quotes on the following pages provide some answers. They are all from squatters or people intending to squat. The photographs are all of squatters. (More details and statistics on squatters can be found on page 230.)

*'I am a squatter. [The house] had been empty a long time, and I had nowhere to go. Now it seems that a person wants to purchase it for a holiday home and of course they keep pestering me to get out, but I have nowhere to go. I have tried everywhere to find accommodation without success.'*  
(Fakenham, Norfolk, September 1976)

*'I was in a flat and it was unbearable and I applied for a transfer. Every time I went out I was having windows broken and my meter robbed. I asked the council if I could have the house next door to my mother in Hyde. Even my MP requested a transfer for me and they had a medical certificate from my doctor as I was under severe nervous strain. But they said I would have to stay there for another four years. I could not anyway stay there any longer. My children and myself were just victimised beyond endurance so I have squatted.'*  
(Hyde, Cheshire, November 1977)

*'At the moment we live in a one room flatlet. We are my husband, myself and daughter (3 months old). We have been given notice to quit and can't just sit back and let it happen. I must do something. We have tried all sorts of rented accommodation, but with a child nobody wants to know. Even when we go down to the council, all they say is they can't do anything until we are evicted. Somehow I don't think I could face that.'*  
(Bournemouth Dorset, August 1975)

*'I have been on Manchester Council's housing list for 12 months awaiting one bedroom accommodation. I live with my aunt and my 69 year old grandmother who I have to share a bedroom with. My gran is bedridden with chronic bronchitis and emphysema. My aunt and I do not get on and due to this I have been in hospital twice with overdoses. My aunt has given me notice to quit but I have nowhere to go so I have thought of squatting.'*  
(Manchester, April 1977)

*'Landlords don't like seamen. Squatting's the only possible thing for a seaman. You don't want to pay rent when you're away eight or ten months of the year. I don't earn enough to be able to afford bed-and-breakfast or hostels and in the seamen's mission you can't bring your girl friend in. There's no freedom. I like squatting as well. It makes me feel a lot freer. It's the same as having a place of your own.'*  
(London, 1975)

*'We applied for a council house in July 1974 when we were in apartments with a young man and his wife and child. Then while my wife was in hospital having our baby, I went to court for a minor offence and was given a six month prison sentence. The couple we were living with then told my wife we could no longer live there. My mother-in-law took my wife and baby in but they were back and*



Shelter Picture Library 1974

Adam Harvey 1978



Topix 1977







Daily Telegraph

forward to the welfare for help to find accommodation as they knew they had no room to put the three of us up when I came home. I also had prison welfare people trying to help, pleading with the council, but we had no satisfaction. 'When I was discharged in April my wife's friend and her husband said we could stay there for a few weeks until we could find somewhere else. Then the council said that they didn't allow sub-tenants and if we didn't get out then they would evict the others. We then bought a caravan and from May up until a few weeks ago we lived in there. We had it parked on a piece of spare council land with a garage a few hundred yards down the road where we got our water and used their toilet facilities. Then the other week the council started harassing us saying they wanted the ground to build on. They then issued us with a letter to quit the site in seven days and they also said not to put the caravan on any other council property. All the caravan parks are full and have waiting lists of up to three years. So we had nowhere to go – so we moved out of the caravan into this house [a squat].' (Blackwood, Gwent, Wales, November 1975)

'What is the law concerning 15 year old squatters who don't get on with their parents very well, so they can't live at home? You see, I don't think I can stand being at home much longer. PS Don't write or phone my parents.' (Petersfield, Hampshire, March 1976)

'The council said we'd have to wait eight or nine years, so we put our names on the New Towns list instead. If they ask us to go to halfway accommodation we won't go. My husband was in that when he was young and caught diseases and really hated it.' (London, 1975)

'I have taken the course to squat as I have no other alternative; as we are living in appalling conditions, and it is taking it's toll on my wife and small son. I am frightened of losing them.' (Watford, Hertfordshire, January 1976)

I am in hospital at the moment due to having nowhere else to go. It has nearly given me a nervous breakdown. I am 28 years of age and have just come out of prison after serving one year of my sentence but since coming out I can find no flat. I intend to squat in the near future.' (Sefton General Hospital, Liverpool, April 1976)

'The council gave me a letter to take to a hotel in Muswell Hill. They showed me a single room and said there were no facilities for children. They told us we would have to be out for four or five hours each day. I said to Brian it would just be awful. We moved into a squat instead.' (London, 1975)

I leave jail [soon] and am homeless. I have a council owned place in mind [to squat] but wish to keep within the law as I have been in prison for two years. Any short stay place would be beyond my means as I will only have a jail discharge grant.' (Her Majesty's Prison, Wotton-under-edge, Gloucester, March 1979)

I moved to Hebden Bridge in December 1972 having then been homeless for 2 months after [the] previous landlord had evicted us — myself and 5-year-old son — in order to sell the house in which we had lived for 4 years, to be converted into offices. Travelling around looking for a home we passed through Hebden Bridge, liked it, found a house and lived here through 1973.

'Then we reluctantly moved away to find work and rented a farmhouse in a small Norfolk village. The landlord got planning permission to demolish the house and build 6 bungalows on the land. I then went to the West Norfolk Housing Department and Social Services, who flatly refused to help, saying that they have no statutory obligation to rehouse the homeless, and that I hadn't lived in West Norfolk for 5 years — their waiting list qualification period. Meanwhile we slept in a garage just over



Time Out 1973



Raissa Page 1978



Adam Harvey 1978

Adam Harvey 1978



Adam Harvey 1978

John Ter Marsch 1979







Adam Harvey 1978

Ray 1978



Adam Harvey 1978



Dave Hoffman 1977



Ray 1979



Dave Walking 1978



Tony Sleep 1979



Mike Goldwater 1979



Mike Goldwater 1979

the Cambridgeshire border. There was nowhere to rent in East Anglia.

Then I returned to Hebden Bridge hoping to find a house to rent, but the housing situation was far worse than in 1973.'

(Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire, 1976)

'It was always one room; I've never been lucky enough to find a flat. Landladies prefer students to working men. Single people have no chance of getting accommodation. I'm definitely not going into a hostel.'

(London, 1975)

'It started off because I couldn't get anything else, now it would be because you're not inhibited. It should be possible for me to do what I want to do in my own environment. I don't see what the council would have to offer.'

(London, 1975)

'My brother-in-law [John] went to see the landlord of a house which has been standing empty for 18 months and asked him if he could rent it off him. This man was rude to John and said he had no intention of letting his house and told John to clear off. This was the straw that broke the camel's back. John and Sally moved into the house. They have been there now for two weeks, but the landlord hasn't found out yet. They have no furniture, light or heat and they sleep in sleeping bags. We are terrified about what might happen to them.'

(Leicester, October 1976)

'After ten years in bedsits I needed to stretch my legs. I lived in a van for about three weeks, part of that time I spent in Manchester and Sheffield looking for cheaper housing. By the end of October it was getting very cold in the van. It was uncomfortable and was broken into, and I heard of this place having empty rooms.'

(London, 1975)

'My wife and I were told by the housing manager that we were to play bat and ball with the Council. If we could find a place to live, and send our rehousing form in, he would, or might, be able to help us get council accommodation.'

'We couldn't find private accommodation, so we decided to squat in empty council property. We had 18 points [on the waiting list] before we decided to squat, now it seems we have none. Many times I have gone to the Council and asked them "What is homeless?"; they reply "A married couple with a child."

(St Albans, Hertfordshire, undated)

'I am living with my common law wife, one of her children and one of my own. My wife is also three months pregnant. We were living with my wife's brother and sister in law, but it got so as we were all getting on each other's nerves and all on edge. We just had to leave there and squat.'

(Liverpool, September 1976)

I had great problems paying the rent. I had been paying a third of my income, but I lost my job and then all my income went in rent. I stopped paying and I was evicted. It was a really shitty life style. It didn't satisfy my requirements. Paying a tolerable rent meant having just no space.'

(London, 1975)

'In the summer of 1971, I was living in my own house in Moss side, Manchester. The house was purchased from me by the Manchester City Council under a CPO and I received £25 for a 3-bedroom and bathroom terraced house.

'In January of the next year, three demolition workmen came to evict my family and myself on the

Lie of Land



Dave Walking 1979



Dave Walking 1979





Adam Harvey 1978



Raissa Page 1978



Martin Slavin 1972



Tony Sleep 1978



Tony Sleep 1979



Christopher Phollips 1978



Mike Goldwater 1978



Adam Harvey 1978



Tony Sleep

grounds that we were squatting. Despite our protestations they commenced to remove the roof. Eventually we were rehoused on the 16th floor of a recently built block. The conditions were, to put it bluntly, awful. Two lifts stopping at alternate floors served 160 apartments. It was very rare for both to be working at any one time and quite frequently neither was. We had to leave.

'We then moved to Hebden Bridge on the advice of some friends who had been living here for some time. Our first home was a rented one-up, one-down and kitchen house which we had to leave because the Council were buying it (same old story). Nothing else was available so we moved into a derelict cottage on the moors. We came to an agreement with the owner and lived there very happily for 18 months. However [the owners] leased the property and again we had to go.

'We left for Scotland in search of work and a place to live. Work of a transient nature was easily found, but a home did not fall to hand so easily. Eventually, admitting defeat we came back to Hebden Bridge where we at least had friends. No houses were available so here we are squatting.' (Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire, 1976)

Dave Hoffman 1978



I have been evicted from my council flat for rent arrears and am now homeless. I am single and on social security and as I have no permanent address now they will not pay me my benefit or help me find new accommodation. So I will have to find somewhere to squat.' (Liverpool, February 1979)

'My wife is divorced and she has four children in voluntary care in Middlesborough. Our situation is that we can't get a house unless we have the children and we can't have the children unless we have a house. We both work in or near the town and we cannot get satisfaction from any of the councils we have been in touch with. Therefore we have taken the law into our own hands to get my wife's children and ourselves together as a family.' (Oldham, Lancashire, undated)

Adam Harvey 1976



'I wanted to live communally in a large household with kids, and the only way to do that was squatting.' (London, 1975)

'We have just squatted a local council property, with the intention of turning it into an action centre, advice centre, craft workshops etc. - much needed in Exeter.' (Exeter, Devon, October 1976)

'There are plenty of places to live on a winter-let basis, but come Easter we find ourselves homeless for the summer. Understandably, the landlords want to let their flats and cottages to holiday-makers in the summer for ludicrous rents. We are fairly together people who want somewhere to stay where we can grow vegetables, keep a few chickens and raise a few kids.' (Liskeard, Cornwall, May 1977)

'[Squatting] was the only way I saw of getting accommodation I could afford and liked, and there was an element of adventure. I'd have joined the brain drain and gone to South America if I hadn't squatted. London is a creative city; creative people always live in a bohemian way. Squatting is a bohemian way of life. Anybody interested in community life would extinguish squatting at their peril. I'm a citizen of the oceans, not of any of the suicidal technocracies.' (London, 1975)

Syndication International 1976



'We are considering moving into a cottage out in the mountains here. It's been condemned for five years. The owner, who's an old local farmer, was quite happy for people to stay here until quite recently but the council have started fining him if anyone lives there with his permission. We're a married couple. If we knew that we'd be able to stay for a few months at least, we'd move in tomorrow as we're living in a tent at the moment and it's very damp.' (Hay-on-Wye, Wales, October 1976)



# A decade of squatting

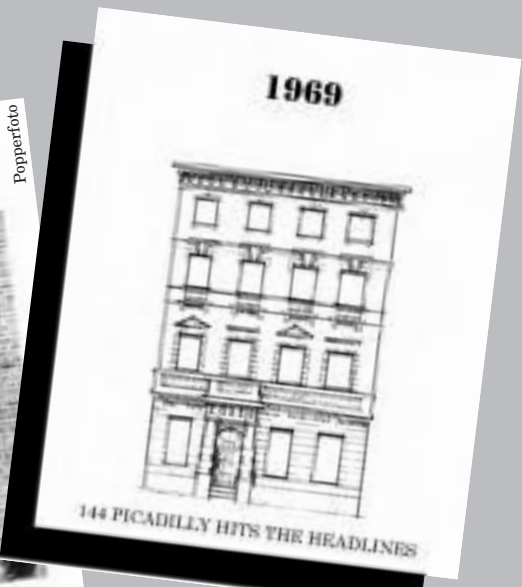
The story of squatting in Britain since 1968  
by Steve Platt



1968

Popperfoto

LONDON SQUATTERS CAMPAIGN BEGINS...



1969

144 PICADILLY HITS THE HEADLINES



1970

THE SUNDAY TIMES SAYS:

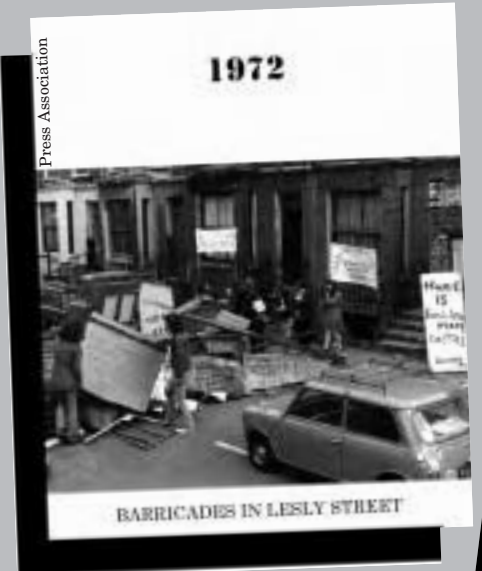
### Squatters are now respectable

After the ugly scenes last year when hangers clashed violently with squatters, the Greater London Council of Redcliffe is now taking a new approach. An investigating committee, including squatters, is to consider installing homeless families in temporary accommodation owned, but not used by the council. The council has accepted the principle of installing squatters; now it is a question of when, where and how many.



1971

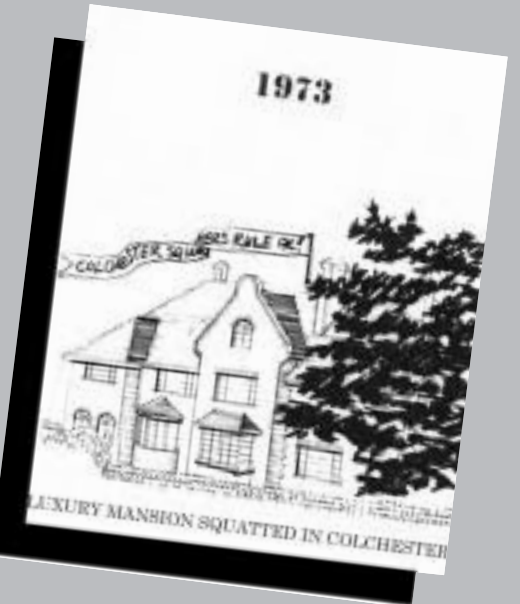
TRANSPORT HOUSE OCCUPIED



1972

BARRICADES IN LESLY STREET

Press Association



1973

LUXURY MANSION SQUATTED IN COLCHESTER

### 3 Setting the stage

The new squatting wave begins – 1969-1972

### 4 Here there and everywhere

The mid-seventies boom in squatting

### 5 Mounting opposition

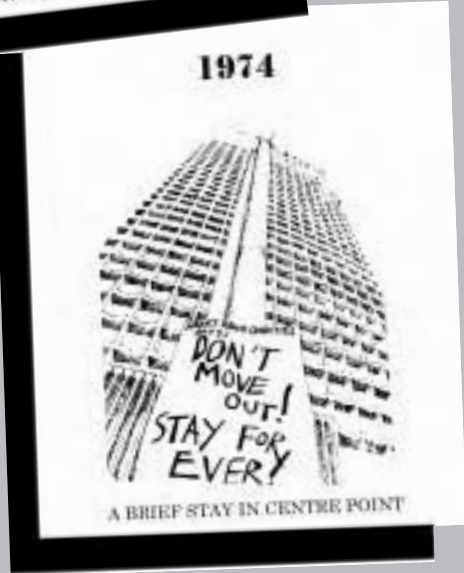
Property owners and the media attack squatting

### 6 Fighting back

Squatters organise nationally and locally to defend their rights

### 7 A whole new ball game

Winning concessions and learning to live with the new law



1974

A BRIEF STAY IN CENTRE POINT



1975

TAKING ON THE CROWN

Time Out



1976

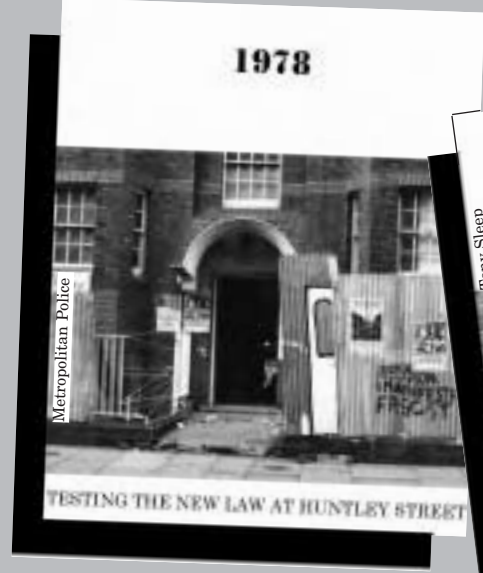
OPPOSING THE GOVERNMENT



1977

WHECKERS V SQUATTERS AT ST AGNES PLACE

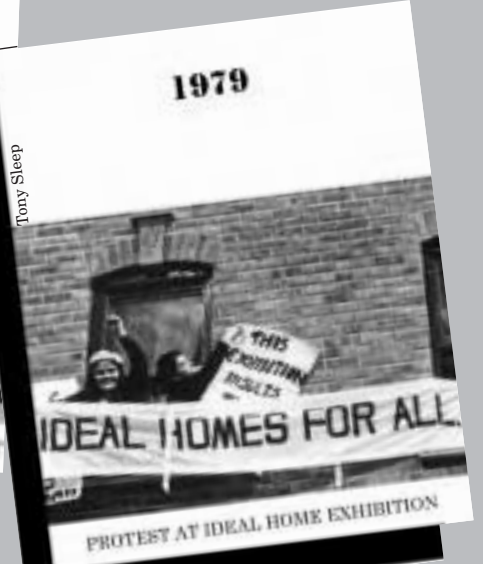
The Times



1978

TESTING THE NEW LAW AT HUNTLEY STREET

Metropolitan Police



1979

IDEAL HOMES FOR ALL

Tony Sleep



# Setting the stage

The new squatting wave begins – 1969-1972

When I was nine or ten years old I used to go ‘exploring’ with friends around the allotments in Stoke-on-Trent. A never-ending vista of huts and sheds of all shapes and sizes littered the area. It was the early sixties equivalent of an adventure playground. One day we went into one of the larger huts and were amazed to discover that this ramshackle building was somebody’s home. What had appeared from the outside to be nothing more than an oversized store shed turned out to be a tiny house. Technically the occupants were squatters since they had no legal right or licence of abode. Although they probably paid the few shillings weekly rent charged for the allotment, they certainly had no right to construct a house on the plot. But lost amidst that warren of greenhouses, huts and sheds, I doubt if they were troubled until the site was cleared for a new housing estate.

There have always been many such squatters; people who probably do not think of themselves as squatters and who are certainly not part of any movement, but squatters all the same. I recently came across one such person by accident at the end of an unmade road near Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, in a large uncultivated field which backs onto a small wood. In the shade of the trees there is the shell of a three-ton truck. The chassis and engine cab are missing and all that remains is the metal bodywork. To the undiscerning eye it looks much like any other abandoned vehicle but for several years it has been the home of an Italian immigrant who works at a local nursery.

Many people are still forced into desperate and inadequate solutions to their housing problems. One family in Lancashire recently made their home in a metal hopper in a factory yard. They installed four bunk beds, a makeshift toilet and a cooker and, unbeknown to the factory owners and workers, lived there until one day candles set



Skelsmerdale & Holland Reporter



David Hoffman



The Guardian

Home in a factory yard hopper in Lancashire, 1974, in a van in East London, 1978, and on a common in Cambridgeshire, 1971. There have always been such squatters who may not see themselves as part of any ‘movement’.

## Chapter 3

fire to the hopper’s canvas cover.<sup>1</sup>

In 1972, a man who had lived with his wife in a car parked outside a transport cafe for nine months appealed to others in a similar situation to contact him with a view to organising a lobby of Parliament. Over 730 people living in cars, vans and abandoned caravans responded to his request, and there must have been many more in the same position who did not. Bus shelters, shopping arcades, doorways, lift-shafts and bridges, among many other inhospitable places, have provided thousands of grateful homeless with shelter and protection from the elements.

In addition, there has always been a large but unknown number of people for whom there is an element of choice in their adoption of an unsettled mobile lifestyle, as opposed to society’s efforts to tie them to one place. ‘Tramps’ have slept in derelict houses for many centuries and gypsies are often forced to squat on empty land whenever they stop moving. There are many individual case histories in the following pages. But it has been the successes and failures of squatting *as a movement* which have determined the present conditions in which squatting is a real possibility for tens of thousands of people. If there is a bias in this section towards the actions of *organised* squatters, it is only because their stories are of greater significance for squatters as a whole.

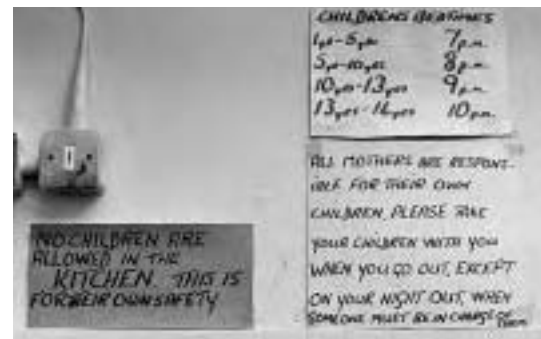
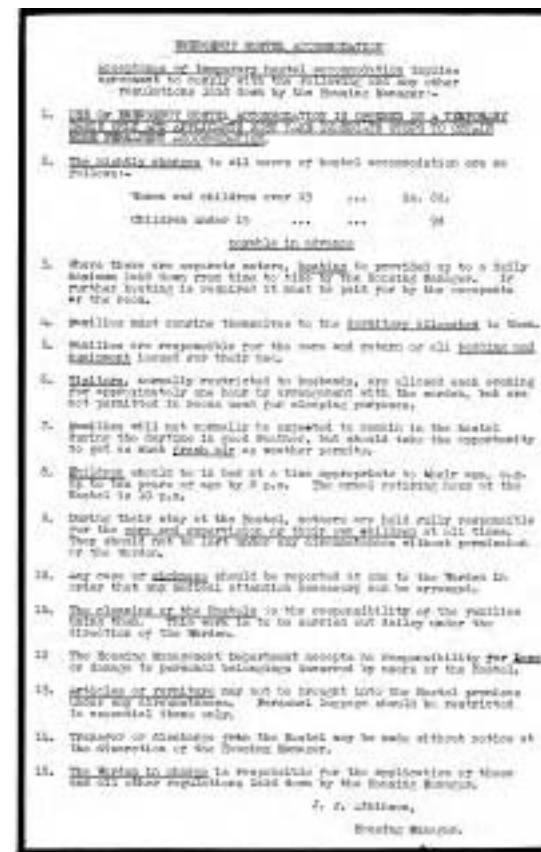
The widespread postwar squatting movement (Chapter 9) was effectively crushed in 1946. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, though squatting was thought not to occur, a few people did squat but in complete isolation from any organised movement. Then, by publicising their activities and consciously encouraging others to imitate them, a group of squatters in late 1968 paved the way for squatting to grow from the quiet act of desperate individuals to the widespread activity which it is today.

### The roots

In the late fifties and early sixties, extra-Parliamentary political activity was centred on the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Committee of 100. The latter openly advocated direct action to further its fight against nuclear arms and this marked the revival of the use of direct action in non-industrial settings. At the same time, numerous sociologists published research confirming the continued existence of inequality and deprivation. A new generation of angry young middle-class men and women were appalled by the fact that the poor were still with us, and the adequately housed majority were shocked to learn that homelessness and inadequate housing still afflicted millions of people. Awareness grew with the publication of reports like the Milner-Holland survey on London’s housing in 1965, TV shows like ‘Cathy Come Home’ (first broadcast in 1966) and the formation of Shelter, a national charity campaigning on housing.

The Committee of 100, and the experience which people acquired during their involvement with it, offered new ideas on how to fight this injustice. It was becoming apparent that direct action was a means by which concessions could be wrung out of a complacent establishment. In a longer-term perspective, some people thought it might provide a way to build a movement challenging the actual structure of society. In many respects the direct action of the Committee of 100 against nuclear armaments was purely symbolic, challenging the state at the point where it could least afford to yield. In contrast the activists of the late sixties began to make more realistic demands and moved into areas which affected people’s everyday lives.

The main impetus for the 1968-69 squatting campaign came from a loosely-knit group of radicals, many of whom had been involved with the Committee of 100 and the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. Some of them had been active in a long struggle at King Hill Hostel, West Mailing, in 1966. The hostel, run by Kent County Council for homeless families, operated on antiquated rules, the worst of which was that only mothers and children could stay there with husbands only being allowed to see their families at approved visiting times. A group of husbands moved into the hostel and refused to leave. A protracted battle followed, ending in humiliation and defeat for the Council. The hostel rules were changed and the lesson was clear



Harsh conditions in emergency hostels for the homeless which led to the formation of the London Squatters Campaign in the late sixties. The hostel rules (top) were produced by Birmingham Corporation Housing Management Department.

for all to see: direct action obtained changes which years of pressure through normal democratic channels had failed to achieve.

Activists also came together in other housing campaigns during 1967 and 1968 and this enabled a core of militants to accumulate a valuable fund of contacts and experience before embarking upon squatting. The idea of squatting was first raised by the homeless and badly-housed families involved in these campaigns. Squatting was a natural extension of direct action into the fight for decent housing and conditions were ripe for it to succeed. Homelessness was increasing again, as was the stock of empty houses. Public sympathy, on which the success of squatting depends, was firmly on the side of the homeless. And there was an organised group of people willing to set things in motion.



### Rebirth of a squatting movement

The London Squatters Campaign was set up by a meeting of 15 people at the house of Ron Bailey on 18 November 1968. Although no written aims were set down, Bailey later claimed there were unwritten ones. One was simply ‘the rehousing of families from hostels or slums by means of squatting’. But it was also hoped that ‘squatting on a mass scale’ could be sparked off, that this would start ‘an all-out attack on the housing authorities with ordinary people taking action for themselves’ and that the campaign would have ‘a radicalising effect on existing movements in the housing field’.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of their laudably ambitious hopes, few of the activists would have found it credible had a visitor from the future told them that their example would be followed by tens of thousands of people seizing houses which did not belong to them. Their first target was ‘The Hollies’ a partially empty block of luxury flats in Wanstead High Street, East London. Some of the flats had been empty ever since they were built four years previously and this was seen as symbolic of the injustice which allowed private property owners to keep houses empty whilst thousands were homeless. The occupation for a few hours of these flats on 1 December 1968 was symbolic too, in a





Daily Telegraph

The London Squatters' first act: a three-hour demonstration squat in luxury flats, December 1968.

different way. It suggested a logical step forward: homeless people could introduce an element of control into their lives by taking over empty houses which the established institutions of society could not or would not use. A week after this brief occupation, a separate group of activists showed how easy it could be to make empty houses habitable. For one day they took over a house in Notting Hill, West London, which had been empty for 18 months and cleaned and decorated it, clearly demonstrating its suitability for use by the homeless.

Two weeks later, just before Christmas, the London Squatters Campaign occupied All Saints Vicarage, Leyton, a building which the church

had kept empty for over three years. Homeless people were encouraged to be involved in the action. A few from a Camden Council hostel managed to enter before police cordoned off the house. The squatters then asked the church to make the house available to the homeless, but this was rejected, almost 1,968 years to the day since another homeless family is reputed to have been forced to sleep in a barn. The squatters made this point forcefully, stayed for a day and left. The same weekend, the Notting Hill group occupied a block of luxury flats, Arundel Court, and again left voluntarily after a few hours. All the occupations so far had been symbolic gestures, their primary aim being to attract publicity. However



East London News Agency



David Hope

Squatting spreads. Left: Moving in and staying, Notting Hill, January 1969. Right above: Edinburgh squatters occupy flats on the Royal Mile left empty for four years after conversion by the Council because no-one could afford the rents. Right below: Occupation of a Brighton Council house after a 200-strong meeting of the 'Rents Project Campaign for Better Housing' decided to take up squatting, May 1969.

the coverage they received was beginning to fade and in the new year, the second, more decisive, phase of the campaign began.

On 18 January 1969, Maggie O'Shannon and her two children moved into No 7 Camelford Road Notting Hill, with the aid of the Notting Hill activists. The Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), which owned the house, reacted predictably: 'This kind of forced entry into private property is tantamount to an attempt to jump the housing queue' said a spokesperson. The fact that the house was condemned and empty with no plans to fill it seemed to have escaped the ILEA's notice. But after six weeks of adverse publicity a rent book was grudgingly pushed through the

letterbox, making Maggie O'Shannon the first person since the 1940s to obtain permanent housing through squatting. Her story was told on TV and in almost every newspaper in the country, with the result that the lesson was not lost on other homeless families — Maggie O'Shannon had got a place to live by squatting.

Squatting began to spread. Three families moved into houses in Winnersh, near Reading. In Yorkshire, a family squatted a privately-owned house which had been empty for six years and, within a month, was given a legal tenancy. Squatting groups were set up in Leeds, where an office block was occupied, Edinburgh, Birkenhead, Brighton and Manchester as well as in several parts of London.

The Scotsman



Brighton Evening Argus







**Redbridge thuggery**  
 The most important struggle though was in Redbridge, East London, an area close to the homes of several of the London Squatters Campaign members. Redbridge Council was planning a major central area redevelopment scheme for Ilford. The scheme had not been officially approved and would not be started for several years and yet the Council was deliberately leaving a large number of sound houses empty to rot. Attempts to persuade it to use these houses for short-term lets had failed and some houses were planned to be left empty for ten years. On 8 February four houses were occupied, families installed and barricades erected.

The Council initially attempted to crush squatting through the courts. First it tried to serve injunctions ordering the squatters to cease trespassing but these were evaded. It then unsuccessfully argued that the squatters were guilty of 'forcible detainer' an offence created in 1429 to prevent anyone using violence to retain possession and asked a magistrate to have them prosecuted. Redbridge Council then succeeded in obtaining possession orders for the squatted houses but was thwarted when the squatters swapped houses so that people named on the possession orders were no longer resident in the houses to which they applied. (A ruling in 1975 (pl61) was to make 'squat-swopping' ineffective but it remained a useful tactic for many years).

Annoyed by the prospect of more occupations, the Council embarked upon blunter tactics. In one fortnight at the end of February, it gutted 29 houses to deter squatters from moving in at a cost to the ratepayers of £2,520.

But by now squatting in the area was beginning to take root as more and more people approached the London Squatters Campaign wanting to squat. During the first weeks of April, several families and single parents moved in. Redbridge Council's determination to crush the embryonic squatting movement was meeting with little success. But towards the end of April it was ready to try again. In March, squatters in a Greater London Council (GLC) house, had been threatened with eviction by a group of officially-sanctioned thugs who used violence without bothering to obtain court orders. Olive Mercer, who was squatting in the house with her husband and son, was struck in the stomach with an iron bar. She was pregnant and the blow caused her to bleed and consequently to lose her baby. The thuggery only ceased when a doctor



John Topham



Chris Smith/ Camera Press

*Squatters move in to Redbridge's empty houses, February 1969. Barricades are built immediately. It was a first home for the Beresford children (right) whose parents had been homeless for 12 years.*



Keystone



Photocall Feature

insisted that her daughter, who was in bed with scarlet fever, was too ill to be moved.

Redbridge Council was sufficiently 'impressed' to hire the same thugs to deal with its own 'squatter problem'. The men, some of whom sported National Front badges, were supplied by a firm of private bailiffs run by Barry Quartermain who the Sunday Times described as a man who 'tears a London telephone directory into halves and then into quarters as he lectures you about the toughness of his henchmen'.<sup>3</sup> He was later to serve a three-year jail sentence for offences committed in pursuit of his 'business'.

On 21 April people squatting in three Redbridge houses were evicted by these bailiffs without any court orders authorising such evictions. They were accompanied by a posse of police, Council officials and welfare workers, all of whom ignored the violent methods of the bailiffs. One squatter was beaten up and had his jaw broken. The Fleming family was forced to dress in front of the bailiffs and had their furniture smashed and thrown out of the windows. Another squatter, Ben Beresford, in an affidavit, described his family's eviction from one of the houses:

'While my wife was trying to get some baby's clothes, I was told to "stop wasting fucking time". I was grabbed hold of violently by one of the bailiffs and my arm was forced in a lock behind my back. I was pushed and frogmarched down the stairs into the waiting van, and was locked in ... There I was forced to stay until the end of the eviction'.<sup>4</sup>

Once the families had been kicked out, workmen were sent in to wreck the houses, smashing holes in roofs and ripping out staircases to prevent re-occupation. There were, however, many other empty Council houses in the area and by mid-June squatters were once more in occupation of several of them. Redbridge Council tried to use Quartermain's men again but this time the squatters were prepared. On 23 June, bailiffs were sent to No. 23 Audrey Road and No. 6 Woodland Road. They met with much more resistance than they had bargained for, and the eviction attempts were rebuffed. The national media were alerted, so that when the bailiffs returned at dawn two days later, their thuggery was reported in the press and shown on TV all over the country. Redbridge Council earned the worst press that a council has ever received in dealings with squatters. Not only was



Fleet Street News Agency



*Top: The Fleming family after being illegally evicted in April 1969 by Redbridge Council. (The house was not needed until 1976 when it was demolished and the site was still unused in 1980). Above: A thug is frogmarched out of a house by squatters after an abortive attempt to evict the Flemings from their next squatted home, June 1969.*





Keystone



The Times



Evening Standard

Left: Protected by dustbin lid shields, Redbridge Council's hired 'bailiffs' hurl bottles and bricks in a dawn attack on No 6 Woodlands Road. The squatters fought back and, after a fire started, the police finally intervened. Above: The squatters fight on.

it shown to be pursuing a wasteful and inhumane policy of unnecessarily destroying habitable houses, but it was also illegally using extreme violence against the homeless.

The media coverage played a major part in forcing the Council to negotiate despite the reluctance of many councillors and council officers, and in July an agreement with the squatters was worked out. Some squatter families were to get permanent council homes, the Council was to carry out a review of its use of short-life property and all gutting was to cease while this review was carried out. The squatters were to meet the Council again after it was completed. In order to obtain these concessions, the squatters had to vacate the houses they occupied and stop their campaign in the area. They voted by a two-thirds majority to agree to the Council's conditions but the agreement was denounced by some as a 'surrender' and there was a lot of bitterness on both sides about the decision.

Although it did get housing for some of the squatting families, the agreement had only a small effect on Council policy. Redbridge did bring into use some properties not scheduled to be demolished for seven years but claimed that most would cost too much to bring up to habitable standard. Three years later, in fact, it released several of the poorer short-life properties to local squatters. One of the properties that squatters voluntarily vacated in July 1969 – No 2 Woodlands Road — was still empty ten years later. Indeed the same streets in Redbridge which were the focus for the 1969 campaign remain blighted by the same redevelopment scheme in 1980.<sup>5</sup> To avoid opposition, Redbridge now has a policy of 'prior demolition', pulling down houses which are on land not needed for several years.

Nevertheless, the Redbridge struggle achieved a great deal. It ensured that owners seeking eviction went through the courts, affording squatters a minimal degree of security without which squatting could not have gone beyond the stage of protest sit-ins. Indeed the London Squatters Campaign's adroit legal defence established precedents which benefitted squatters for many years and many people involved in Ilford went on to promote squatting in other areas. The London Squatters Campaign renamed itself East London Squatters as new local groups were established all over the capital. The beginnings of squatting on a mass scale had been made.



Widespread support and sympathetic publicity helps the upsurge in squatting.





Illustrated London News

The Times



Sunday Telegraph



Brian Weske/ Camera Press



The Times



Sunday Telegraph



Brian Weske/ Camera Press

### Hippydilly

The tide of public opinion which was firmly in favour of squatters in Redbridge turned later in 1969 as a result of the terrible publicity attracted by the occupation of a number of prominent buildings in central London, particularly No 144 Piccadilly.

September 1969 became the open season for hippy-hunting and squatter-bashing in the press. The main action was centred upon the takeover by the 'London Street Commune' and assorted supporters of No 144 Piccadilly, an empty school in Endell Street, Covent Garden and empty offices in Russell Square, Bloomsbury. No 144 Piccadilly was squatted early in September and when police evicted its occupants less than three weeks later, many of them moved into the Endell Street school, from which they were evicted after only two days.

The Russell Square squat was equally short-lived.

The press had already introduced the 'hippy menace' to the public earlier that year, but had not yet generated the hysteria which erupted in September. The London Street Commune was a loosely organised group of mainly young, long-haired people who wanted to find somewhere for hundreds of 'hippies' then sleeping rough in London's parks to stay overnight. No 144 Piccadilly, a privately owned empty mansion at Hyde Park Corner, seemed an ideal place to establish a communal squat. But any possibility of this happening was immediately destroyed by the powerful reaction of the media.

'Drug taking, couples making love while others look on, rule by heavy mob armed with iron bars, foul language, filth and stench. THAT is the scene inside the hippies' fortress in London's

Piccadilly. These are not rumours but facts, sordid facts which will shock ordinary decent, family-loving people.'

declared the front page of *The People* under the heading 'HIPPIE THUGS: THE SORDID TRUTH'.

*The Times* warned in a lead article that 'Molotov cocktails were being manufactured' in preparation for a long siege. The *Sunday Express*, in common with most newspapers, 'smuggled' reporters and a photographer into the building. Under the heading 'HIPPIES WITH SWORDS WAIT FOR BATTLE', the brave journalists revealed that the squatters had an armoury consisting of 'knives, coshes, rocks and even swords'.

Media coverage ensured that the crowd outside No 144 Piccadilly rarely dropped below 500 during the day and large sections of it were

The occupation of No 144 Piccadilly. A hostile press and defiant slogans ensure a permanent sea of onlookers (left), while inside, people try to establish a long-term communal squat. Plastic balls are used both for defence (top left) and for play (top right).



Daily Telegraph

Brian Weske/ Camera Press

John Haines/ Topix

extremely hostile and potentially violent. Indeed, until the eviction, most police activity was directed against spectators who wanted to 'deal with' the squatters. Little media coverage was given to these incidents. In one case, when five motorbikes belonging to people inside were set on fire, not one large circulation paper mentioned it, even though every paper reported that the occupants hurled missiles at the people responsible.

The media, having created this mood of intense hostility, neglected, by and large, to report how it was manifested. For example, the saddest moment of these squats was reported only by radical papers and *The Guardian*. A youth climbed onto a window ledge 30 feet above pointed iron railings during the eviction of the Endell Street squat. A policeman inside the building tried to grab him. Down in the street a group of onlookers yelled 'Let him

fall' and 'Come on, why don't you jump?' For a moment it looked as if he might fall; he slipped, lost his footing and was left holding on by one hand. The group of men below cheered but much to their disappointment, he was saved.

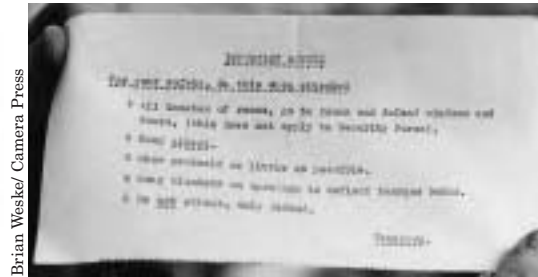
Even when No 144 was evicted on 21 September, press coverage remained firmly rooted in the fantasies the press had created which seemed to relate more to medieval times or the Wild West than to 1969. For the *Daily Mirror*, the Piccadilly eviction took on the form of the 'FALL OF HIPPIE CASTLE'. *The Times* emphasised the role of 50 young policemen who formed 'a bridgehead for a supporting column of police waiting nearby' and its headline bawled 'SQUATTERS OUSTED BY POLICE COMMANDO'. The *Daily Telegraph* crowed delightedly 'POLICE ROUT PICCADILLY HIPPIES'.

The next day *The Times* carried an editorial demanding that squatting be made a criminal offence, and suggesting 'Meanwhile, if groups of hippies continue to roam from one unoccupied building to another, they could be prosecuted under the Vagrancy Acts.'

Although, looked at objectively, these squats did not give a particularly good impression of the squatting movement, the frenzy of paranoid indignation they aroused was out of all proportion to their significance or to the number of people involved. Furthermore, the public hostility itself was largely responsible for the escalation of the squatters' defences and the disintegration of organisation inside the squats. For example, after initially intending to occupy No 144 Piccadilly peaceably and eventually to argue their case in court, the hippies felt forced to bring in Hell's



Brian Weske/ Camera Press



Brian Weske/ Camera Press



Brian Weske/ Camera Press



Brian Weske/ Camera Press



Brian Weske/ Camera Press





Angels to form a defence force against attacks by police and skinheads. The Hell's Angels started to dominate the squat and there were several nasty incidents, including a rape. Faced with angry crowds, impending eviction and internal dissent between hippies and Hell's Angels, what could have become peaceful communes housing homeless young people became chaotic and disorganised fortresses.

For all the *talk* of violence, there was none at the evictions. Most of the weapons were figments of journalists' imaginations. Those that really existed – mostly brightly-coloured plastic balls and fire extinguishers – were relatively harmless and ineffective. It took just four minutes for police to take control of No 144 Piccadilly and little longer at Endell Street.

The press outcry also provided a smokescreen behind which civil liberties were being cast to one side. The eviction of No 144 Piccadilly was not legally authorised. The police had no possession order and used a warrant under the Dangerous Drugs Act to legitimise their entry. In Endell Street 200 policemen evicted 63 squatters, all of whom were arrested and charged with resisting the Sheriff. Many had additional charges laid against them and most were refused bail. One month after the arrests

32 of them were still being held at Ashford Remand Centre. Eight were singled out as 'ring-leaders' and charged with conspiracy to 'forcibly detain' the Endell Street premises under the 1429 Forcible Entry Act. After a nine-day trial held in ultra-conservative Lewes 50 miles from London, all eight were found guilty. Two were jailed for nine months, two sent to detention centres, three given suspended jail sentences and one escaped with a £20 fine.

The events of September 1969 provide the historical basis of later popular and media images of squatters. Labels thrown around freely at that time stuck. The image of lazy scroungers bent on destroying society became synonymous with squatters, as *Peace News* observed:

'The word 'squatter' now conjures up a club-waving savage who is liable to take over your semi-detached the moment you turn your back, and wreck it. A totally misleading image, even insofar as it applies to the occupants of No 144, let alone to other varieties of squatter. But it will stick, and it will greatly help the Quartermaines of this world.'

Whether the press campaign against hippy squatters was, as the newspapers would claim, a reflection of public outrage or whether, as is more

likely, the campaign itself created that outrage, there is no doubt that the media coverage pandered to people's worst prejudices, and focused resentment not just against hippy squatters but against squatters generally. Prior to these events, the press had been equivocal about squatters, and, at times, had supported them wholeheartedly like at Redbridge where public opinion lay solidly with the homeless families involved. But No 144 Piccadilly was totally different. The demands of the Redbridge squatters had been realisable in the short run within the terms of the existing institutional framework of housing. They sought improved housing provision for homeless families and the main issue at stake was bureaucratic inefficiency in the handling of local authority housing stock. Conflict between the needs of people for housing and the right of property owners to do as they wished with their property – including leaving it empty – was a secondary issue. Squatting in Redbridge was not so much a challenge to private property rights as it was to incompetent councils.

The 'hippy' squats appeared to present a starker threat to private property. The lifestyle of the hippies, or at least the way in which it was described, was perceived as a challenge to society's most dearly held values. It called into question

both the nuclear family and the work ethic, and however superficial that challenge was in reality, it was regarded by the public and the state as a real and substantial threat.

The London Squatters Campaign vacillated in its attitude to the 'hippy' squatters, and in doing so missed one of the most crucial points arising from the central London occupations – the expression of the growing need for single person accommodation and more imaginative thinking in housing provision. Not all young people wanted to live in bedsitters or with their parents, and the big squats of September 1969, for all their short-comings, did reveal the increasing demand for communal living arrangements managed by young people themselves.

But any serious consideration of the issues raised by these squats was drowned in the tide of hysteria. Meanwhile we were left to reflect upon the unedifying spectacle of Mr Ronald Lyon, a property developer, walking into West End Central Police Station and donating £1,000 to police charities in appreciation of the good job done in evicting the occupants of No 144 Piccadilly. The building stayed empty for three more years and was then demolished (despite being listed) for a luxury hotel.



Keystone



The Guardian



Daily Telegraph



The Times





**Even tanks won't move us, say squatters**  
*By Robert*

**Siege mentality**

It was not only 'hippy squats' which ran into trouble at this time. In the midst of the Hippydilly affair Alistair Black, Under Sheriff of Greater London, whose opposition to squatters has since often put his name in headlines discovered 'an armoury of diabolical weapons' in No. 22 Rumbold Road, Fulham, after he had evicted squatters from the premises. Alderman Bill Smith, Leader of the local Council said the house was like a 'World War One dug-out' and that the weapons found included gas chlorine bombs, swagger canes filled with lead, piles of bricks and sticks with sharpened metal ends.<sup>8</sup> The squatters were subsequently found guilty of conspiracy to commit actual bodily harm to persons attempting lawful entry and received suspended prison sentences.

In Brighton too squatters went to extreme lengths to defend their homes. Squatting in Brighton was launched by the Brighton Rents Project, a broad based campaign for better housing which had already received widespread support, including that of the Labour MP for Kemp Town, Dennis Hobden. Squatting was seen as a last resort in the face of an intransigent Conservative Council. Several empty houses were occupied and families installed. The Council promptly announced that the squatters would be struck off the housing waiting list, and immediately began court proceedings for eviction. And, as if to emphasise its lack of concern for the homeless, it proceeded to sell No 70 Church Street, a house in the town centre which it had kept empty for 20 years.

Despite numerous arrests of supporters on minor charges, the campaign continued to grow. Towards the end of July 1969, houses in Queens Square and Wykeham Terrace were squatted. The army, which owned the properties, had been intending to sell them with vacant possession, but the presence of squatters meant that this had to be postponed. The squatters dug in to fight and called for support. In the months up to the eviction (on 28 November) the local press pilloried the Rents

Project and its helpers, warning of 'private armies' and 'terrible weapons' waiting at Wykeham Terrace. The dire warnings seemed to be validated when three people from the squat were arrested for firebombing a local army recruitment office. The petrol bombs had been made at the squat and several squatters were later sent to prison.

These events were widely publicised with disastrous consequences. In Brighton for instance, squatting abruptly came to an end and the Brighton Rents Project disintegrated, torn apart by external hostility and internal divisions.

**Squatting has been discredited**



*Military-style defences at Wykeham Terrace, Brighton, July 1969.*

Physical defence of squats was not in itself the main mistake. Indeed in Redbridge, which had received nothing but favourable publicity, it had been essential. On one occasion when a bailiff broke through the front door of a squatted house, he fell down to the basement as the Council had removed the ground floor floorboards. His misfortune was compounded as squatters pelted him with bricks until police intervened. The difference was that in Redbridge, physical defence was part of an overall strategy and the actions of the squatters were clearly seen (both in law and by the public) to be in response to violence on the part of the Council and its

bailiffs. The weapons in Fulham and Brighton were, in fact, a direct response to events in Redbridge as a statement, largely ignored by the press, from the Fulham squatters made clear:

'The stockpiling of weapons must be seen against the right background. They were acquired at a time when certain authorities were using private armies of strongarm toughs on eviction work. When the danger of this happening in our case diminished [because the owner showed no intention of using violence] the weapons should have been got rid of. Unfortunately they weren't.'<sup>9</sup>

The reason why the weapons were kept was that a kind of siege-mentality had taken over from reasoned and intelligent action. The task of *physically* defending buildings had completely dominated that of organising an effective defence *politically*. The occupants became involved in an increasingly introverted and insular struggle which bore no relation to tactical or political realities.

This failure was exploited to the full by the media to the detriment of all squatters.

**Emergence of licensed squatting**

In June 1969, negotiations started between South East London Squatters and Lewisham Council, with a view to allowing people to use empty Council properties on short term licences. The first squats in Lewisham coincided with the violence in Redbridge and Lewisham Council was eager to avoid a similar conflict. The existence of several large redevelopment schemes in the borough meant that a large stock of property would be empty for several years and the Council realised that if it failed to reach an agreement with the local squatting group, squatters would probably take over these houses anyway.

The negotiations were long and protracted, partly due to the cumbersome process of local government, but also because the Labour minority opposed any deal with the squatters. At all stages, the squatters' negotiators pushed for further concessions but some squatters felt that they were being too conciliatory and betraying the original ideas of the squatting movement. Critics of a 'deal' pointed to the number of restrictive conditions insisted on by the Council. Only Lewisham families on the waiting list were to be housed; dwellings licensed to the squatting group were to be vacated when required and there would be no

guarantee of rehousing.

In return the squatters would be licensed to use short-life houses given to them by the Council. (Technically a licensed squatter is not a squatter at all but a licensee: a licensee has permission to remain in a property until the licence is revoked; a squatter does not have the owner's permission – see p 230). The families who were housed would have their housing waiting list points 'frozen' so that their long-term chances of getting a Council house would not be jeopardised.

The critics amongst the squatters argued that the conditions imposed by Lewisham made the squatters totally dependent upon its generosity and its efficiency in the use of its housing stock. There were a number of objections:

- How could they be sure the Council would honour the agreement?
- What would prevent it from merely releasing a handful of dwellings keeping many more empty?
- Why restrict allocation to families living in the borough?
- What about the rights and needs of single people?

Supporters of the deal argued that obtaining licences was a great victory. Families gained security from eviction and the agreement did not preclude further militant squatting campaigns if the Council failed to deliver the goods. Indeed the agreement was based upon the threat of direct action. Furthermore, they argued that it was easy to ensure that a family was put on the waiting list by housing them temporarily at an address in the borough – all residents of Lewisham being eligible to put their names on the waiting list. They also pointed that although no offer of permanent rehousing was made, families evicted out of short-life property could always find accommodation through Lewisham's Homeless Families Department.

Eventually agreement was reached and on 13 December 1969 Sam and Jill Kelly moved into a Lewisham house with their ten-month old baby, marking the official recognition of the first licensed squatters association. Within a few months the Lewisham Family Squatting Association had over 80 houses and employed Ron Bailey, one of the founder members of the London Squatters Campaign, as a full-time worker. During the next five years, it housed around 100 families at any time and at the time of writing it is still operating,



*The first licensed family squatters move in, Lewisham, December 1969.*

though with fewer houses than in the past. It has long been a thriving model of a short-life group working in harmony with its local council.

The creation of licensed squatting emphasised a division that was developing between 'responsible' family groups and other squatters, especially of the 'hippy' variety. This division facilitated the development of a dual movement by the end of 1969 when various groups had forced concessions out of a few authorities and won licences whilst many more squatters continued to face hostile reactions. There was a growing lobby in favour of making squatting a criminal offence. This came not only from expected sources, such as the Property Owners Protection Society and the Conservative Party, but also, and more alarmingly,

from sections of the Labour Party. Squatters could thank the tangled and complex laws of property ownership and tenure for the reluctance to legislate quickly rather than any enlightened approach on the part of either major political party in office. In the absence of any centrally-directed policy, the state's response to squatting varied immensely between one area and another and even between different groups of squatters within the same area.

**Growth and limitations of licensing**

Local authorities did not rush to follow the example set by the Lewisham agreement. On the contrary, the usual pattern for the emergence of licensed 'squatting' groups was that first, squatters moved into council property and the council would start the eviction process while the squatters responded by waging a campaign around demands for no evictions and the use of empty



*Direct action like this occupation of the Labour Party's HQ at Transport House in May 1971 (above) was needed before Labour-controlled Southwark Council was prepared to start a licensed squatting scheme. Few councils gave in without such pressure.*

Brighton Evening Angus

Topix

The Guardian

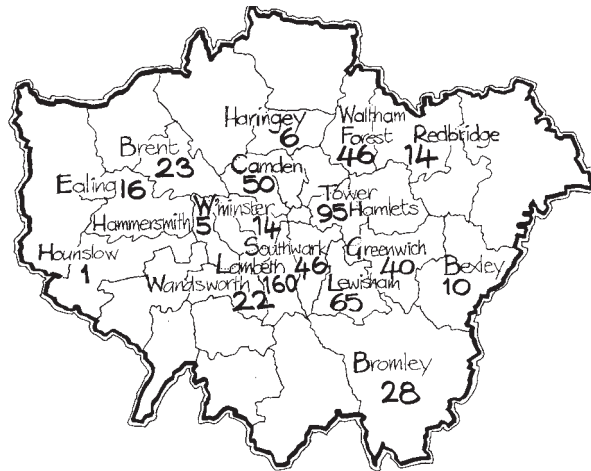




**Model Agreement between Councils and Family Squatting Associations**  
Information Sheet No.7

Family Squatting Advisory Service

1. 'The Council of the London Borough of --- (The Council) will offer to the --- Family Squatting Association (The Association) all properties in the Council's ownership with a minimum life of nine months and which the Council does not propose to use themselves.'
2. 'Such properties shall be offered to the Association without charge.'
3. 'The Association will decide whether to accept or reject properties offered to it. Before officially accepting a property the Association shall be permitted to enter the property for the purpose of repairing it.'
4. 'Anyone rehoused in the properties by the Association shall be liable to pay general rates and water rates.'
5. 'No expense shall fall upon the Council in respect of any works, repair or maintenance needed at any of the properties.'
6. 'The Association will ensure that the properties are only used for the benefit of people registered with the Council for housing accommodation and in exceptional cases for any other families, provided that in such exceptional cases the Association shall obtain an alternative rehousing commitment for the families involved.'
7. 'The Association will give the Council vacant possession of any of the properties when they are required by the Council for demolition or rehabilitation and the Council will give the Association at least three months notice to vacate.'
8. 'The Association undertakes to use its best endeavours to rehouse the occupiers of any of the properties when they are so required, unless
  - (a) the occupiers qualify for Council accommodation, or
  - (b) the occupiers have persistently failed in a material respect to comply with the terms of the licence granted to them by the Association.
 As regards (a), in assessing eligibility under the Council's points scheme, the occupiers shall be deemed to have remained in continuous occupation of the accommodation they occupied immediately before they were first rehoused by the Association.'
9. 'The Council and the Association shall each nominate four people to serve on a Working Group to discuss this agreement, its workings, any disputes or any other matters which may arise. The Working Group shall meet whenever either party decides there is a need for such a meeting.'



The number of families in licensed 'squats', in London boroughs, end of 1973. (Source: FSAS).

**SQUAT!**

Newsletter of the  
**FAMILY SQUATTING MOVEMENT**

BRENT HOMELESS FAMILIES SQUATTING ASSOCIATION

Facilities in occupied houses 8  
Families waiting to move in 5  
Houses offered 4  
Houses accepted 2

We have made some progress during the last few months. Some families moving in because the council office finally has approved the council's plan. It is contrary to a statement made by Mr. Gaudin, the Housing Committee. In fact, the group has decided to arrange a meeting with Mr. Alan Priest, an officer and representative of the group.

We are looking for a Part Time Co-ordinator. Contact Mrs. Pat Gilpin, 60 St. Paul's Way, Brent.

On Wednesday 23rd August, members of the group met for a meeting. The subject was discussed. The idea of a group was agreed. It was also decided that such groups should get together and discuss their needs. We need to establish contacts with other groups and Electrical, etc.

Both groups agreed that the movement, hence the general name, and each district could be cleared up.

There was also mentioned, but this needs further discussion. It was suggested that it would be better to have a meeting among certain groups and then discuss the other meetings.

Lastly, the time of the monthly management meeting, but no agreement was reached.

To be sure, most of those who come and squat are initially concerned with immediate relief. But those of us who have organised, hustled, argued and fought to bring groups into existence, had other goals in mind as well. Structural reform or social change is one way of looking at it, but the method is of some importance.

We were, and we are, people who believe that worthwhile change must come from beneath, and that the experience of organizing, sharing, controlling and succeeding is the vital educational process that most people are denied. Squatting is a politicizing experience and a punch-up with the few weeks in an empty house and a political. It is the months of organization, quarrels and mistakes; the slow growth and understanding of power, responsibility and co-operation that converts anger into competence and ignorance into knowledge. Some of those families in Lewisham who might have sat with their mouths open two years ago, while I told them what was up, would very quickly put me down if I dropped in to play the expert now. They don't need my help anymore. They run their own show - fix their own houses, hire and fire their own workers, run their own democratic and negotiable. They are organized, with councils, officials. They know how to deal with councils, officials, newspapers and power. The people you go to in Lewisham - if you want help now, are the same people who came to me for help two years ago.

Jim Radford, Street Research No 2

**Extracts from Bromley Family Squatters Association Leaflet for prospective licensed squatters**

We are allowed to use the houses for a year or so until they are wanted for demolition. We have promised the two councils that we will see that our families leave when required by them to do so. If you have not been rehoused by the council or anyone else when that time comes we will certainly try to transfer you to another squatting house. But we cannot guarantee or promise that we will be able to do so.

We can only offer accommodation on the clear understanding that you will move out when the council ask for the property back.

**You must take responsibility**

There is no tenant/landlord division among the squatters. If you join us you will become a landlord just as much as a tenant. You will be expected to accept your share of responsibility for the whole organisation. You will have an equal voice in our decision-making and you will be expected to come to meetings and to join work parties from time to time to help other people.

**You will contribute subscriptions**

The sub. for squatting houses is fixed by the association at a reasonably low level. It is normally £3 per week per family. It does not make you a tenant. It makes you a member. The money is used for the essential repairs needed BEFORE houses can be occupied, for the connection of gas, electricity and water supplies if these are cut off at the road, and for administrative costs.

The sub. does not entitle you to expect the association to pay for repairs AFTER you have moved in. We expect you to do those or pay for them yourself. But we do try to help one another as much as possible.

You will be responsible for your own gas and electricity bills and general and water rates.

**What happens next?**

If you are prepared to accept these conditions and want to squat, fill in the attached questionnaire and return it to one of the officers. You will be visited at home by one or more members of the association who will then report back to the Friday meeting.

We will expect to see you at the Friday meetings at 77b Thicket Rd., Crystal Palace beginning at 8 p.m. These are the meetings at which decisions are taken on whether or not to squat a family and where. No discussion about a family takes place at a meeting unless at least one member of that family is present. So if you miss a meeting it means you lose a week.

You qualify to be a voting member of the association after attending three meetings and three work parties. The final decision to admit you to membership or not will be taken by the meeting.

property. Finally, the council would capitulate and hand over a limited number of its empty houses. Councils rarely handed over houses unless faced with the threat, or use of, direct action.

Nevertheless, licensed squatting became more firmly established as housing authorities grew more aware of its value. In June 1970, the Greater London Council (GLC) gave Lewisham Family Squatters Association four houses on licence and later that year Student Community Housing came into being in Camden with houses from both the GLC and Camden Council. Tower Hamlets, Greenwich and Lambeth soon followed suit in reaching agreements with their respective local squatting groups and in September 1970 the Family Squatting Advisory Service (FSAS) was set up with a £5,000 grant from Shelter.

FSAS activist Jim Radford outlined two basic purposes behind its establishment.<sup>10</sup> There was a practical purpose - to alleviate housing need by making use of disused council property: 'To this end we were prepared to work, organise, negotiate and, if necessary, fight.' There was also an ideological purpose: 'To show that ordinary people can organise collectively to run their own affairs and make their own decisions and that the weakest can become strong through the principle of mutual aid.' A fundamental innovation of the family squatting groups was that they were democratically controlled by the families involved, even if in practice they frequently relied on professional leadership.

The successful development of the Lewisham group made it possible to persuade Shelter to fund FSAS in the belief that it would bring about a rapid increase in the use of short-life housing and a network of self-help, community-controlled groups. The grant enabled FSAS to employ two full-time workers and maintain an office in Lewisham. An FSAS hand-out described its job as

'To service, support and maintain contact with existing groups and to initiate the setting up of new groups by researching possibilities, development plans, etc in new areas, by contacting and bringing together interested people for this purpose and by assisting and advising at every stage of the negotiations if needed.'

A model agreement between councils and family squatting associations was drawn up and FSAS also produced a series of detailed information sheets on legal, practical and organisational

aspects of squatting, as well as *Squat*, a bi-monthly news magazine. Interest-free loans of up to £100 and grants of £20 were made available to local groups.

Soon after its inception FSAS could point to new agreements reached by groups in Brent, Islington and Wandsworth. By the end of 1971, 12 local authorities in London had entered into agreements with squatting groups many of which were renamed 'self-help housing' groups as technically their members were not squatters but licensees. By the beginning of 1972, the family squatting movement was housing around 1,000 people. During that year Ealing Council (in January), Haringey (September) and Hounslow (October) started to give self-help groups short-life properties. Even Redbridge Council finally gave way in June 1972.

Outside London, where the housing crisis was less severe, far fewer squatters obtained licences. There, the condition rather than the availability or cost of housing tended to be a greater problem. The proportion of squatters in small towns was thus smaller than in London and this correspondingly reduced the amount of pressure which squatters were able to put on councils. Also, a greater proportion of squatters outside London were in privately-owned property for which licences were less forthcoming.

Squatting outside London achieved much in terms of forcing the release of property for use by housing associations, charities and other non-squatting groups. In 1972, for instance, I was involved with a community project in Stoke-on-Trent; the Community Help and Information Project (CHIP), which became one of many such groups to benefit from the squatting movement. CHIP needed premises from which to operate and the Council had many empty commercial properties in the city centre pending demolition for a new road. By reaching a licensing agreement, CHIP was able to get a shop and sufficient space to run a 'crash pad' for people with nowhere to stay. Squatting had provided the impetus for the Council to reach an agreement and the means by which it could be formalised to its satisfaction - a licence. Councils also awoke to how unnecessary it was to use expensive bed and breakfast hotels as temporary accommodation for homeless families when empty short-life property was available as a far cheaper alternative.

By May 1973, FSAS estimated there were

2,500 licensed squatters in 16 London boroughs, an increase of 150 per cent in little over a year. This rate of increase continued throughout 1973 and by the end of the year Student Community Housing alone was housing over 700 people. Provided the groups handed houses back when required, the arrangement was extremely advantageous for local authorities and the continuing pressure of unlicensed squatting was forcing them to look for ways of avoiding the squatting 'problem'. By 'co-opting' the family squatting movement they could exercise control over a trend which was threatening to usurp a little of their power. Granting licences to particular groups which were housing the deserving 'homeless' also added the bonus of undermining popular support for squatters without licences.

And yet this strategy was unable to halt the 'boom' in unlicensed squatting which started in 1972. Family squatting groups were quickly inundated with requests for housing which they were unable to fulfill and most groups had housing waiting lists almost as intractable as those of local authorities. Also, with the exception of Student Community Housing, none of the groups catered for people without children and few would house people from outside the boroughs in which they were based. The failure of licensed groups to cope with the demand for such accommodation, coupled with the continued existence of a large amount of empty property which councils were unwilling to license, meant that unlicensed squatting became increasingly attractive for a growing number of people.

At the end of 1971 when there were about 1,000 licensed squatters in London, there were fewer than 1,000 unlicensed squatters. From 1972 onwards, however, the number of unlicensed squatters exceeded the number of licensed ones. The history of squatting after 1971 becomes more and more concerned with 'unofficial' squatters and it is to the growth in unlicensed squatting that we now turn. •









Tatod y Ddraig

**From Taunton to Colchester**  
Almost half the London boroughs had reached licensing arrangements with local squatting groups by 1972 but, in other parts of Britain, antagonism towards squatters meant that even small concessions were granted reluctantly and under immense pressure.

In Kent, for example, in October 1972, Medway Action Committee for the Homeless squatted an empty school in Gillingham because of the County Council's appalling record in housing homeless families. In particular, this squat was prompted by the Council's failure to provide accommodation for families who had been living in holiday chalets on the Isle of Sheppey and who were forced to leave when the chalets were closed at the end of the holiday season.

This campaign serves as an example of the broad-based support which squatting was, on occasion, able to command. A local vicar was extremely active on their behalf and the *Kent Evening Post*, whilst not actually encouraging people to squat, certainly made it easier for those already squatting by organising a very successful 'Homeless at Xmas' appeal for food, toys, cigarettes and furniture for the people in the school and other homeless in the area. Public support was so strong that Kent County Council turned a blind eye to the occupation and eventually agreed to use the school for homeless people.

Support for squatting started to come from unusual quarters. In November 1971 the Cyrenians a charity for the single homeless which had become exasperated with Brighton Council, squatted three houses. Social workers, probation officers, housing department officials, councillors and churchmen, unable to help people find somewhere to live, were suggesting squatting to the homeless. In Slough, for example, the Council's General Purposes Committee chairperson, John Harley, noted in April 1972 that many private flats in the town were empty. To the homeless he had a clear message: 'My advice is to squat these places. If necessary I will personally assist you.' Referring to one family squatting in a house without services, he said, 'I can tell them about some far more comfortable places.'<sup>2</sup>

As well as involving such diverse people, squatting spread to remote places. Although largely spontaneous in nature and lacking central direction or leadership, it became truly national. At the end of September 1972, a group called the



*Oakley, Buckinghamshire, 1972.*

Oakley Vigilantes was formed in a small Buckinghamshire village. They warned that if a local empty house owned by the Ernest Cook Trust was not used within a fortnight they would squat it. One can imagine the rushed work at the Trust which enabled it to announce plans for the house within the set time limit.

There were many such small victories to prove that squatting, or the threat of it, was effective. During January 1973, 13 squatters moved into two houses in Belle Vue Road, Colchester. A few weeks later a further 20 people occupied the empty Woods Sports Club premises and turned it into a spartan People's Community Centre. The local authority was galvanised into action, offering some of its empty houses to a local Christian Action project. But this concession was insufficient to halt the spread of squatting in the town and by May 1973 there were around sixty squatters in Colchester.<sup>3</sup>

Steve, locally born and bred, and working for the Council on a building site, typified many thousands of people forced to squat out of desperation. Unable to find anywhere to live, he had slept rough since leaving home at 17 and had spent the previous winter in a beach hut in West Mersea. In 1973-74 he was squatting in Colchester:

'I feel guilty taking over someone else's property – sure. But it came down to the simple fact that I needed somewhere to sleep – that's all. It isn't an easy life and I don't know how people think we do it voluntarily. There is a continual overriding sense of insecurity. I pray as I come home that there will be a light on in the house so I'll have another night with a roof over my head.'

Steve worked for as much as 88 hours a week to save the money to buy his own home. He did not give his full name for fear of losing his job. 'I have come to the conclusion that to get anything

in this world you have to fight. I have only my pride to keep me going. That's why I must keep my job.'<sup>4</sup>

All sorts of people were being forced into choosing between squatting and homelessness: families denied access to council housing or mortgages, students, unemployed people and others on low incomes, battered women, gays denied the right to live as they choose, people with unorthodox lifestyles, ex-offenders fresh out of prison (in Colchester, the Senior Probation Officer said that he and his colleagues could see no alternative but to suggest squatting to 'clients'), and many more. At times, they combined to form unexpected alliances. The squatters who had erected the barricades in Islington, for example, consisted of an anarcho-pacifist commune (The Living Theatre – London) and three working class families.

By the end of 1973, there were about 3,000 licensed squatters in London and several hundred outside the capital. But there were an estimated 7,000 unlicensed squatters in London and a further 4,000 elsewhere (p 230). Each victory won by squatters, however small, increased the impetus towards further unlicensed squatting, particularly since licensing arrangements involved the use of only a very small proportion of empty dwellings.

### Squatting speculators

Not all squatting was in council property. Indeed, many of the more influential struggles of 1972-1974 were in privately-owned property. In mid 1972, for example, squatters began moving into privately-owned terraced housing in the Parfett Street area of the East End of London. After several battles they succeeded in staying for many years, and eventually prompted the council to buy the houses with the squatters in occupation. (See Chapter 10 for a more detailed account).

Olive Morris and Liz Turnbull became the first successful squatters of private property in Lambeth when they occupied a flat above a launderette in Railton Road. Successfully fighting off attempts at illegal eviction, they set an example for hundreds of homeless young people in Brixton and the flat remained squatted for many years. In June 1973, Lambeth Council gave squatters occupying maisonettes in Herne Hill support by agreeing to negotiate the purchase of the flats which were owned by Grandiose Properties Ltd (part of the Gerson Berger group) without vacant possession.

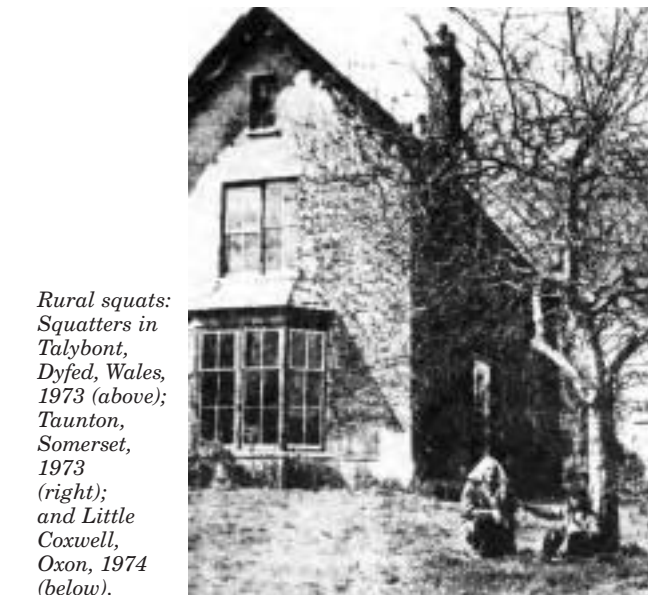
This encouraged other local squatters to occupy millions of pounds worth of the company's property throughout the borough. The Brixton Women's Centre in Railton Road became a focus for squatting advice and assistance and between 1972 and 1975 was responsible for the squatting of 300 empty private dwellings.

These campaigns brought squatters into the forefront of struggles against property developers and speculators and they drew immense local sympathy and support. The picture became familiar. A property company intent on obtaining planning permission to redevelop began to buy up houses in an area, leaving them empty when possible and thus precipitating the neighbourhood's decline. Residents lost heart and the will to fight. Those that could moved out of their own accord and the neighbourhood deteriorated still further. Squatters entered onto the scene taking over empty houses and restoring them. The squatters were often young, enthusiastic and willing to fight back, providing the backbone to campaigns against redevelopment and speculation.

Squatters often worked closely with the existing local communities. Unity was forged between squatters and other local people, for instance, in a long campaign against Prebbles, an estate agent in Islington. Prebbles was one of a number of estate agents playing an active role in the gentrification of the area. Regular pickets were organised outside the Prebbles office and were so successful that the company was compelled to seek a court injunction banning them. Prebbles was granted a temporary injunction pending a full hearing. The case was never brought to court and was eventually dropped in 1978. Nevertheless the action halted the pickets (after at least one supporter had been jailed for defying the injunction) and the campaign against Prebbles failed in its ultimate objective. It did, however, make speculators more cautious about moving into Islington.

The campaigns in Camden against Joe Levy's property company, Stock Conversion, provide another good example of squatters and other residents fighting against speculators together. Without the involvement of squatters, it is likely that Stock Conversion would have been able to shape two areas, in Camden High Street and Tolmers Square respectively to suit its profit-making motives.

In the sixties Stock Conversion constructed Euston Centre, a massive 500,000 square foot



Bristol United Press

*Rural squats: Squatters in Talybont, Dyfed, Wales, 1973 (above); Taunton, Somerset, 1973 (right); and Little Coxwell, Oxon, 1974 (below).*



Wiltshire Newspapers



Michael Sheridan/IFL



Michael Sheridan/IFL

*Squatters and other local residents in Islington picket Prebbles estate agents in protest against property speculators, 1974.*



Paul McNicholls/Time Out



office development, on a site formerly consisting of low rent working class housing, workshops and cheap commercial premises. The company had made £64 million profit on this development by 1973 and started buying property in similar areas with a view to further office developments.

In June 1973 Susan Johns and John Rety were evicted from No 220 Camden High Street where they had lived and run an antique shop for 12 years. Cromdale Holdings, a subsidiary of Stock Conversion, had increased the rent from £15 to £60 per week on acquiring No 220, in order to force them out. The two gave full support to the people who squatted their old home in order to prevent what they described as 'the carve-up of Camden High Street.' The building was used by a number of community groups over the next nine months and became the organising centre of the campaign against Stock Conversion's plans.

Impressed by the strength of local support for the squatters at No 220, Camden Council passed a resolution giving them its backing. In April 1974, the police asked the local fire brigade if they could borrow ladders in order to get onto the roof to evict the squatters as the front of the shop had been barricaded with steel bars and iron bedsteads. The Camden Fire Brigade Union refused, saying that it would be 'the first step towards a police state'.<sup>5</sup> Six bailiffs backed by 120 police were eventually sent to carry out the eviction at 5 am one morning and had to use a winch mounted on a car transporter to tear down the front door. Backing its verbal support, Camden Council provided a nearby shop for the campaign. During the court proceedings for possession, Cromdale Holdings' representative had claimed that the company needed immediate possession in order to relet the premises; yet, straight after the eviction the staircase was smashed, wiring and toilets were ripped out and the building was securely boarded up. Companies connected with Stock Conversion then owned a quarter of Camden High Street and 50 shops in the area were empty.

Two weeks after the eviction, the squatters held a press conference and demonstration. They marched up the High Street and, to cheers from local people, reoccupied the building. By the time

*Squatters fight property speculators:*

*Left: West London 1973;*

*Centre: Tolmers Square, Camden, 1975;*

*Right: No 220 Camden High Street, Camden, 1974.*



Peter Smith/Time Out



Pedro George



Tony Prime/Camera Press

the police arrived, squatters were securely inside and a picket patrolled the pavement outside. A furious representative from Cromdale was told by the police that it would have to reapply to the courts for possession. The company had completely failed. It had gone through two court cases, two evictions, suffered intensive bad publicity and achieved nothing. No 220 remained squatted for two more years and the campaign eventually succeeded in halting Stock Conversion's redevelopment plans for Camden High Street.

In nearby Tolmers Square too, squatters staved off attempts at eviction by the same company and were instrumental in stopping its plans for a half million square feet office and commercial development.<sup>6</sup>

Squatters became increasingly daring in their choice of targets. In January 1974, a group of activists pulled off a spectacular publicity coup occupying Centre Point, the best-known empty building in Britain. Their action required months of planning, including the infiltration of the firm supplying security guards and was performed with almost military precision. It made the front page of every newspaper in the country. Centre Point, empty since its completion in 1963, was a gross affront to the homeless and a powerful example of the way companies could make vast profits simply by owning empty office blocks: built for £5 million in 1963, by 1974 Centre Point was worth £45-55 million. The activists demanded that the building be requisitioned. (Camden Council did later attempt to compulsorily purchase 24 luxury flats at the rear of Centre Point but after protracted and costly legal proceedings, the Law Lords quashed the Council's Compulsory Purchase Order in April 1977. Most of the building remained empty until 1980.) As well as publicity, the occupiers received a great deal of support and, when they left the building after two days, they were greeted by a rally of 3,000 people.

The success of this 'propaganda squat' prompted others to follow. On the weekend of 17 May, Hillman House, described locally as Coventry's Centre Point, was occupied by 60 people. Later that month a coalition of radicals in Bristol (where the amount of empty office space quadrupled in less than a year) took over an empty office block in Victoria Street and stayed there a month. Several homeless families were moved in and Bristol Council shortly afterwards put a bar on planning permission for new office building.







Occupying Centre Point (left) in central London, January 1974. The block owned by Harry Hyams had been left empty for 11 years. Emerging from the West End crowds, 80 people with sleeping bags and other essential equipment are safely inside within 90 seconds. Barricades are erected immediately (below) and a squatter who got a job as a security guard in order to obtain the uniform, convinces the police that there is no point in storming the building (bottom left). The squatters' aim is publicity and they plan to leave peacefully after three days. Bottom right: Makeshift sleeping arrangements.



Press Association



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Camera Press



Martin Slavin

When the squatters come out on Sunday afternoon (right), they are greeted by a large crowd of supporters (bottom right) with mixed chants of 'well done' and 'stay put'. Bottom left: Organiser Ron Bailey is interviewed by TV men.

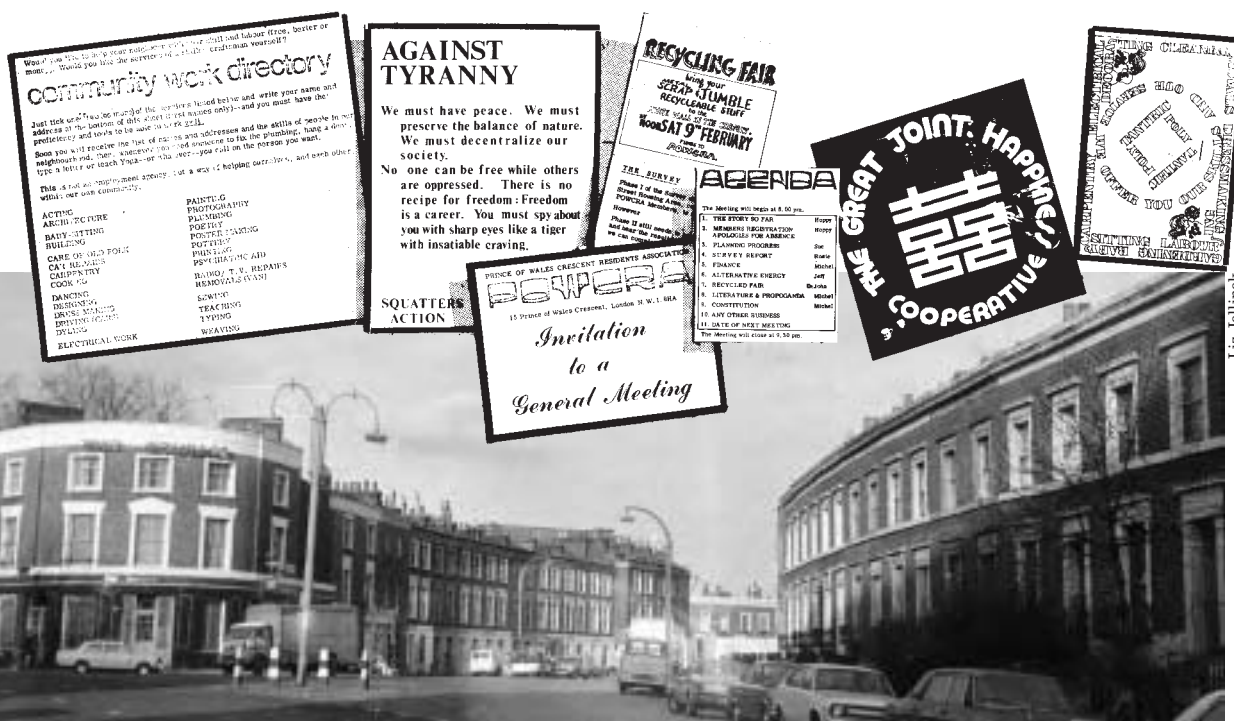


Martin Slavin



Camera Press





**Taking the whole street**

As well as raising questions about the *amount* of housing available, squatters increasingly challenged the *nature* of housing and the quality of community life. In many towns whole streets were empty pending redevelopment schemes, and these were gradually occupied creating sizeable squatting communities. One of the first was in the streets surrounding Prince of Wales Crescent in Camden, where by 1972 there were 280 mainly young people squatting. One third of them had university or college degrees or diplomas, yet it was far from being a traditional middle class city neighbourhood.

Employment patterns were unconventional with most people working freelance or doing casual work to earn money. The average wage in 1972 was estimated at £7 per week. Having been empty for up to seven years the houses were fairly derelict and conditions were primitive. Skills such as wiring or plumbing had to be self-taught and shared with people less able to do it. The increased leisure time available to people who often *chose* to live on low incomes enabled them to do more for themselves. It also allowed people to experiment and put ideas into practice.

Several squatters started workshops – electronics, engineering, silk-screening, jewellery and car-

pentry. A derelict site was turned into a park with a sand pit, paddling pool, cafe and treehouses. Musical events and barbecues were held regularly and two community newspapers were started. A creche began and unused food was collected from nearby markets and distributed free.

Enterprises sprang up and flourished both in squats and in buildings licensed by Camden Council:

- Community Supplies began as a cheap organic food supplier, where customers weighed, packed and priced their own goods. Demand was so great that a bulk store was opened serving people from all over Britain.
- The Institute of Art and Technology converted a former dairy into a centre for artists and craftsmen working in new media.
- The Centre for Advanced Television Studies began as a nationwide information centre for video users.
- The Craft Shop promoted home crafts such as candle making and tie-dyeing.
- The Guild of African Master Drummers made high quality drums.

Other groups which found a home around the Crescent included Airworks (a centre for air structures), the London Film Makers Co-op, Little Sister of Jesus, European Theatre Exchange, Poly-

tantric and Action Space.



Almost everyone lived in shared or communal houses, often because the houses couldn't easily be divided into self-contained flats, but sometimes for more positive reasons. One person enthusiastically endorsed communal living as a response to 'the adverse psychological effects of individuals living alone – neurosis, depression, alienation – which can in extreme cases lead to psychosis and general personality breakdown. People in this area have learnt from bitter experience and have set about changing their circumstances – hence the development of community spirit. None of the residents have any desire to return to the isolation of a bedsitter.'

There were leaflets about various objectives of the community: a 'decentralised urban self-managed community', a 'green revolution in the city', finding 'new ways of human interrelationships', and building a 'new culture from the pieces of the old'. Inevitably such ideals could not be sustained. They were, in essence a middle class luxury, promoted by people who could often retreat to a well-paid profession or a comfortable parental home if the going got rough. The relaxed atmosphere also attracted some people who shared few of the ideals of early Crescent squatters. At times, drug addicts, alcoholics and thieves threatened to overcome the



whole community. Houses were constantly broken into, local tenants antagonised and the community spirit started to fall apart.

In response, squatters started to form their own forms of self-help community care. The Mental Patients Union was set up and provided a crisis centre where people with psychological difficulties could help each other and remain in contact with sympathetic members of the community. Other groups dealt with drug dependency and a community work directory was established to enable the unemployed to develop new skills and serve a community which could not pay commercial rates. A 'police force' was established and some improvement was made. However, the problems created by the people with severe psychological or social difficulties manifested on occasion by their excessive use of drugs or alcohol remained both in the Crescent and in later squatting communities. The very transience of most squatting communities meant that a satisfactory long term solution on how to deal with these problems seldom had time to develop effectively (unlike in Christiania in Denmark (p213) where after a number of years extremely successful forms of self-management have evolved).

In December 1973 the Prince of Wales Residents Association was set up and an attempt made to

persuade the Council to shelve its redevelopment plans and let the community stay to retain and reinforce its identity.

It is a genuine organic community. Planners are searching desperately to produce this phenomenon in new estates, so far without success. Prince of Wales Crescent is an excellent example of what people can do if left to their own devices.<sup>77</sup> An alternative plan was drawn up. Houses could be rehabilitated on a self-help basis costing between £300 and £3,000 per dwelling compared with £9,000 for new build – saving £1/2 million. A further £300,000 could be saved by turning the street into open space instead of knocking down houses to make one. Mixed uses could be allowed to continue instead of providing just housing and 'turning a socially mixed area into another desert-like council development where the inhabitants are socially homogeneous.' And more people would be housed because the density could remain at 180 persons per acre instead of being reduced to 125 persons as laid down in government rule books for redevelopment.

The squatters suggested that the Council should see the area as an environment for experimenting with ways of living, and that it should actually take a positive interest in its growth. But the

Council was not up to the challenge and rejected the squatters plan and eventually the squatters were evicted (p65).

Squatting communities grew up all over London: at Bristol Gardens, Charrington Street, Tolmers Village, Finsbury Park, Longfellow Road and many other places. A few similar communities occurred outside the capital, too: Hebden Bridge, Bristol, Brighton etc. Each one was different depending on its size, the conditions of the property, the amount of security, and the people attracted to them. Some were made up of people from predominantly middle class backgrounds; others were almost exclusively working class. Some, like Prince of Wales Crescent, shared a hippy ideology which never truly adapted to overcome social or political problems.

And they all invariably changed rapidly, responding to external and internal pressures. But common to most was a sense of identity seldom found in towns. People had a sense of living somewhere special, symbolised by the street carnivals and parties which became a regular feature of squatting life (see p 190). For some people, albeit only a small minority of squatters, squatting began to be more than simply finding a roof, it became fun, it offered new freedoms, a sense of community . . . almost a way of life in its own right.





Syndication International

**Extending frontiers and explosive growth**

The success of squatting both as a means of obtaining accommodation and as a more directly political tactic, led to its continuing growth during 1974 and 1975. Indeed, these were 'boom' years, with the number of squatters increasing from 15,000 at the end of 1973 to an estimated 40-50,000 by mid-1975. Though the majority were concentrated in inner London, there were few towns of any size which escaped. In April 1974, for example, a group of young people took over houses in Queens Terrace, Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire. The local council was worried that too many young people were leaving the town, but had not accepted that it was partly due to housing shortage. Councillor Cyril Farrar, the Housing Committee chairperson, opposed letting the squatters stay on the grounds that, 'Once we start to allow squatting, no one's house will be safe'.<sup>8</sup> However, such inflexible attitudes did not prevent the spread of squatting in Yorkshire, and by August there were squatters in Halifax, Harrogate, Sheffield, Batley, Huddersfield, Leeds, Barnsley, Bradford and many other towns.

The existence of squatting often revealed large numbers of 'hidden homeless', people not shown as homeless in official housing statistics. In Norwich, for example, 19 houses were occupied in the Sandringham Improvement Area in May 1974, housing 63 people, almost all of them families.

Few, if any, would have been officially classified as 'homeless'; they had come from overcrowded conditions (such as living with parents), expensive or substandard accommodation or from short-let rooms, hotels and hostels. There were also people for whom local authorities accepted no responsibility at all – the childless and families from outside Norwich.

At that time most councils did not consider women fleeing from domestic violence – 'battered wives' – to be homeless. Such women often need support and help from others in the same position and normal tenure arrangements do not allow much scope for the communal homes which best fulfil such requirements. As a result, large numbers of battered women turned to squatting and many women's groups took over houses to provide refuges where women could escape from their violent partners. Squatted houses for battered women were opened in Manchester in March 1974 and, two months later, in Glasgow. The 1975 takeover of the Palm Court Hotel (p196) in Richmond was the best-publicised but there were several others.

Squatting opened up new possibilities for women's groups, enabling them to find premises for a variety of activities. Brixton Women's Centre was housed in a squat for several years and played a leading role in the growth of squatting in Lambeth. In Radnor Terrace, South London, a wom-

*Thirty battered wives and their children escape from overcrowded conditions at the women's aid refuge in Chiswick and take over a former four-star hotel in Richmond owned by Goodhew Developers Ltd who had deliberately left it to rot for three years. The squat lasted from 1975 to 1979.*

en's meeting and resource centre operated until 1977 and in Mile End women squatted a house to use it as a nursery.

In Lambeth, the East End, Haringey, Bristol and elsewhere, empty buildings were taken over and used as gay centres. Properties were occupied, too, for offices, workshops, meeting rooms and social centres for community groups. Artists, carpenters, mechanics and second-hand furniture dealers operated from squatted premises. A variety of shops and cafes were established in squats and a group of prostitutes took over empty offices in Greek Street, Soho, from which they plied their trade. Several community groups squatted derelict plots of land, converting them into playgrounds, communal gardens, and even urban farms.

At the beginning of 1975, Cornwall Terrace, a historic Nash building overlooking London's Regents Park left empty by the Crown Commissioners, was opened up and rapidly filled by over 300 people. In North Islington the number of squatters in three blocks of GLC flats on Hornsey Rise rose to about 350. In the East End of London continuing racial violence was forcing Asian families to leave council flats on estates where they were

often the only non-white residents. *The Guardian* told of one family's experiences:

'Abdul Mumin came to Britain in 1963 to work as a tailor's machinist in East London. It took him ten years to save enough money to bring his wife and children to Britain and within a few months he lost his rented accommodation. Tower Hamlets put the homeless Mumin family in a Council flat at Constant House, Harrow Lane, Poplar, in July 1973. A week later a boy knocked on the door and coolly said, "I don't like you coloured people." Someone else threw an iron bar as the family stood in the doorway.

Every night the door was kicked and the windows hammered. Within a few months the attacks had grown into the smashing of windows. One evening, as Mrs Mumin went to the dustbins, a youth jumped on her back. Another night three men tried to kick the door down. Then one of their four children opened the door to a caller and two men and a woman barged in. One man knocked Mr Mumin to the floor and kicked him in the ribs. He was threatened with a knife and abused because of his race. Soon after that a window was smashed, paraffin poured through the hole, and the curtains set alight.<sup>9</sup>

After that incident the Mumins finally decided to join several hundred other Bengali families who had already fled council flats for the security of squats in the predominantly Asian district of Spitalfields. They were aided by Tower Hamlets Squatters Union and the Bengali Housing Action Group which opened up several blocks to cope with the demand. At its height, one of these, Pelham Buildings, had almost 200 families squatting in it.

A Lambeth Council report in December 1974, identified 333 unlicensed squats in Council property. This figure added to the number of squats in private and GLC houses, and to those the Council did not know about, suggests a total of some 3-4,000 squatters in Lambeth alone. Similarly, in August 1975, Camden Council reported that 176 of its properties were occupied by unlicensed squatters. In addition both boroughs had about 1,000 people in licensed property. A London Boroughs Association survey published in September 1975 estimated that there were 20,000 squatters in council property in the capital. And this figure did not include those in GLC and private dwellings.

It was not only in London that squatting had become so common. In February 1975, Manchester Corporation claimed that 130 houses were

occupied by squatters and issued eviction notices against 100. In fact, many squatters in Council property at this time did not receive eviction notices, indicating that the number of Council squats in Manchester was probably in excess of 200.

- Estimates from various parts of the country are available for this period.<sup>10</sup> For example:
- In Bristol there were around 200-300.
  - In Portsmouth there were 80.
  - In Brighton about 150.
  - In Guildford there were 50.
  - In Swansea there were between 60 and 80.
  - In Cambridge there were 40.
  - In Leicester there were 100.

Press cuttings from 1975 reveal squats in many remote rural areas, villages and small towns; from Sotterley in East Anglia to Chertsey in Surrey, from St Ives in Cornwall to Stone in Staffordshire and from Shepton Mallet in Somerset to a small farm near Heathrow Airport. Need had begun to assert itself over centuries of deference to the rights of property owners. •

*Bengalis in London's East End squat together in rundown buildings rather than face racial violence on more modern estates.*



David Hoffman



Jane Brown/Camera Press



*Squatted land and buildings are put to many uses, London, 1974-7.*



Caroline Lwin

*city farm*



Caroline Lwin

*city farm*



Syndication Int

*breeding hens, ducks and rabbits*



Caroline Lwin

*open air music*



Mike Goldwater

*entertainment*



Nick Wates

*workshop*



Nick Wates

*poster workshop*



Adam Harvey

*practice room*



Aden Kelly

*woodwork shop*



Koista Mathey

*growing tomatoes*



Charles McKean

*allotments*



Aden Kelly

*food co-operative*



Mark Gimson

*new religions*



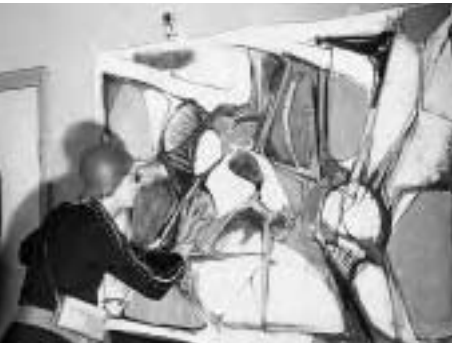
Jack Lambert

*playground under a motorway*



Jack Lambert

*adventure playground*



Adam Harvey

*artist's studio*



The Times

*bakery*



Philip Wolmuth

*cheap food*



Nick Wates

*Vegan restaurant*



Nick Wates

*Vegan restaurant*



Caroline Lwin

*banquet*



Caroline Lwin

*action centre*



*bookshop*



Adam Harvey

*sculpture studio*



David Hoffman

*workshop*



David Hoffman

*instrument making*



David Hoffman

*jewellery workshop*



David Hoffman

*motorbike repairshop*



*shop*



Mike Wigg

*wholefood supplies*



Nick Wates

*meeting room*





Popperfoto



Tony McGrath/Camera Press

*Squatting in style.*  
Left: Squatters purporting to belong to an organisation called MUSTARD (Multi-racial Union of Squatters to Alleviate Racial Discrimination!) take over a £200,000 house in Notting Hill Gate, 1976.  
Above: Behind the Nash facade of Cornwall Terrace in London's Regent Park, 300 new residents start a communal kitchen and a nursery. They also organise meditation classes and concerts in the spacious rooms, 1975.  
Below: A luxury house in Palace Gardens, West London is occupied by members of WOGS (World Organisation of Gracious Squatters) 1976.  
Right: The Bishops Avenue ('Millionaire's Row'), Hampstead where houses left empty by a bankrupt property company are squatted, 1977.  
Far right: Living in Bilba's abandoned department store in Kensington High Street, 1977.



Keystone



Mike Goldwater







The Guardian



Surrey Comet

Town and country squatters. Far left: Condemned millworkers' cottages in Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire, 1976. Top left: Garden life in suburbia, Kingston upon Thames, 1974. Second from top: The 'Wiltshire Wallies' at Stonehenge where they claim God has told them to set up camp. The Department of the Environment say they need its permission first and soon starts court proceedings saying they are bad for the tourist trade! Third from top: Commune in a squat in Bracknell, Berkshire, 1974. Bottom: Almshouses in Salisbury, 1976.



Press Association



Reading Evening Post



Salisbury Times

**Hampshire Probation and After-Care Area**

CARLISLE HOUSE, ST. THOMAS STREET, WINCHESTER. Telephone: Winchester (0962) 63234.

Your ref: 28 June 1977

Advisory Service for Squatters, 2 St. Pauls Road, LONDON N.1.

Dear Sir,

I am writing on behalf of the residents of Carlisle House Probation Hostel. All the residents at the hostel are on a 12 month condition of residence and at the end of this time they have to leave. Obviously trying to find accommodation poses a number of problems and therefore we are trying to explore all possibilities. Perhaps squatting is one that could be considered.

I would be grateful if you could send us any relevant information as to how to find out about squats in areas, preferably legal as most men have been in enough trouble with the law as it is. I would appreciate any information.

Yours faithfully,  
R. G. Pearce

R. G. Pearce,  
Representative of Discharge Group.

**Squat if there are no lodgings—NUS**



Faced with a student accomodation crisis, the 1975 National Union of Students conference recommends its members to squat - inspiring a racist cartoon from the Times Higher Education Supplement.

Top right: Already evicted three times from council property, this couple had to move out of a relative's house because the council claim it is overcrowded. They erect this tent on council land nearby. The council is unmoved and threatens them with eviction yet again, Mildenhall, Suffolk, 1975. Second from top: Caravan dwellers squat on council land at Rainworth, Nottinghamshire, 1974. People living in caravans, are increasingly forced to squat because of the shortage of official sites. Third from top: Squatters pose for the Sunday Times in Birmingham, 1976. Bottom and far right: Summer House, East London, 1974 where 52 of the 64 flats are squatted after Tower Hamlets Council refuses to support a proposal for a tenant co-operative in the block. Although the squatters are rehoused, the flats are gutted and most remained derelict in 1980. Hundreds of similar flats in the area are squatted but few successfully make the transition to co-ops (p90).



John Sturrock/Report



Newsphoto Mansfield



Sally Soames/Topix



Michael Ward/Topix



Michael Ward/Topix



# Mounting opposition

Property owners and the media attack squatting

## Chapter 5



*'While there is a large pool of empty property, public and private, it is difficult to see a reduction in squatting. The best that can be expected is to contain it...'*  
(GLC Director of Housing (Management and Maintenance) report 20 January 1976 Hg 746).

*'There is no question of the Corporation entering into any agreement with squatters, or negotiating with them, since they are illegal occupiers.'*  
(Public Relations Department, Bristol Corporation, November 1973).

*'The high incidence of squatting should not be considered as a "problem" which by definition is capable of solution, but as a "condition" to be alleviated rather than cured. While society reflects the criminalisation of squatting and prohibits the use of private force, the practice can never be stopped. Local authorities must, therefore, use a combination of avoidance and prevention, together with a variety of cures, in order to reduce the incidence. In this combination it is avoidance and prevention which lead the way...'*  
(Report by Co-ordinator of Housing, Islington Council, 20 February 1975.)

By the end of 1975 unlicensed squatting had almost established itself as a routine method of finding housing in the short term. A number of housing officials stated in private that squatting had to be tolerated, quite simply because it was impossible to envisage any alternative for the estimated 40-50,000 squatters. The Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS) reported in a press release that housing aid centres, social service departments, citizens advice bureaux, probation services and even the police were regularly referring people to them. Brixton Women's Centre received as many as 30-40 referrals in one week from Lambeth Social Services Department.

Official attitudes toward squatting were, however, paradoxical. While there was often a measure of acceptance of squatting as inescapable, even

necessary, there was also strong determination to bring it under control. As an officer's report in November 1974 to Lambeth Council's Housing Committee put it: 'The Council is faced with a situation which is clearly out of control and the need is to bring it under control as quickly as possible.'

Thus, the explosive growth of squatting during 1974-75 was accompanied by an immense increase in opposition unparalleled since 1969. As most squatting took place in council property, the most vociferous opposition tended to come from local authorities. They were generally even less willing to negotiate with the 'new wave' of unlicensed squatters than they had been with family squatting groups particularly as there were now more young, single, and sometimes unortho-

dox, people squatting. Most councils remained unwilling to negotiate with either type fearing that to 'give in' would cause a flood of 'queue jumpers' to descend on their area in search of housing. Everywhere that there was squatting, at least one local councillor would warn of the danger of becoming a 'soft touch' for squatters. A policy of immediate eviction was preferred in most areas.

The Labour leader of Tower Hamlets in East London, Paul Beasley, echoed the attitude of many councillors when through the local paper, he declared 'all out war on squatters' in February 1975; 'We are not going to be taken for a ride; we have had enough and we are bloody well not going to have any more.'<sup>1</sup>

Squatting was a headache for councillors and



Eviction at Bramley Road, North Kensington, 19 April 1977



Eviction  
all over  
England



Kentish Gazette 1974

Union Row, Kent



Middlesex County Press 1975



Mike Goldwater

Battersea



Laurie Sparham/ IFL 1979

Camden



Westminster (below)



Martin Slavin 1973

Elephant and Castle



Sevenoaks Chronicle 1975

Sevenoaks



Battersea



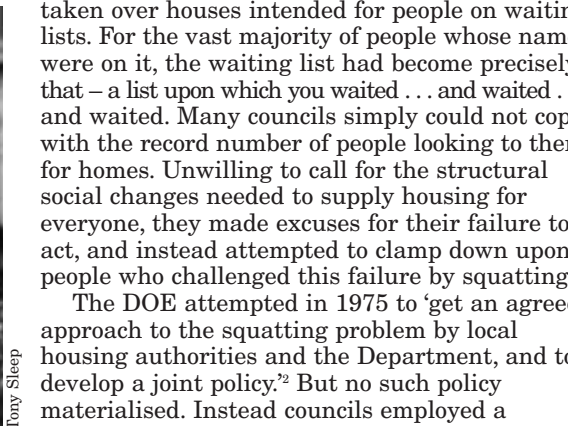
London Express 1975

Regents Park



Tony Sleep

Camden



Somerset (below)

officers; it was exposing the inadequacies of local authority housing programmes and was seen as a threat to some of the established institutions of housing. A Department of the Environment (DOE) consultation paper put it this way:

'Squatting raises the wider and very real problem of the extent to which local authorities are having their position, as elected bodies answerable to the general electorate, undermined. To the extent that squatters are attempting to buck the system, they clearly call into question the traditional democratic basis of current procedures, founded on the rule of law and its ordered administration.'

Above all, squatting was seen as a threat to that basic pinion of council bureaucracy — the housing waiting list. In effect, squatters have generally opted out of, or been excluded from, the housing queue as surveys have consistently shown ( p 233). They have made use of properties that would otherwise have been empty and have not taken over houses intended for people on waiting lists. For the vast majority of people whose names were on it, the waiting list had become precisely that — a list upon which you waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. Many councils simply could not cope with the record number of people looking to them for homes. Unwilling to call for the structural social changes needed to supply housing for everyone, they made excuses for their failure to act, and instead attempted to clamp down upon people who challenged this failure by squatting.

The DOE attempted in 1975 to 'get an agreed approach to the squatting problem by local housing authorities and the Department, and to develop a joint policy.' But no such policy materialised. Instead councils employed a variety of techniques in their efforts to prevent, control or halt squatting and during 1973-76 these were tested and refined in various areas by both Labour and Conservative administrations.

The Labour-controlled GLC's policy was typical of many authorities. In June 1974 it announced the first of several 'new policies' towards squatters. It intended to be 'humane but firm' and expressed its determination that squatters should not mess up its plans any longer. A GLC report estimated that 2,000 squatters were occupying 390 GLC dwellings.' 'Any attempt to mount a drive against all squatters at one time would be wholly beyond the present resources', reported the Head of the Housing Department and thus the

**Bailiff's Song** (Dedicated to all oppressed Bailiffs)  
*There's something about a Bailiff  
There's something about a Bailiff  
There's something about a Bailiff  
That is BAD BAD BAD  
His job is not his hobby  
It's banned by the Union lobby  
And even the British bobby finds it SAD SAD SAD  
If only he knew what I know  
If only he knew what I know  
If only he knew what I know  
If he KNEW KNEW KNEW  
He'd hand in his resignation  
Without any hesitation  
And claim for compensation as his DUE DUE DUE  
But a bailiff never guesses  
How much the British press is  
A medium that suppresses  
What is TRUE TRUE TRUE  
That a Bailiff would go pale if —  
That he'd get ten years in gaol if —  
That he'd never get out on bail if —  
People KNEW KNEW KNEW*



Bailiffs in  
Battersea

Mike Goldwater 1977





Union Place Collective



Westminster Empty Property Action Group



Sevenoaks Chronicle 1975



Corrugation Street No.5



Covent Garden Community Association



Squatters Handbook 1978



David Hoffman



Nick Wates

Thousands of habitable houses are vandalised by owners to stop squatters using them.

Top left: Lambeth Council raises the roof in St Agnes Place, 1976.

Bottom left: Police protection for the wreckers, Lambeth, 1976.

Middle: Westminster Council gets to work on a house in Bravington Road, 1977.

Left: Without waiting for the departure of the elderly tenants, Lambeth's workmen start demolition at Radnor Terrace, 1977.

Below left and centre: Ritchie House, Hornsey Rise in the hands of the Greater London Council, 1975.

Below right: Westminster Council smashes up Sandringham Flats in Charing Cross Road in 1973 only to repair them two years later at a cost of £400,000.



'humane' aspect of the policy was that people already squatting would be allowed to remain until the buildings were needed. But this did not seem to happen in practice and many squatters all over London were evicted without offers of alternative accommodation and frequently well before the buildings were needed for development.

In the East End, for instance, on Mercer's Estate, Stepney, there were 69 squatted flats as well as 177 empty ones – whose occupants faced eviction under the new GLC policy. For three years tenants had slowly been moved out in preparation for demolition, but the DOE then imposed a preservation order on the flats and so new plans had to be drawn up.

Yet the GLC went through with this unnecessary eviction making a complete mockery of the statement by its Housing Committee chairperson, Gladys Dimson, that: 'Our policy is to use every possible empty house awaiting redevelopment.'

The 'firm' aspect of the GLC's policy involved tightening security on empty houses to prevent any further squatting. Boarding up houses was not proving successful as a deterrent and the GLC resorted to gutting, a term used for 'ripping up floorboards, knocking out windows, taking

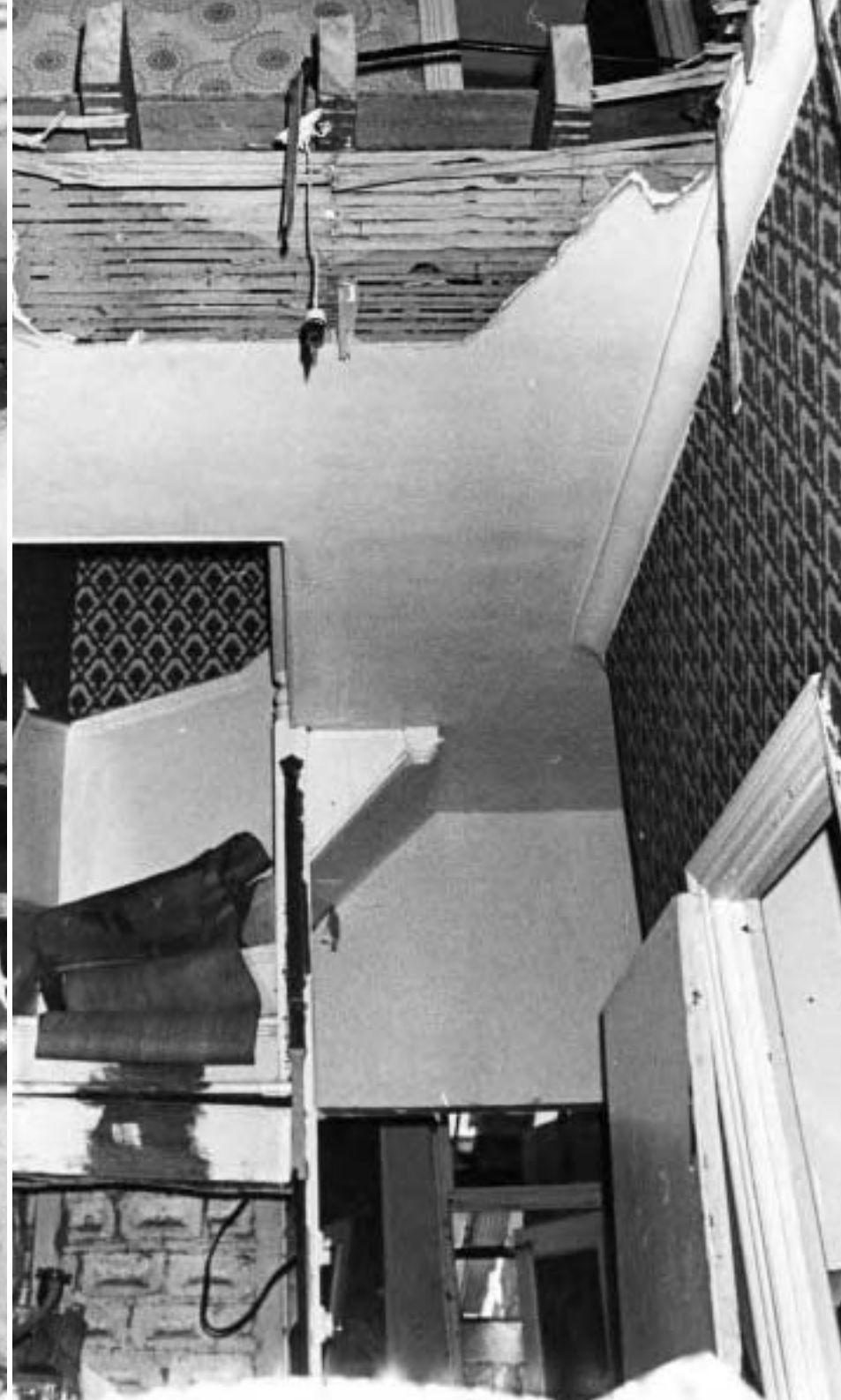


down internal doors, moving or destroying sanitary fittings, etc.'<sup>5</sup> The 'etc' in the statement actually concealed the most objectionable parts of an already objectionable practice e.g pouring concrete down lavatory basins or drains, sawing through support joists and breaking roof tiling. Other public authorities also resorted to gutting. The Crown Commissioners not only smashed washbasins and lavatory bowls but welded metal windows shut. Although squatters proved adept





Time Out Gutting by Quadrant Housing Association, Crystal Palace, 1973 (above). Gutting by Brent Area Health Authority, Brondesbury, 1979 (below). Ray



Mike Wigg Gutting by Redbridge Council, Lockwood Road, 1979 (above).

Lambeth, 1977 (below). Nick Wates







On 'instructions' from West Glamorgan Council, electricity board workmen cut supplies to houses in Oystermoull Road, Swansea, even though the squatters had paid their bills, 1974.

at repairing gutted houses, this municipal vandalism was responsible for the destruction of thousands of useable homes.

Councils also increased harassment of squatters through gas and electricity cut-offs taking advantage of legal confusion on the issue (p. 162 ). Bengali squatters in the East End suffered particularly through gas supplies being disconnected in properties where gas was the only safe form of power for heating or cooking as the electrical wiring was unable to carry high loads. In 1973 the GLC refused the London Electricity Board access to houses in Charrington Street, Kings Cross, to prevent squatters obtaining a power supply. It was a tactic employed successfully again and again by property owners as an effective form of back-door eviction.

In Bristol, for example, it was used successfully by both private owners and the local authority. Squatting first occurred in Bristol in October 1972, when four houses owned by a company were occupied. The company instructed the electricity board not to connect electricity supplies, and the coldness of winter helped minimise resistance to eviction. Later, Bristol Council used the same tactic against over 100 people squatting in houses due to be demolished for a new road scheme in Ashley Road. The denial of electricity supplies again reduced the will of the squatters to fight eviction.

Squatters in several areas attempted to compel their local gas and electricity boards to provide supplies by appealing to the Magistrates Court and

in Bristol, squatters went to the High Court. But all such cases were lost by the squatters and the chances of obtaining supplies of services varied greatly from area to area depending on the attitude of the local boards and the owners of the squatted properties. Minister of Energy Tony Benn stated in Parliament in 1975 that squatters would be treated the same as any other occupiers<sup>6</sup> but in spite of this property owners continued to be able to deny them gas and electricity supplies. Indeed, the DOE, three months before Bonn's statement, had suggested that to deter squatters it 'would be willing to approach statutory undertakings centrally, as a supplement to local approaches by the local authorities to the boards in their areas, to establish that they would be ready to consider not making supplies available to houses notified to them by a local authority.'<sup>7</sup>

A variety of other attempts were made to repress squatting through use of the law. Bradford City Council, for example, tried unsuccessfully to get damages for trespass, costs for 'use and occupation' (which amounted to rent) and other injunctions restraining named individuals from squatting.<sup>8</sup> Other authorities, especially outside London, where squatters more often had no legal advice or support, tried other tactics like applying for large sums of money in costs against squatters when they obtained possession orders. Bath City Council threatened squatters in an old stone cottage which had been condemned as 'unfit for human habitation' that if they did not leave they would be liable to fines of £100 – plus £20 per every day they remained in the premises – under public health legislation. The idea that one could be evicted for the sake of one's own health added a bizarre twist.

There were cases of children of squatters being refused places at local schools and of squatters being denied access to the refuse collection service. In 1973 Camden Council even tried to ban squatters from using library facilities by issuing a directive instructing staff that squatters were not classed as 'residents' and were therefore not entitled to borrow books.<sup>9</sup> Attempts were made to prevent squatters obtaining advice from council-aided advice groups. In June 1976, for instance, Holloway Housing Aid Centre received a renewal of its £17,000 grant from Islington Council only on condition that it guaranteed not to assist squatters. Islington Council in fact attempted to disguise its empty property by putting up curtains in windows. Then, having decided that 'squatting invasions of Islington' were being organised by 'certain notorious persons', considered, in February 1975, taking out injunctions stopping these people from trespassing in Council property. This addition to the arsenal of anti-squatting measures was only rejected when Islington realised that the 'notorious persons' would have to be supplied with complete lists of empty Council property or otherwise they could claim to be unaware when they were in breach of the injunction.<sup>10</sup>

Council responses were cynical in the extreme. To lower squatters' public status, housing departments would sometimes claim that squatted houses were just about to be let. Squatters were therefore seen to be creating hardship, and quite often left voluntarily. On one occasion in 1975 Calderdale Housing Department allocated a house in Royal Terrace, Hebden Bridge, to a woman and her three children *ten minutes* after hearing that it had been squatted. The flat had been empty for a year and a half. Six months previously the same woman had asked the Council if she could live there and had been told it was not for letting. In fact, the squatters moved out to make way for her but she did not take up the offer. (Some of the houses in that street were still empty in 1980.)

One of the most ironic deterrents was dreamt up by Conservative-controlled Brighton which had maintained a tough line, involving the immediate eviction of all squatters, since 1969. In the summer of 1973, a new campaign began in the town and the Council, echoing the blinkered assessment of the *Brighton Evening Argus* that 'squatting is a social disease which breaks out at intervals', introduced a new punishment. Eugenia Griffin, and her five-year-old son, who had been sleeping on the

beach before squatting, were not only evicted but also struck off the housing waiting list.

Banning squatters from waiting lists became quite a common tactic, the hypocrisy of which was illustrated in Southwark, South London, in 1976. On 8 March, the Senior Lettings Officer of the Council wrote to a Mr Orchard as follows: 'With reference to your application for housing assistance, it is observed that you are illegally squatting ... In view of this irregularity, it will not be possible to place your name on the housing waiting list and you are advised to vacate immediately, since only in the event of your being able to find alternative accommodation *within* the London Borough of Southwark will you be able to register with this authority for alternative accommodation.'

A similar letter was sent to Kathleen Hoey, her husband and their children on 29 October. Yet only the previous day, a social worker in the same Council had written to the Camberwell squatting group to which Mr Orchard and the Hoeyes belonged as follows:

'This is to introduce Colin Myton who urgently needs accommodation. He is staying with friends at the moment but must leave immediately. I hope you can help.'



### Cops and squatters

The police, under heavy pressure from property owners, sometimes attempted to bring criminal charges against squatters, particularly in small towns. In July 1975, for example, three squatters in Lancashire were charged under the 1824 Vagrancy Act with 'wandering abroad, lodging in an unoccupied building, failing to give a good account of themselves and failing to apply for accommodation when directed to a reasonable place of shelter'. More commonly, charges of criminal damage or theft were laid, although provided that squatters

had not actually taken or damaged anything in entering premises, these were often defeated in court. Nonetheless, the eagerness with which many police officers sought possible charges was indicative of their hostile attitude to squatters. Police in Twickenham, Surrey, took the unprecedented step of announcing figures showing how many squatters had been arrested over a certain period. These figures were not even a true reflection of the level of crime among squatters as they related to arrests not convictions. Needless to say similar figures relating to council tenants or owner-occupiers were not produced.

The police harassed squatters, too, through raids in search of drugs or, on occasion, even bomb and firearms (p 127). The number of raids and the number of police involved was disproportionate in relation to the number of drug-taking squatters. For instance, in the same week in September 1977 80-strong police contingents, spearheaded by the Special Patrol Group raided the squatted Elizabeth Garrett Anderson maternity home in Hampstead, North London<sup>11</sup> and squatted houses in Little Venice, West London, both early in the morning. At the maternity home, the police kicked down almost every door in the building, including one which fell on top of a 58-year-old woman, causing a face wound which needed four stitches. Eleven of the 40 people living in the squat were arrested but only three were actually charged all for possession of small amounts of cannabis. In Little Venice, people who did not get out of bed immediately also had their doors kicked down but no one was arrested.

The role of the police in drug raids on squatted premises had less to do with maintenance of law and order than with intimidation. Magistrates handed over warrants to search squats for drugs without question and the police often took advantage of the lack of public sympathy for squatters by treating them as they liked. When the SPG kicked down the door to a squatted flat in Emmalisa Court, Islington, during a drugs raid in 1975, they were asked why they had not knocked first. The answer was: 'It's more fun this way.'

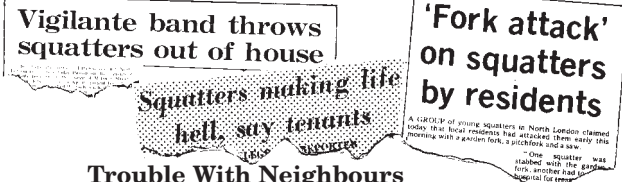
In addition there was a marked lack of interest on the part of police when squatters themselves were victims of crime. During the summer of 1976 Bengali squats in the East End were firebombed, as were squatted houses in other parts of London – West Hampstead, Brent and Kentish Town. No 220 Camden High Street which was being used

as a base by community groups came under harassment from the National Front and on one occasion a shotgun was fired through the window. The North London Gay Centre, a squatted house in Finsbury Park was attacked by a bottle-throwing gang of NF youths. These are just a few examples of incidents against squatters which were not effectively investigated by the police. The covert police attitude appeared to be that squatters were 'fair game' and not entitled to protection of the law because they had put themselves outside it by squatting in the first place. When it was arranged for squatters in Camden to give lectures on squatting to the local force to increase 'understanding', eight policemen complained in a letter to the police magazine, *The Job*: 'The obvious continuation of this policy must be that within the foreseeable future we shall be lectured by thieves, prostitutes and the like.'<sup>12</sup>

In the courts, a series of regressive rulings eroded loopholes that had been used over previous years (Chapter 14 details this gradual erosion of the law). Possession orders could now, in theory, be obtained in as little as a week but in practice the courts are always so clogged up that generally they took several weeks. More significantly, possession orders could now be used against unnamed occupants, preventing squat-swatting and they could not be suspended without the owner's consent. It was also ruled that it was legal, if inadvisable, for an owner to evict without a court order.

The tighter legal context made it increasingly difficult to mount an effective defence to a possession order in court but this did not satisfy many opponents of squatting for whom substantial legal reforms seemed long overdue. Since 1971, the Law Commission had been working on a review of the criminal law with the brief to reframe the law relating to trespass. In 1974 the Law Commission published a proposal that *any* act of trespass should be made illegal, once the trespasser had been asked to leave. In response, the Campaign Against a Criminal Trespass Law (CACTL) was set up by All London Squatters (p 87). After much opposition to the proposals, both from CACTL and from diverse organisations outside the squatting movement, ranging from the police to the trade union movement, the Law Commission reported again in 1976 with less Draconian proposals that were to make squatting more difficult but not illegal (pp 161-2).





### Trouble With Neighbours

Not all hostility towards squatters emanated from property owners, and on several occasions councils evicted squatters because they claimed to be under strong pressure from local residents who accused the squatters of causing a nuisance.<sup>13</sup> There is a joke about squatters, current in different forms in several countries. Residents in a neighbourhood are supposed to have complained about noise from squatted houses keeping them awake late into the night. The squatters are reputed to have said in reply that the neighbours woke them up early in the morning by revving their car engines as they left for work.

It is a humorous tale not entirely devoid of truth. The joke was almost mirrored by events in August 1974 in Deal, Kent, where residents complained about cars revving up and doors slamming late at night. They blamed it on the young long-haired squatters who had moved into the street. The local paper quoted squatters as saying: 'We don't have cars. The other morning we were woken up by a neighbour telling us to stop the noise. We had been asleep until then'.<sup>14</sup>

Normal tenure patterns tend to segregate different classes and types of people. Squatting has often broken down these divisions enabling working class people to live in wealthy neighbourhoods or young single people to live in areas of council housing normally restricted to the elderly or families with children. This has resulted in occasional clashes of lifestyle as at Grosvenor Road in Twickenham.

Squatters first moved into the street in October 1972. Bovis, the building firm, had acquired over 20 properties in the area for development but did not have any immediate plans. After the arrival of the first squatters, the company decided to let London and Quadrant Housing Association use all the empty homes. But the Association was completely unprepared to receive 20 dilapidated semi-gutted houses, so that over the next few months more unlicensed squatters moved in. By April 1973, the character of this affluent and spacious street had been totally altered by the 'invasion' of over 100 squatters. Meanwhile, Alderman Hall, the Leader of Conservative-controlled Richmond Council, and Housing Committee Chairperson George Tremlett, organised a campaign to get the

squatters evicted. They were encouraged in pursuit of this aim by the fact that two Labour Councillors had given support and encouragement to the squatters. Tremlett accused Labour councillor Lady Connor of encouraging 'riff-raff into the borough and warned: 'The borough is fast developing a cancer in its midst, a cancer that could dangerously pollute the quality of our life and the moral well-being of our children.'<sup>15</sup> (Ironically, in October 1977, then GLC Housing Chairperson, George Tremlett gave licences to over 5,000 squatters in GLC property under an amnesty.)

What was this cancer? The *Richmond and Twickenham Times* published its answer in a fanciful article in April 1973 under the heading, 'GARDEN OF EDEN HIPPIES SPREAD WAVE OF TERROR'. Hippies, according to a few unnamed local residents, had 'turned day into night' with wild parties going on all night in a huge communal garden: 'Young revellers danced naked to the music of live groups'; the area was 'a hotbed of drugs'; the squatters had an 'elaborate police warning system', consisting of a scout near the police station blowing a whistle, the sound being picked up by a bugler in a tree who immediately relays the alarm. The residents the paper claimed to have interviewed were said to be so terrorised by squatters that they were afraid to give their names.

What had happened, as in other parts of the country both then and since, was that among the squatters there were a minority of anti-social people who showed as little respect for their neighbours' way of life as the neighbours did for theirs. The ethic of tolerance and non-interference, so often prevalent amongst squatters, made it difficult for the 'community' of squatters to try to control the undesirable elements. As a group the squatters appeared different to other residents. They moved into an area as it was declining and rather than their presence being seen as symptomatic of that decline, it became seen as the *cause* of it. In addition, some residents had developed a sense of outrage at the idea of people living rent-free while they were paying high rents in similar houses nearby.

Rumours circulated among residents about squatters and were perpetuated by the lack of social contact between the two groups. The truth got distorted and lies were believed. Every piece of rubbish dumped in the street and every car door slammed late at night was blamed on squatters. What began as the residents' concern over

the deterioration of the area, turned into resentment against squatters who became the scape-goats for everything wrong with central Twickenham. The mobilisation of that resentment was not spontaneous and its direction against the squatters rather than the developers was largely determined by the intervention of local worthies like Hall and Tremlett and the press.

Events in Twickenham in 1973 are an example of how the stereotyped image of squatters can carry more weight than the facts. The squatter was seen as single, unemployed, lazy and from outside Twickenham. Yet a survey of 18 houses in September 1973 found: that there were 16 children squatting as well as 112 adults; that 61 per cent of the adults were working and only 10 per cent had not worked since moving into the squat; and that while 12 months earlier there had been no squats, 67 per cent of the squatters had lived in Twickenham for over a year and 13 per cent had lived there for over 15 years.<sup>16</sup>

During 1973, conflict between squatters and other local people in Stepney, East London, led to several nasty incidents. Squatters had their windows smashed and were subjected to various forms of harassment including physical violence. Houses from which squatters had been evicted and which were not due for immediate demolition were set on fire by local people to prevent other squatters moving in.

In Camden, too, conflict erupted in violence on a few occasions. On 19 April 1973, local 'vigilantes' threw out squatters from No 35 Marsden Street, the only house in the road with a bathroom. Camden Council had stated that it intended to use the house for a family off the waiting list but after the squatters had gone, Camden's first and only act was to tin up the windows and doors. A few weeks later the Francis family who lived next door and who had been prominent in kicking out the squatters apparently had a change of heart. They issued a statement saying that they had been mis-led by the Council and that in future they would work alongside squatters to fight bad housing. But the squatters in this particular case must have been unusually patient and determined and the Francis family particularly open to discussion and argument. Very often the divide between squatters and neighbours has been too irrational and wide to allow for any conciliation.

When squatters move into a street they are on public trial. They are observed in a way that few

'legitimate' occupiers ever experience, and their every action is noted and commented upon. They walk a knife-edge between acceptance (and support) and hostility (and opposition). By 1975, a growing number of squatters were on the wrong side of that edge. Their failure to take sufficient account of the feelings of neighbours, whether reasonable or not, was increasingly damaging to their cause.

### Media myths

What really undermined the basis of support for squatters was a vicious and systematic campaign against them conducted by the press and helped, at times, by various politicians and other interested parties.

At the beginning of 1975, angered by the resistance of squatters, particularly in Elgin Avenue, West London, and unwilling to give in to demands for rehousing, the GLC organised a press conference to expose 'smash and grab' squatters. This was a 'new breed' of squatter – allegedly holding up redevelopment schemes by refusing to move out, taking over houses and flats meant for people off the waiting list and damaging property. To support the last point the GLC produced photographs of damage, said to have been done by squatters, to new property in Westminster. These allegations, based on a few isolated incidents, received widespread coverage and set the tone for the whole year. During the summer, anti-squatter hysteria reached new heights.

As in 1969, it was the *Sunday People* which led the way, with a series of three articles, published in consecutive weeks in June, containing all the classic ingredients of sensationalism:

'An Englishman's home used to be his castle . . . but today he stands a good chance of having it taken over by Britain's growing army of squatters. It used to be the long-vacant premises of property speculators that were the targets of the live-for-nothing invaders.

Now it's ANYONE'S home . . . even a family coming back from holiday can find itself locked out, with strangers in occupation. Squatting, 1975, is highly organised, nationwide, spreading rapidly - and DANGEROUS.'<sup>17</sup>

The articles painted a picture of a sinister, sophisticated and unscrupulous squatting movement, equipped with its own legal services, radio station, newspapers, estate agency, police force and health

service. Eager to take over any dwelling, whether empty or not, the squatters were portrayed as hardened political militants who lived rent-free on social security handouts, using the homeless for their own ends. Upper-class or university-educated squatters were given particular attention as were two 'glamorous, polished' women squatting in Cheltenham. The articles emphasised violence (resisting eviction), squalor (the condition of squatted properties), drugs (allegedly used regularly in squats), and even sex (one being headed 'How a Naked Blonde Beat the Bailiffs').

One month later, *The Times* letters column became the focus for more damaging and more influential allegations against squatters. On 11 July 1975, a letter was published from a Miss Elizabeth Harper writing from an address in Northumberland who claimed she had just 'had the appalling experience of turning squatters out of our home in Kensington, left locked and secure three weeks earlier. The squatters arrogantly assumed the right to break in, to live in our home with their dogs, to sleep in our beds in our sheets, to daub crude drawings in black on our walls, to use our food, light, heat and telephone, to steal £300 worth of antique furniture and above all to dispose of all our treasured possessions.' According to Miss Harper, the police had refused to take any action and she warned that if the police continued to turn a blind eye, many *Times* readers could return from holiday to find their homes squatted.

Three weeks later, a letter was published from the Metropolitan Police Solicitor which pointed out that the story set out in Miss Harper's letter 'was not in accordance with the facts' on police records. Amongst other things, 'Miss Harper' was in fact a Mrs Such who claimed to be a barrister, who had not been on holiday and whose house in Kensington was up for sale. (A Frederick Such, presumably Miss Harper's husband, was resident at the same address in Northumberland and practiced as a barrister in Newcastle.) In other words, it was not her 'home'. In addition, when police officers had gone to the house and told the squatters the house was occupied, they left 'without any incident occurring'. The telephone which the squatters had allegedly used had been previously disconnected. The Police Solicitor commented: 'I think you will agree that the facts I have set out . . . present a very different picture from the facts

set out in the letter to *The Times* and that the letter is, to say the least, disingenuous.'<sup>18</sup> In less polite terms, she was lying. (When contacted by the press, Mrs Such declined to comment on Mr Lane's letter.)

But the damage had been done. In the intervening three weeks, there had been a spate of letters, articles and editorials condemning squatting and demanding tough legislation. Three days after the publication of the Harper letter, another one appeared from the Labour Chairperson of the GLC Housing Management Committee, Tony Judge. After stating 'Miss Elizabeth Harper's letter rightly drew attention to the illegal behaviour of squatters who invade private homes and the reluctance of the police to take action against them', Judge went on to claim that squatters in Elgin Avenue had held up a GLC housing development, designed for people in 'real need', for a year, and that the 'cost to the public had been incredibly high'. After describing them as 'worthless and articulate scroungers whom . . . the country has no conceivable duty to house', it concluded: 'It is past time we cleared up the absurdities in the law to reassert the rights of owners, be they public or private.'<sup>19</sup>

The next day, the Under-Sheriff of London, Alistair Black, gave an account in *The Times* of the problems faced by his officers under the current law due to the sophistication of squatters' methods of defence: 'In our view, if effective enforcement procedures are available with a sanction of arrest and possible imprisonment, the scourge of the squatter will be removed from the already over-troubled and over-burdened housing scene.'<sup>20</sup>

Much of the press coverage relied on the 'facts' as stated in the Harper letter to assert that squatters were now taking over people's homes while they were on holiday, or even out shopping, and indeed this became a widely believed myth. And despite the fact that there were no verified cases of this occurring (p 231) – and that the police confirmed they would intervene if it ever did – some astute businessmen even offered insurance policies against the possibility. Lloyds, for instance, offered full cover of £5,000 including the cost of alternative accommodation and legal fees for £5 a year, and many other organisations including the Automobile Association introduced similar schemes. It was an easy way to make money. A detailed study of press coverage found that the number of column inches per day rose dramatically during 1975 and that there was a substantial



increase of 'anti-squatting' articles as against 'pro-squatting' and 'neutral' ones.<sup>21</sup> Coverage focused on five typical representations of squatters.

- Deviants in lifestyle, political views, attitudes or behaviour
- Queue jumpers preventing 'genuine' people from being housed
- Parasites who cost the ratepayers money
- Cheeky and greedy people indulging in a lifestyle which is the prerogative of the property-owning rich (by occupying mansions and luxury homes)
- A danger to the mortgage middle class (by occupying their homes)

There were frequent calls for tougher legal measures. *The Times*, for example, editorialised: '... it has become increasingly clear that the act of squatting is no longer carried out by, or on behalf of deprived and homeless people. The new generation of squatters are not by any test poor (or if they are, they need not be). They are usually articulate and sophisticated, and their motives are often cynical in the extreme. At best they are people whose purpose is to live cheaply at other people's expense. But many of them are motivated politically. Their aim is not to improve the lot of the homeless (indeed, by their action they are achieving precisely the opposite) but to make political points about the concept of private property, the capitalist system and so on.

What is particularly disturbing, as correspondence to *The Times* over the past week has shown, is that the position is getting worse. No longer content with taking over empty properties, some have taken to squatting in obviously occupied houses. What is needed is a law aimed specifically at illegal squatters. The government should urgently consider bringing in such legislation.<sup>22</sup>

An editorial in the *Daily Telegraph* even went so far as to say that squatting was a direct threat to the survival of society and described how 'innumerable houses up and down the country are now in illegal occupation by organised gangs of thugs layabouts and revolutionary fanatics. In reality the motive for most of this squatting is either political - a settled purpose of subverting public order - or simple greed and aggression.<sup>23</sup>

The same views were echoed throughout the popular papers, which vied with each other for



1975: A collection of sensationalism, pompous ignorance and downright lies from politicians and journalists.



the most alarming or sinister 'stories'. The *Daily Mail* decided that

'Many thousands – in all probability the majority – of squatters ... are freeloaders and layabouts . . . Strong laws are needed to prevent the forces of anarchy which are undermining the democratic processes of our country.'<sup>24</sup>

And a London *Evening News* 'investigation' culminated with this editorial comment:

'An *Evening News* investigation has vividly revealed the true face of the new breed of squatters who seem to have taken over Central London. And what a nasty face it turns out to be. Many of them are foreign scroungers here for the social security and free accommodation. . . It is no good the government waiting for the Law Commission report before amending the law to deal with these housing bandits. By the time MPs get back from their summer holidays, how many more of the world's waifs and strays will be enjoying their free stays in London?'<sup>25</sup>

Watford Evening Echo 5.4.1974

## Ex-squatter hit pub row man with beer cans

### Effect of media image

Some MPs did, in fact, respond to this media onslaught. At its height a number of MPs called upon the government to take immediate action against squatters. A Commons motion tabled by Conservative Hugh Rossi on 17 July, 1975, called for legislation making it an offence to squat. One hundred and fifteen MPs signed it and at least two attempted to introduce Private Member's Bills on similar lines during the summer.

In reality, as several surveys show (pp 230-3), squatters were totally unlike the media's presentation of them.

- The vast majority of squatters improved their properties rather than damaged them.
- Squatters did not take over other people's homes while they were out.
- Squatters rarely prevented people in greater need from being housed because most squatted houses were not intended for immediate use.
- And in cases where squatters were accused of trying to hold up development schemes, this action was usually part of a wider campaign against anti-social developments. Anyway squatters could easily be evicted

through the courts when property was required and such delays were insignificant in comparison with even the ordinary delays common to large development schemes. For example, in Elgin Avenue where Tony Judge had claimed that squatters held up development work for 12 months, building work did not start for seven months *after* the squatters eventually moved out. While there undoubtedly were isolated cases of squatters damaging property, taking drugs and being 'revolutionary fanatics', 'foreigners', 'articulate scroungers', 'upper class' and so on, the vast majority of squatters did not fit these mythical media stereotypes.

In the desperate search for sensationalism, the press further reinforced these myths in the public mind. One of the most malicious stories appeared long after the summer 1975 coverage had petered out. The London *Evening News* headlined a story, 'SQUATTERS WON'T QUIT CRASH WIDOW'S HOME'. It began with the sentence 'Two squatters who have deprived a Moorgate tube disaster victim of a new home, today refused to get out.'<sup>26</sup> A subsequent investigation showed that the woman was not a Moorgate crash victim but had been hurt in another tube accident six years ago. Nor had she been offered a 'new' home – it was a poor standard prefab, on a site where there were numerous other empty prefabs. The squatters had stressed their willingness to move into one of these to make way for her. Finally, the squatters had a small child and thus the local Council had a duty to house them.

The images conjured up by the media had an effect on *all* squatters. Neighbours who had previously been helpful or ambivalent became hostile.

## Brick-up the squatters, plan by schoolboy

By DAVID FLETCHER, Education Staff

A SCHOOLBOY found his suggested tough methods for dealing with squatters—sending in Alsatian dogs to make them jump off the rooftops—taken more seriously than he expected yesterday.

Paul O'Leary, 9, from Hornsey, put his ideas in an essay which won a Haringey Council competition on how to solve the problem of squatters and vandals.

His solution, which won him £5, was simple: brick-up the squatters in their houses forcing them out on to the roof. He also suggested that they would be scared off and surrender.

'Machievellian plan'

He also proposed sending in Alsatian dogs and suggesting using tear gas and spraying vandals with luminous paint. He concludes: "They would never do it again."

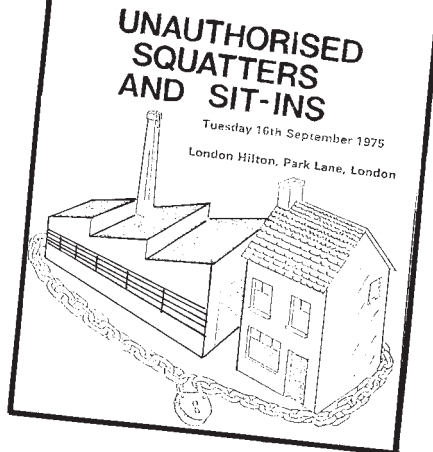
But when the National Council for Civil Liberties heard about it yesterday they suggested

the council might have given him the prize as part of a Machievellian campaign to harden public opinion against squatters.

Mr Martin Kettle, its spokesman, said: "I hope he was awarded the prize for the bright way in which he wrote the essay rather than for the content."

But Haringey has quite a well-publicised squating problem and it is just possible that the council could be making use of this competition to prepare people for a hard line against squating.

The N.C.C.L.'s suspicions were laughed off last night by Coun. Mrs Maureen Dewar, chairman of the council's working party on vandalism and one of the judges in the essay competition. She said: "The essay won because it was well written and amusing and made us laugh."



Property owners organise a seminar to learn how to deal with squatting and occupations, 1975.

Children who lived in squats were picked on or ostracised by other children at school, and known squats were 'forgotten' by refuse collectors (thus fuelling the myth that squatters lived in squalor). Monica Ferman, secretary of Fairhazel Tenants Association in Camden, described how one tenant had, by mid-1975, 'given up almost all forms of work and relaxation, as an obsession with squatters had taken over his life'. The tenant once spotted

'an unfamiliar pushchair standing outside his building. Purple with fury ... he rushed into the back garden dustbins with the pushchair. Much soothed by this positive gesture, he went upstairs to join his family. A minute later our tenant shot out of the house again to retrieve the pushchair, and he made it just in time to help his wife's best friend tuck up her two-year-old toddler and wave them away.'<sup>27</sup>

People with little direct experience of squatters developed wild ideas about their lifestyle. One Wandsworth resident wrote in the local paper 'They are in the bingo halls as soon as the doors open; also the betting shops and have a taxi to take them. The Council encourage them by handing out keys to enter these flats and houses. It is about time something was done about it.'<sup>28</sup>

Private property owners became more confident in dealing with squatters. With the possibility of bad publicity largely dissipated, wasteful and harsh policies could be implemented with little fear of public disapproval. In July 1976, for instance, 50 people were forced out of the squatted Cumberland Hotel, Earls Court, by 15 workmen with four Alsatians. Dispensing with such niceties as a possession order, the owner intruded the workmen to

board up all windows and doors. Faced with the choice of leaving or being incarcerated, the squatters chose to move on. In Brighton, where most squatting was in private property, a squatters union was set up specifically as a defence against evictions which were often carried out violently by people without possession orders.

Local authorities too made use of squatters' low public status. In Hebden Bridge, for instance, the linking of 20 long-haired squatters living in old millworkers' cottages in Queens Terrace with the mythical evil beings created in the media made the owners, Calderdale Council, less willing to negotiate and more able to evict. With more insight than other newspapers. *The Guardian* remarked, '... the Council has a preconceived image of them as scruffy, ill-mannered individuals who have been conveniently lumped together under the squatting label.'<sup>29</sup> In fact, many of these squatters had previously been private tenants in the same cottages at Queens Terrace prior to their purchase by the Council in 1974. Initial suspicion by other local residents had gradually been replaced by a limited degree of acceptance and support. Indeed, the squatters secured 500 signatures to a petition asking that they be allowed to stay and gained the backing of the local Labour Party, the MP for the area, the senior social worker and the local clergy, both Methodist and Catholic. They also produced detailed plans for the houses and requested that they be allowed to rent or buy them, as they were unsuitable for families from the local authority's waiting list.

Unfortunately, the Tory controlled Calderdale Council was not impressed. When squatters presented their case in a formal deputation, Councillor Raymond Pearson walked out saying 'I do not see it as part of my duty as an elected representative to talk to people who are occupying houses illegally.'<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, it was agreed to renovate the houses instead of demolishing them as originally planned which the squatters saw as a partial victory. But they were not to be rented to the squatters as the Council's stated policy towards them was that they should be sent back to where they came from.

Media-inspired antipathy enabled the hard-line opponents of squatting to mobilise support, as *Peace News* reported: 'Local Liberal and Tory councillors/businessmen began to exploit the situation to stir up antagonisms.'<sup>31</sup> The squatters were accused of living in disgusting conditions and

scrounging off social security. By November 1976 there was talk of a vigilante group of locals preparing to throw out the squatters and the Council felt confident enough to evict, refusing to rehouse even a mother and child, despite a directive from the court judge that they should do so. Housing Committee Chairperson, Robert Sunderland, had already declared defiantly: 'There is no way that we are going to rehouse these leeches on society.'

Not only did Calderdale Council clamp down on all squatting locally, but councillors and officers went so far as to travel to London to lobby parliament (successfully) for an amendment to the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, then in Parliament. Nicknamed the 'Calderdale Clause' it allows councils to refuse accommodation to people who 'deliberately make themselves homeless'. This sufficiently ambiguous wording allows Calderdale Council among others to continue avoiding its obligation to the homeless.

Councils showed little enthusiasm for negotiating with squatters or for trying to find ways of housing them and were increasingly prepared to use force to evict them. In Islington, for example, 17 people were arrested when 200 police and 20 bailiffs evicted four houses in Charteris Road in June 1976, despite the fact that a survey had identified a hundred Council-owned empty dwellings in the immediate area.

A GLC report acknowledged the way in which the media prepared the ground for a crackdown on squatting: 'There is no doubt that, as a result of the recent press campaign against squatting, public interest in the matter has been aroused. It is likely that there would be public support for more positive (*sic*) action on the part of local authorities in tackling the problem.'<sup>32</sup>

And taking the lead, the GLC held yet another press conference at the beginning of 1976 at which yet another scandal was revealed. Squatters, so the unsubstantiated claim went, were employing a 'Rent-a-Kid' system, whereby squatters facing eviction 'borrowed' children of friends to get rehoused.<sup>33</sup>

The media campaign of 1975 and subsequent press fabrications about squatting were inspired by a combination of both commercial and political motivation. The coverage made a mockery of the very notion of freedom of the press and the pursuit of truth. Squatters were merely the latest in a long line of victims of a media that is far-removed from the ideals it professes to uphold. •

*Squatters Army*  
(tune: 'My old man's a dustman')

Oh. . . . .  
We're the squatters Army  
We're the 'won't pay rent Brigade'  
We like marijuana  
And we like getting laid  
Oh, have you read about us?  
If not you will you bet  
Because the Sunday People  
Ain't seen nothing yet

1. We piss out of windows  
And we shit on the floor  
And we shoot up in lavatories  
Well ain't that wot they're for

2. We don't work in offices  
We don't work on the stalls  
We don't work in factories  
We don't work at all

3. We got lice and scabies  
Fleas and bedbugs too  
We only take our clothes off  
When we want to screw

4. We'll beat up your grandma  
Coz we're a load of thugs  
We won't even notice  
Coz we're all high on drugs

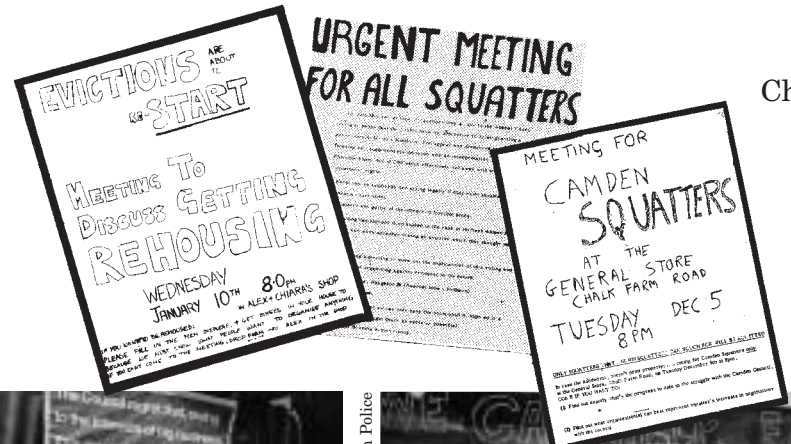
5. We laze around like landlords  
Let others rub and scrub  
The only landlord that we pay  
Runs our local pub





# Fighting back

Squatters organise nationally and locally to defend their rights



## Chapter 6



### Squatters organise

Part of the success of the 1975 campaign against squatters lay in the relatively fragmented state of the movement. It is worth comparing the media myth of a highly organised squatting movement with the reality of that movement's response to the attacks on it. The only answer that squatters could often find was to attempt to persuade the media to present a more balanced picture. Letters were written to newspapers but rarely published; press conferences were called but largely ignored; the *Sunday People* had its offices picketed one evening but its anti-squatter tirades continued unabashed. Journalists who wrote articles favourable to squatters had them returned by editors. In the face of wide-ranging opposition from the establishment and the mass media, the squatting movement, in common with other radical social movements, had no complete answer. It remained isolated and divided, with neither the support nor the cohesive political perspective which would have enabled it to mount a more effective response

to the opposition.

Many squatters' reactions to the onslaught was to play down the fact that they were squatting. To appease neighbours, some even pretended they were not squatters and were paying rent. More positively, an increasing number of squatters began to organise in a variety of ways to cope with the threat.

### The local level

The most common form of organisation was the local squatting group at street or block level. Squatting groups sprang up all over London (there were 14 in Tower Hamlets alone in 1975) and in many other towns too. They were usually created to resolve practical problems like opening up houses and repairs and they rarely became very active until eviction loomed. At this point, street meetings would start being held weekly or even daily. People would be deployed on a variety of tasks; printing leaflets and news-sheets, negotiating with owners and housing authorities, handling the legal defence,

Squatters keep themselves informed

Left: James Street, London, 1976.

Right and centre: Huntley Street, London, 1979.

organising social events, raising money, seeking support from other groups, finding new squats, liaising with the press and perhaps building barricades.

The style of organisation and political strategy varied enormously from group to group depending on the nature of the opposition, the aspirations and skills of the squatters and the emergence or otherwise of leadership. The success of local organisation varied too, but the potential was shown dramatically in 1975 by the victory of the Elgin Avenue squatters. After a long and protracted battle, they managed to persuade the GLC to re-house all the families in permanent accommodation, and all the single people in short-life property.

The most significant factor in the Elgin Avenue victory was that *the squatters had organised over a period of years*. They had built links with

important local organisations and had gained the support of, amongst others, the local MP, the trades council and the federation of local tenants and residents associations,

Elgin Avenue marked a tremendous victory for the squatting movement but there was still no general recognition of single people's *right to housing*. The agreement to rehousing was presented as a one-off deal and statements emphasised that it did not apply to other squatters. Indeed, victory in Elgin Avenue proved to be exceptional, as very few other squatters won rehousing. On 7 November 1975, 300 police evicted 70 squatters from Cornwall Terrace and two months later 150 were used at the eviction in Hornsey Rise, once the home of 350 squatters. In both places brave, but belated, attempts were made to mobilise shifting and unstable squatter populations. Such efforts came to little, largely because the squats had attracted large numbers of people with no interest in organisation or even in squatting as a political movement. When eviction loomed, the residents

moved on in many cases to new and isolated squats. Both of these squats experienced unpleasant degrees of social disintegration Petty theft was rife, 'hard' drug dealers had moved in and the proportion of people who created problems began to exceed the capacity of more 'together' squatters to cope with them.

It was not only disorganised squats which fell to the bailiffs in the aftermath of the 1975 campaign against squatting. Prince of Wales Crescent, in Camden, described in detail earlier (p 38), became very chaotic and when the bailiffs turned up in March 1976 the number of squatters had fallen drastically – from 300 one year before to under 100. A campaign to persuade Camden Council to allow the community to remain had failed. Instead the squatters demanded rehousing for everyone still living in the Crescent. In fact, the families were rehoused by the Council and the more established projects were offered rented short-life buildings elsewhere. But for the single people who failed to get rehousing there was no alternative to squatting

Squatters' meetings.

Top left: Cleveland Street, London, 1976.

Top right: Tower Hamlets, London, 1979.

Bottom right: Islington, London, 1979.

Bottom centre: Cornwall Terrace, London, 1975.

Top centre, bottom left: Talmers Square, London, 1979.

and a group of them took over Trentishoe Mansions a block of GLC flats next to Cambridge Circus in central London.

The Cornwall Terrace and Hornsey Rise squatters and the thousands of individual squatters evicted during 1975-76 failed to get rehousing because of the absence of effective organised action. In contrast, Prince of Wales Crescent squatters were *relatively* well organised. Their failure stemmed from a variety of other factors, of which the climate of local opinion created largely by the life-style of the squatters was the most significant. This affected the extent to which squatters were able to mobilise outside support and also undermined their confidence, thereby reducing their willing-





SQUAT THE LOT

ISLINGTON  
HAC  
SQUATTERS  
ACTION

SWANSEA  
HOMES BEFORE CAR PARKS

HOMES FOR ALL

DIRECT ACTION HOMES

NEWS  
SMASH & BURN RAID  
IN ISLINGTON  
COUNCILLORS SUSPECTED

THIS COUNCIL IS GUILTY!

ISLINGTON SQUATTERS

HOMELESSNESS WHOSE CRIME?

NO HOT FOOD SQUATTERS  
GAS

LAMBETH TRADING SQUATTERS GROUP

USE EMPTY PROPERTY DIRECT ACTION

HOUSING FOR ALL NOW

FIGHT  
SQUAT

WHY CREATE MORE CRIMINALS? AREN'T THERE ENOUGH ALREADY?

EVICTIO  
LABOUR CL  
SOLUTION TO HOUSING PROBLEM

WE WANT HOMES NOT EMPTY HOUSES

PADDINGTON FEDERATION

SAVE HOMES SAVE MONEY SUPPORT SUMMER CO-OP

GET THE BEST LIES in the Sunday People

NO TO CRIMINAL TRESPASS LAW

you can't live

CHUCK OUT SPECULATORS

HOUSING CRISIS WE ARE THE SOLUTION NOT THE PROBLEM

HOUSING FOR ALL

SQUATTER UNPAID CARETAKER

A REAL MENACE  
AARGH! IT'S THE CRIMINAL TRESPASS LAW

SMASH THE TRESPASS LAWS! KEEP ON SQUATTING SISTERS & BROTHERS

OPEN VACANT HOUSES FOR THE HOMELESS

YOU WANT TO PAY £100M  
HOTEL BILLS FOR 3 FAMILIES  
out of their ears  
when it is the PRESSURE???

PEOPLE IN HOUSES NOT RATS + MICE

SQUAT IN WHILE STOCK LAST

BRENT

CAPITALIST PRESS SUPPORTS BUSINESS AND PROPERTY SPECIAL INTERESTS

STOP THE EVICTIONS NOW

NO EVICTIONS WITHOUT ALTERNATIVE HOMES

HOUSING NOT SQUATTING

EMPTY HOUSES ARE BEING BURNED

WHY IS IT OK TO OWN EMPTY HOUSES BUT A CRIME TO SQUAT THEM?

COUNCIL EXISTS THE HOMELESS

MARKET SQUATTERS

HOUSE FOR THE 5000 HOMELESS FAMILIES

AFTER EVICTIONS DRAMAS PLAY FOR PEOPLE

MAKE WORKERS' HANDS OFF THE HOUSES

BUILD HOUSES NOT OFFICES

the case for squatters

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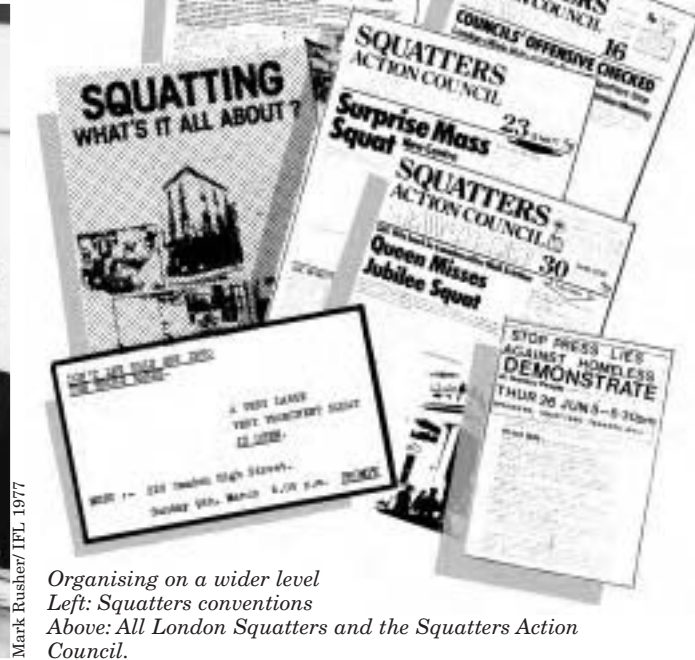








Tony Sleep



The Squatters Handbook is one of the most useful squatters' publications on how to squat, and is updated at regular intervals.  
Right: The Advisory Service for Squatters

The growing militancy of unlicensed squatters, and of those licensed squatters who were refusing to move out when required, was seen as a threat to the 'reasonable' approach forcefully advocated by FSAS: 'Whilst we recognise that breaking or threatening to break agreements may sometimes be justified, we believe that the success of the movement has rested as much upon our collective credibility through keeping agreements as upon our determination to be an active part of the Housing Movement.' This approach assumed that, except in rare instances, owners of empty property could be persuaded by rational argument to make use of it. In opposition to this philosophy, the militants in ALS believed that licence agreements were not producing enough houses and that the only way to get more was to step up direct action. The divisions within the squatting movement were again heightened during the Centre Point occupation in January 1974. Although it was organised by people active in FSAS, many squatters from ALS joined the demonstration outside and were disappointed when the occupiers decided to leave after only two days as it seemed a

waste of the effort that had gone into the occupation. 'Stay put – weekend revolutionaries', they chanted, and urged those inside to move homeless people into the 36 flats attached to Centre Point. They argued that this was not the time for 'token' protest squats. ALS planned a militant answer to what it saw as the 'Centre Point letdown'. In March a group of activists took over 57 Dover Street, a new block of luxury flats in Mayfair. The flats were occupied by homeless families who were evicted after six weeks. **ASS is born** Within FSAS the schism was almost complete by this stage. A core of 'moderates' became opposed to unlicensed squatting as it attracted bad publicity. FSAS began to disintegrate as a representative assembly, even of licensed squatting groups, and bitterly split into two factions. By July 1975 the nature of the organisation had completely changed and it renamed itself the Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS), aiming to work closely with unlicensed squatting groups and individual squatters. Shelter, threatened with a loss of charitable income if it

continued to support a squatting organisation withdrew its funding. This loss of income put ASS in a precarious financial position. As there was no money to pay wages, the service became entirely dependent upon voluntary unpaid effort but ASS managed to survive. Money for stationery, the telephone and other essential items (including, ironically, rent for its office) was raised through donations and benefit concerts. The service was still functioning as an advice centre in the Autumn of 1980 as this book went to press. ASS was also different from FSAS in that it ceased to attempt to function as a federation of local groups and became a collective controlled by the people who worked for it. The workers were opposed to the way FSAS had attempted to become a central body which could speak authoritatively for all squatters and which imposed its will upon recalcitrant local groups. The ASS collective felt that FSAS had ceased to be a loose association of free and equal groups but had become a centrally directed monolithic body devoted to leading' the broad mass of squatters, a form of organisation incompatible with the structure of the squatting movement. Political disagreements hindered the formation

during 1975 of an organisation to replace ALS which had virtually ceased to function by the time the summer media attack was launched. The differences were primarily between those who favoured a loose arrangement and whose political views tended to be libertarian or anarchist, and those who favoured a more centralist arrangement and whose politics tended to be Trotskyist. A Squatters Convention, attended by 250 people, at the end of May 1975, was dominated by this split and failed to produce any concrete mandate for future organisation.

**SAC** But the press campaign of the summer made the creation of an organisation essential. In August, a London-wide meeting called through ASS, and attended by 100 squatters, accepted a proposal from Piers Corbyn – one of the main activists at Elgin Avenue – to set up the Squatters Action Council (SAC), 'a body of elected members delegated from each squatting group in which observers are welcome to participate'. Its purpose was to 'organise and campaign to defend squatting and to develop the fight for decent housing for all'. Its

immediate tasks were to respond to media attacks, mobilise against evictions, organise against the Criminal Trespass Law and build links with trade unions and tenants organisations. One of SAC'S most effective achievements proved to be organising large scale occupations which individual squatters would have found difficult to undertake. For example, in 1977 it organised its own contribution to the Queen's Jubilee celebrations in the form of a long series of 'Jubilee Squats'. The first, and most daring, took place on Jubilee Day (6 June) at No 18 Carlton House Terrace, on the Mall, a house the Crown Commissioners had kept empty for two years. As it was on the Queen's procession route, the police declared the squat to be a 'security risk' and sent the Special Patrol Group to evict the occupants. Backed up with Alsatian dogs, they broke in through the roof and warned the squatters to leave 'or else'. They did so, but the same night achieved partial revenge by squatting Camden House, a police-owned block in central Camden that had been empty for four years despite the efforts of Short-Life Community Housing (formerly Student Community Housing) to bring it into use. The police displayed a sense of urgency over evicting the squatters which had

been completely absent from their efforts to find a use for the block and the eviction was carried out with a High Court possession order just two months after the flats were squatted. SAC, like ALS, was intended to bring together squatters from all over London and, in theory anyway, outside the capital. Yet meetings were frequently attended by fewer than a dozen people, who were sometimes delegates in name only, with the result that the strength of both organisations lay in the handful of active individuals who kept them going, rather than in the local groups which were supposedly represented. Most squatters never had any sense of identification with either ALS or SAC. Neither of these organisations, nor ASS, really managed to mobilise squatters into an effective political force. Nonetheless, they did play an invaluable role: ALS and SAC through the initiation of particular campaigns, the opening of mass squats, the organising of actions involving large numbers of people, and the production of newsheets, and ASS (and, to a lesser extent, SAC) through the provision of advice and the production of the *Squatters Handbook* (taken on by ASS in 1977) and other informative material. •



THE WORKING CLASS BUILT THESE HOUSES,

ONLY THEY ARE MADE HOMELESS THIS MUST STOP!



I AM SQUATTING HERE COS IVE NOWHERE ELSE TO GO



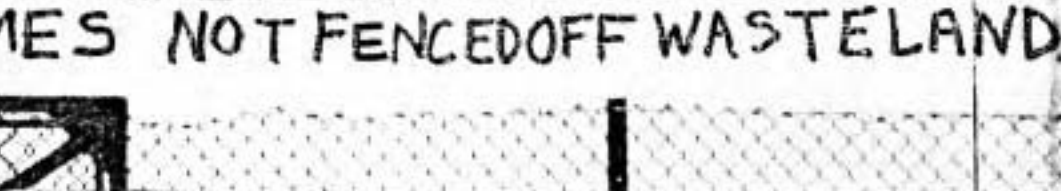
CORRUGATED IRON IS THE CHARACTER ARMOUR OF THE COUNCIL!

We hope youre satisfied. Do you manage to sleep at night? Yes, you dont deserve too. Oh, so its your job well youre all making things to DESTROY our right to a home. Well were another HOME to NOW. Were homeless and youre so happy. Sod off you lunatics + leave people like us alone. THE COUNCIL cant House US. REMEMBER?

PEOPLE NEED HOMES NOT FENCED OFF WASTELAND

BEHIND HERE LIVE 6 PEOPLE + SOME CATS AND WE'RE STAYING

THINK OF THIS AS A WINDOW

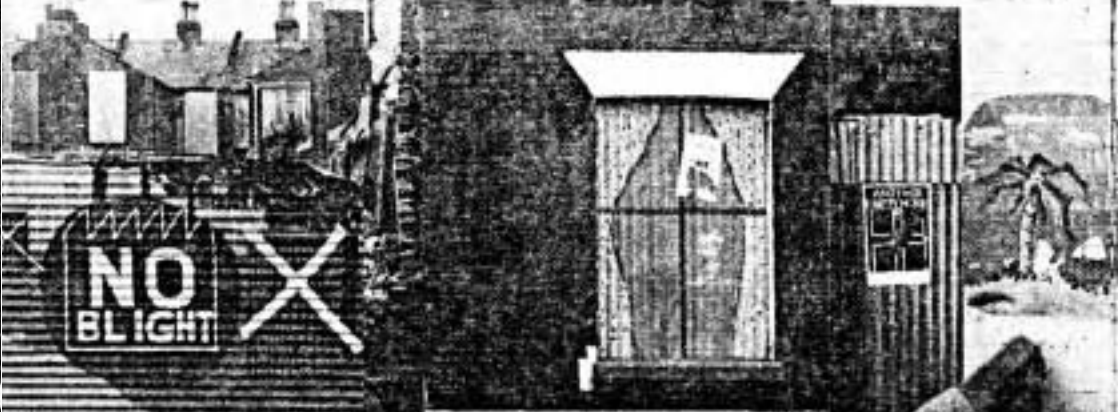


DEAR BAILIFF PLEASE DONT READ THIS NOTICE FOLLOWING ORDERS CAN MAKE YOU BLIND THANKYOU!

PEOPLES WISHES DESPISED STOP TRYING NOW!

TAKE IT

WASTE OF A HOUSE



SQUAT NOW WHILE STACKS LAST

WE WILL NOT BE HOMELESS

THOUGHT HOME WAS AN EX-PRIME MINISTER UNTIL I DISCOVERED SQUATTING

DWELLING UNIT SWEET DWELLING UNIT

4 MORE HOMELESS BEWARE THE MIND FUCKERS

THIS IS MY HOME

THOUSANDS OF HOUSES EMPTY THOUSANDS ON COUNCIL LISTS WE HAVE NOWHERE ELSE TO GO TO! NO EVICTION HOUSES FOR ALL!

WHO MIGHT OUR BLACK BROTHERS THEN ENJOY

TENANTS + SQUATTERS UNITE TO FIGHT FOR GOOD HOUSING FOR ALL!









Mike Goldwater 1979

Demolition Decorators at the Ferry Lane occupation

**COUNCILLOR'S SONG**

We don't want no Dirty Squatters  
They're all out to help themselves  
They do their own repairs  
They know their own affairs  
They make the welfare State look foolish  
We like helpless homeless families  
They can have bed and breakfast - if they pay  
But if we don't stop the Squatters  
The Dirty Filthy Squatters  
they'll SOLVE THE HOUSING PROBLEM OF  
TODAY  
We'd be redundant -  
If we don't stop the Squatters - yes  
The Dirty Filthy Squatters - why  
They'll SOLVE THE HOUSING PROBLEMS OF  
TODAY  
Lock 'em away . . .

(Squatters Song - anon.)

A performance of 'Squat now while stocks last' in Prince of Wales Crescent (p38)



Mike Goldwater

**My land - an ancient squatters fable**

A man is out walking on a hillside.  
Suddenly the owner appears.  
'Get off my land', he yells.  
'What do you mean, your land?', demands  
the intruder. 'Who says it's your land?'  
'I do, and I've got deeds to prove it.'  
'Well, where did you get it from?'  
'From my father.'  
'And where did he get it from?'  
'From his father. He was the seventeenth  
Earl. The estate originally belonged to the  
first Earl.'  
'And how did he get it?'  
'He fought for it in the War of the Roses.'  
'Right - then I'll fight you for it.'



The law doth punish man or woman  
That steals the goose from off the common  
But lets the greater felon loose  
That steals the common from the goose



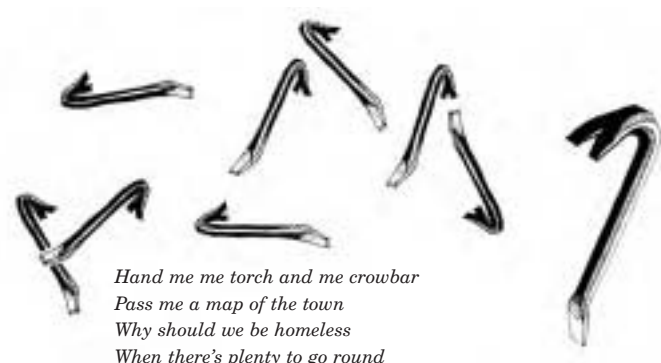
Oh I was built in 1893  
And my owners took care of me.  
They kept me warm, sound as a bell  
I was their home, they treated me well  
Got taken over by the GLC  
Different tenants came to live in me  
But sending workmen round was very rare  
Sinking fast into disrepair

The GLC they've treated me real mean  
Called me a slum, wrote me out of their scheme,  
They moved my tenants to another place,  
Took out my windows and bricked up my face  
Sent in the heavies to smash up my loo,  
Ripped out my piping and power points too  
Till I was nothing but an empty frame  
A pawn in their redevelopment game

When I was thinking that my life was thru  
Along came a woman, her family too  
Took down the bricks, put a lock on my door  
They couldn't stand being homeless no more  
Put back the windows and another loo  
Replaced my wiring and power points too  
Put up some curtains  
Helped some friends move in over the street



Everybody's got a right to a home  
And there's houses just a-going to rot  
If the Council won't house you, do it alone  
Don't let houses rot, SQUAT!



Hand me me torch and me crowbar  
Pass me a map of the town  
Why should we be homeless  
When there's plenty to go round



**Doing the Lambeth Squat**  
by Bernard Hanson

Any time of any day  
When you go down Lambeth way  
You'll find us all  
Doing the Lambeth squat.  
When the rent is getting high  
And you can't afford to buy  
Why don't you try  
Doing the Lambeth Squat

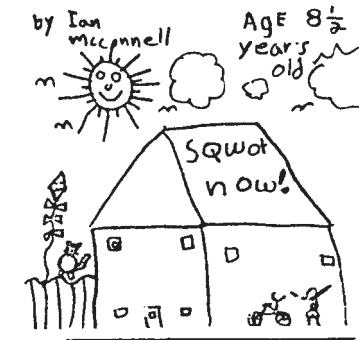
Everything's bright and breezy  
Do what you damn well pleasee  
Have everything your own way  
Each day, all day.  
Any time of any day  
When you go down Lambeth way  
You'll find us all  
Doing the Lambeth Squat

Fix a Yale-lock, mend the lights  
Get to know your squatter's rights  
And join us all  
Doing the Lambeth Squat.  
Sunny Brixton welcomes you  
And the Lambeth Council too  
Can't stop us all  
Doing the Lambeth Squat

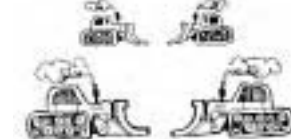
As for the planner's new schemes  
They have such lovely daydreams  
They only need to wake up  
Shake up, break up.  
Revolution just for fun  
Villa Road my home sweet home  
We'll have a ball  
Doing the Lambeth Squat

**(tune: - 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary')**

Its a long wait for a council house,  
Its a long wait we know,  
Its a long wait for my council house,  
Through the wind and rain and snow.  
'Come back tomorrow!'  
We've heard it all before,  
So the next time you see a house that's empty,  
Just walk in through that door!



Maybe its because I'm a squatter,  
That I love London town,  
Maybe its because we're squatters  
We're going to stop them knocking it down!



"I understand he's from the GLC Planning Department."



Squatter-singer Carol Grimes at a benefit



Mike Goldwater

(tune: - 'Lilli Marlene')  
Little terrace houses where I used to roam  
Rooms rather small but at least it was a home.  
A dear little garden eight by eight  
A little fence, a little gate  
My little private home, my little private home

When the war was over - all the bombin' done  
We were still together - we still had lots of fun.  
But then all our neighbours disappeared  
They said the slums must all be cleared  
They pulled down every stone of my little private home.

Now we live in tower blocks - everything's so clean  
Formica tops and a washing-up machine.  
But why did they make them all so tall  
Oh what a long long way to fall  
My feet were on the ground in my little private home.

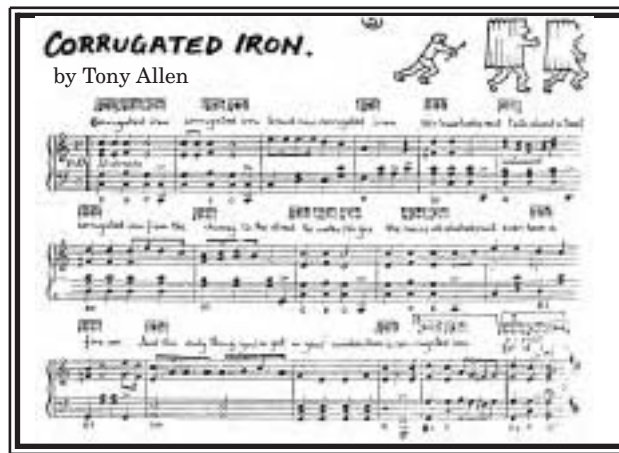
Took a little bus ride just the other day  
All what we passed by was much to my dismay  
Tower blocks a-crumbling in the air  
In bad repair and no-one there  
But some terrace houses done up new  
Extensions for an indoor loo -  
I wish I'd stayed and fought for my little private home . . .



The Realists



Squatter-comedian Tony Allen



(Spoken)  
Just a week or two ago poor old Uncle Bill,  
He went and kicked the bucket and left me in his will.  
The other day I pops round to see me Cousin Clare,  
She says yer Uncle's left you his flat in Colville Square.

I couldn't believe me ears  
he weren't even in arrears,  
and me been on the housing list for fifteen years.

So I goes straight round  
but I hears an ominous sound,  
and there stands the landlord  
with an 'ammer in his hand.

(Chorus sung to the tune of 'Any Old Iron')  
Corrugated iron, corrugated iron brand new corrugated iron,  
Yer 'ouse looks neat, talk about a treat,  
Corrugated iron from the chimney to the street.  
No water, no gas and the mains all slashed,  
Can't even have a fire on, and the only thing you've got  
In yer window box is corrugated iron.

(Spoken)  
I was homeless, pissed off, had nowhere to stay  
Half of fucking London tinned up and grey  
It was then that I noticed every flat in the block  
Had a squatters legal warning and a newly fitted lock.  
Goodbye bed and breakfast, farewell rent  
Why not force a window and take up residence.  
I'd jemmied a door, and was just climbing through  
When a copper ups and does me for  
Malicious damage to that . . .

(Spoken)  
Now the moral of the story is clear for all to see  
Anyone half sussed can work it out for free;  
When you're gaining entry, opening up a squat,  
If you have to break in, don't go getting caught,  
'Cos landlords, law courts, councils and the 'filth'  
Ain't no good to no-one, excepting them with wealth,  
And they've got their name on the deed  
And that's all they really need  
But to protect their racketeer Karma  
They've got this extra character armour  
Its that . . .



Squatters brighten up the environment. (See page 234 for location and credits.)







Sketty, Swansea 1975 – Western Mail Cardiff



Battersea 1977 – Andrew Wiard/ Report



Battersea 1977 – Andrew Wiard/ Report



Westminster 1974 – Sport & General

### The Ballad of Terminus Road

Early one morning the bailiffs marched in  
To smash up the home of the Family Flynn  
Policemen all round them, their grim faces showed  
Their heartless intentions at Terminus Road.

But with help from their friends and from strong barricades,  
And with flour, jam and water the siege plans were laid  
With banners and megaphones the bailiffs to goad  
The squatters were ready at Terminus Road.

Surprised by resistance, the bailiffs sent in  
A young council workman to tear down Fort Flynn  
But his heart wasn't in it, and flour they threwed  
He was all doubts and dirt at Terminus Road.

The bailiffs drew back to discuss their next move  
Determined the FALSE RIGHTS OF PROPERTY to prove  
Then sneaked round the back for the next episode  
Of the fight for possession of Terminus Road.



Brighton 1974 – Syndication International

Now a villainous bailiff tries to tear down the place  
Thicket and dark, a cruel smirk on his face  
He hammered on coldly, eyes glazed like a toad  
Closing his mind off at Terminus Road.

Muck poured down upon him, the barricade's strong:  
Two women came close to him and tell him he's wrong  
They get in his way and his iron will corrode  
For he'd have to smash them to smash Terminus Road.

Retreating once more they returned to the front,  
It was Dave on the door who next bore the brunt  
The bailiff drew in, Dave's coat opened and showed  
He was chained to the door of Terminus Road!

And as squat supporters closed in all around  
The bailiffs no longer could stand to their ground  
The attempt at eviction had been overthrown  
They were forced to retreat along Terminus Road.



Camden 1974 – Hampstead & Highgate Express

Left: How to get in when your front door is barricaded.



Brixton 1973 – Bob Bray/Time Out



Notting Hill 1976 – The Times



Elephant & Castle 1972 – Martin Slavín



Battersea 1977 – Mike Goldwater



Herne Hill 1973 – Peter Harrap/ Reprt

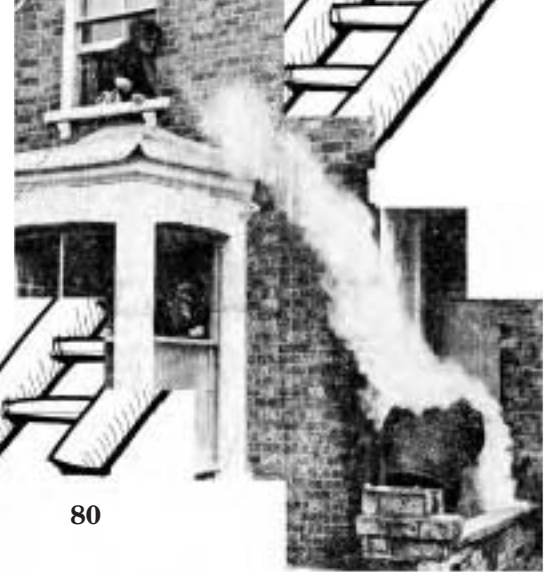


Battersea 1977 – Mike Wigg

When all other tactics fail – resisting the bailiffs.  
Barricades were seldom effective on their own but  
have been an essential part of many campaigns



Camden 1976 – Julian Stapleton/Time Out



Swindon 1974 – Western Daily Press Bristol



Brixton 1973 – Bob Bray/Time Out

(tune: 'Grand Old Duke of York')  
Oh! The Labour GLC,  
They have 10,000 slums,  
They knock the floors and windows out  
To keep out all the bums  
But while we're in, we're in,  
And while they're out, they're out,  
And if they try to get inside,  
We'll kick the bastards out!



Battersea 1978 – William Wise



Glastonbury 1973 – Bristol United Press



# A whole new ball game

## Chapter 7

Winning concessions and learning to live with the new law

*‘Remember – trying to stop squatting is like stamping on a greasy golfball.’  
(All Lambeth Squatters 1974.)*

By 1976 the squatting movement was under sustained attack. Even large evictions had ceased to be newsworthy and there were countless unpublicised evictions of individual squats. In addition, most squatters left voluntarily without resistance. For instance, in the London Borough of Haringey at this time, the average life of a squat was three to four months<sup>1</sup> – an average common to most areas outside inner London. In many rural areas, where support networks were less well developed, squatting was virtually wiped out.

On the other hand, squatters were fighting back and the movement had certainly not been destroyed. Local campaigns, particularly in central London, had achieved significant victories and long and patient campaigning had persuaded some councils to soften their hard-line approach. Camden Council, for instance, was prepared to leave squatters in short-life property ‘providing they are not a nuisance to their neighbours and are not preventing the Council [from] housing people off the waiting list’. Camden still took ‘immediate legal action to get rid of squatters in anything but its short-life properties’. It still gutted empty properties to prevent squatting and it rarely offered rehousing to people it evicted. But one important step forward had been made. As a press statement proudly proclaimed on 19 March 1975: ‘Camden takes the view that short-life houses are better in use than left empty.’

### The Lambeth fightback

Another Labour-controlled Borough – Lambeth – was less ‘enlightened’, and it was here that the major squatting struggles were now fought. The number of squatted Council properties in the borough had risen from 333 at the end of 1974, to 524 by April 1976. They were scattered but many were concentrated in Victorian terraces around

Brixton. Streets like St Agnes Place and Villa Road were given new life by their squatter occupants. Squatters first moved in to St Agnes Place in late 1974, some of its houses having been empty for 14 years. By April 1976, 65 people were squatting there. Villa Road provided homes for another 200 people and the total number of squatters in Lambeth, including licensees and squatters in GLC and private property, had topped 5,000.

In April 1976, Lambeth Council announced a five-point plan of attack:

- Immediate eviction for single squatters.
- Power supply cut-offs to squatted premises.
- More houses to be ‘sealed up’ or ‘made uninhabitable’ to deter squatters.
- Council-funded groups to have their grants cut if they tolerated squatting.
- The use of private investigators to help deal with squatters.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the crackdown on squatters involved the demolition of houses long before sites were actually required. In particular, Villa Road and St Agnes Place were due to be pulled down for two open spaces. Although the Council readily admitted that it would not have enough money to complete either scheme for five years, it insisted it wanted to demolish the houses to get rid of the squatters as quickly as possible.

By December 1976 almost 100 people were squatting in St Agnes Place and, anxious to ensure this number did not increase, the Council gutted a number of houses immediately the tenants moved out. On 10 December, it expected to do the same to No 85 without too much difficulty. The tenant, 78-year-old Ruby Thompson who had lived there for 30 years was leaving, but as she went out squatters entered the house from the rear and occupied the two top floors, while workers wrecked her ground floor flat. (See p 188 for a detailed description of this incident). (The workers were non-union

because UCATT, the building workers union, had instructed its members to black work involving the gutting of good homes.) The press had been alerted to the event and lambasted the Council. The *Evening Standard* headlined its story ‘Council “vandals” are defied by squatters’<sup>3</sup>, and the *Sunday Times* later ran an editorial under a similar headline.<sup>4</sup>

Councils were being urged to cut spending, and yet here was a council deliberately wrecking perfectly good homes for no reason other than a vendetta against squatters. Council-bashing in the press, particularly of Labour councils, became a suitable alternative to squatter-bashing, at least for a while. There was strong opposition within the Labour Group of the Labour-controlled Council for the anti-squatting measures policy. Norwood councillor Ted Knight (later to become the Leader of the new left-dominated Labour administration in 1978) was quoted as saying:

‘The Council’s policies are bankrupt. They talk to the waiting list and say it is because of squatters. They talk to the homeless and say it is because of the waiting list. And yet we still have vast quantities of empty property.’<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the administrative resources needed to implement the policy were not available and, although some unlucky squatters suffered, squatting continued largely unabated in Lambeth. Any reduction in their number was due to the Council carrying out its redevelopment programme rather than to its punitive policy. The policy finally foundered when the Council underestimated the strength of the opposition to it and overplayed its hand at St Agnes Place.

On 19 January 1977, the occupants of St Agnes Place were awakened by the sound of a huge crane rigged up with a demolition ball moving into position outside. The street was closed off by police coaches parked across the road and 200



Union Place Collective

police officers were present ‘to prevent trouble.’ Squatters had proved so adept at repairing even the most badly gutted houses that this time the Council had resolved to make its gutting effective. Again and again the demolition ball swung and smashed into the roofs and upper floors of the empty houses in St Agnes Place. Lambeth Council had spent £13,600 to hire the demolition contractors to do work which its own unionised employees refused to do. The squatters, with the help of Lambeth Community Law Centre, hurriedly and successfully applied for an injunction to halt the demolition – but not before 16 houses had been wrecked, 10 irretrievably.

The outcry which this affair caused brought an end to the Council’s most rabidly anti-squatting policies. On 25 January the Labour Group voted to think again about the future of St Agnes Place and later it agreed to allow the squatters to remain until the park could be laid out. Many councillors were angered by the deceit that had surrounded sending in demolition contractors as the decision had been kept secret from all but a handful of high-ranking officers and councillors. Even the police were said to have been misled when asked to attend. They were told to come to assist in an eviction and the officer in charge of the operation was later quoted as saying that he hoped never again to be involved in anything similar.

The fight for St Agnes Place was a remarkable one. At times official attitudes were completely at odds with the needs of local people. For example, Councillor Carey, leader of the Conservative Group, had seconded the proposal to demolish St Agnes Place at a Planning Committee meeting with the memorable suggestion that there were already too many people living in Lambeth and ‘to make sure that the extra population doesn’t stay, we should demolish houses that encourage them to do so.’<sup>6</sup>

In the aftermath of the St Agnes Place affair, the entire ‘get tough on squatting’ steamroller ground to a halt, not only in Lambeth, but elsewhere. The continuing presence of squatters in St Agnes Place and in Villa Road after a similar confrontation (Chapter 12), constituted a victory for all squatters. The outcome of these struggles, moreover, comprised a victory for the homeless in Lambeth, because it prevented the loss of housing that the original plans entailed. The role of

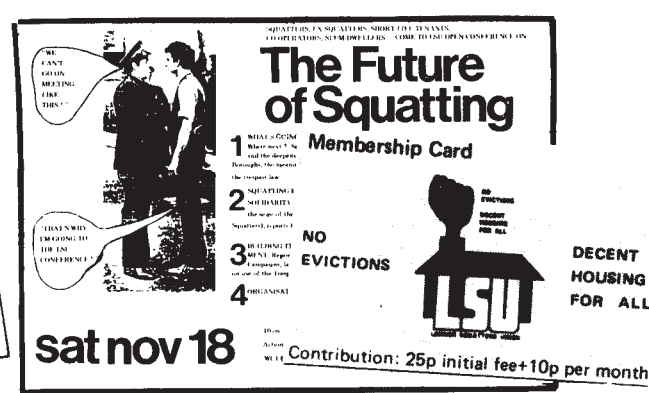
*The ultimate in wrecking. Hired contractors move in to St Agnes Place under police escort, January 1977.*







The London Squatters Union is set up in 1977 to help organisation in the light of the new anti-squatting laws.



### SQUATTING CHARTER

The Squatting Charter is the basis of membership of the London Squatters Union. It states the principles its members fight for in activity among squatters, tenants and trade unions.

- We stand for decent housing for all as a right.** We occupy empty houses not other people's homes. We oppose all homelessness whether caused by councils or private landlords. The councils' waiting lists are an excuse NOT to house people; they are used to divide up the homeless and badly housed and justify homelessness while thousands of houses lie empty.
- We are opposed to any discrimination over the right to housing** on the grounds of family, status, race, sex, age, origin or being an ex-squatter. We are not opposed to a person choosing to live with other similarly motivated people, and would support houses or groups such as black people, gays and women.
- We are against squatting houses where new occupiers are genuinely in the process of moving in,** or the houses are definitely about to have improvement work carried out, but houses left empty for an unreasonable time SHOULD be occupied.
- No evictions of squatters or tenants.** We are against evictions by landlords or councils acting independently or through the courts which make people homeless or force them into housing without their agreement. Any offers of rehousing must take into account the needs and wishes of the occupiers such as the type, location and state of repair of the house and their desire to live together as a group or community.
- We stand for real community control of development plans.** All plans should be submitted to meetings or conferences of tenant, trade union, squatting and community organisations so that human social needs are put before the pressures of the property market and financiers. We are opposed to removing people from development areas without such plans and contracts being signed and published.
- Where disputes arise over the use of any accommodation we support the setting up of local enquiries by tenants, squatters and community groups to resolve the matter and ensure everybody concerned is housed.**
- We are opposed to vandalism or gutting of houses whether by councils, landlords or individuals.** We are also opposed to the stripping of fittings and appliances from habitable houses.
- We fight for the right of squatters to a supply for gas, electricity, water and all other services without discrimination on the same basis as other occupiers.** We are strongly opposed to the use of cut-offs as a way of making houses uninhabitable.
- We are totally opposed to any criminal trespass law and will support and organise action against any attempts to use it** — on squatters, workers, tenants, students or anyone.
- We support all tenants, community and other groups in struggles against evictions and homelessness, and for the provision of more and better housing.**

### The London Squatters Union

It was against this background that some squatters attempted in 1977, yet again, to form a more co-ordinated organisation to counter the opposition they were now facing. A squatters' conference arranged mainly by ASS and attended by 150 people, was held in May 1977 to discuss the way forward. Its main purpose was to try to set up a more representative body than the Squatters Action Council which, for all its achievements, had failed to bring together more than a small number of squatters and which could offer little to isolated and individual squats away from the main areas of squatting activity.

Two conflicting methods of organization were suggested in discussions leading up to the conference. One, advocated principally by the majority of the ASS collective, was an informally constituted federation of local groups. The other, backed by many individuals involved with SAC, was a more structured and centralised 'union' with membership cards and formalised aims and objectives. The London Squatters Union (LSU) which was closer to the latter form of organisation eventually emerged in July 1977 from the long series of follow-up meetings that were held in the months after the conference. Membership was open to all squatters, ex-squatters and licensees for a cost of 25p and 10p per month, and the Squatters Charter, a statement of the Union's aims combined with a code of behaviour for squatters, was adopted as the Union's policy.

### Opposing the Criminal Trespass Law

A dark cloud had hung over the squatting movement since 1974 when the Law Commission published its proposal to make all forms of trespass, and consequently squatting, illegal. All the events described above since that date were affected by the prospect of the new law. The squatting movement's response had been, perhaps uncharacteristically, swift. At an All London Squatters meeting in 1974 it was decided to set up a campaign to fight the proposals and the Campaign Against a Criminal Trespass Law (CACTL) was born.

CACTL's beginnings were humble. A leaflet was produced and circulated to a variety of organisations and regular meetings gradually started to be held. CACTL's first task was to spread information about the proposals which had been poorly publicised. Apart from a few active squatters, not many

people knew about the new law or understood the breadth of its scope. The importance of spreading information about the draconian proposals of the Law Commission was quickly recognised by many people both within and outside the squatting movement, and CACTL grew very quickly. Whereas none of the London-wide squatting organisations — ALS, SAC and LSU — were ever able to build any extensive links with organisations outside the housing field, CACTL was remarkably successful in obtaining support from the labour movement and students (see pictures on pp 156-7).

CACTL's success lay in the fact that the proposed Criminal Trespass Law posed a serious threat to workers and students occupying their places of work. Indeed CACTL argued that the real purpose of the legislation was not to wipe out squatting but to stop occupations of factories. The fact that politicians rooting for the new law denied that it would affect workers only served to emphasise people's fears. By the end of 1975, CACTL was operating out of rent free offices in West London and had two full-time workers who were paid a small wage. CACTL began to receive invitations to send speakers to trades councils, trade union branches and student unions. It soon became clear that in addition to its primary role of building opposition to the Trespass Law proposals, CACTL was playing a vital role in forging links between the squatting movement which had been largely discredited in the media, and the wider political movement. A measure of CACTL's support can be seen by the fact that in 1976 it had received support from 36 trades councils, 85 trade union branches, 51 student unions and many other organisations.

In its primary aim, CACTL was partly successful. The initial plan to outlaw trespass entirely was greatly watered down when the Law Commission's final proposals were published in 1976. These were to become Part Two of the Criminal Law Act 1977 passed in the summer of that year, and brought into effect on 1 December 1977. Five new offences relating to squatting and trespass were created. Specific forms of squatting which related to a minority of squatters (eg squatting on embassy property, squatting in houses that the owner is planning to live in, etc.) were made criminal offences. It also became legal to evict squatters when they were not in the squat (eg they were at work or shopping) and it was made an offence to resist bailiffs once the owners had obtained a possession order (see p 161 for a detailed outline of the

new law). However, squatting had survived the legal onslaught and had not been made into a criminal offence.

Only eight days after the Act came into force, Alan Beddoe was charged, and later convicted of, resisting a bailiff contrary to Section 10 of the Act at an eviction in Battersea, South London. But in its final form, the new Act turned out to be less of a threat to the squatting movement than might have been expected from a Parliament which regarded squatting as a law and order problem rather than as a symptom of housing shortage. Nevertheless, about 25 people were arrested under its provisions in the first two years of its operation, almost exclusively for 'obstructing or resisting a bailiff.'

While the new law was certainly a set-back and did make squatting more difficult, it did not make it illegal. Perhaps its most significant initial effect was to curb the number of new squats. Unsure of the precise legal position and, perhaps under the misapprehension that it was now illegal to squat (a belief, ironically, reinforced by the propaganda of CACTL), many potential squatters were put off. Indeed, in the summer of 1978, ASS felt it necessary to mount a campaign with the slogan 'Squatting is still legal'.

CACTL continued operating with two full time workers until the summer of 1979, having widened its brief by opposing other legislation affecting the rights of workers to take direct action: strikes, picketing, the closed shop and so on. In this latter period, to some extent CACTL lost touch with the squatting movement which was largely in disarray. CACTL's eventual demise came not through lack of support, or even of funds, but as a product of its success. The TUC, anxious that an independent non-party organisation had built up so much support within the labour movement, began to oppose its progress and in mid-1979 CACTL decided to cease to run an office.

### Some 'solutions'

Ever since squatting re-emerged in 1969, property owners had called for tougher legal sanctions, and many pinned their hopes on the new Criminal Law Act. Yet it became clear well before the law was passed that it would not end squatting. Despite concerted opposition, squatting continued through 1977 to 1979, not on the same scale as during the previous years but sufficient to be seen as a threat by property owners. The experience of almost a







Chris Davies/Report



Chris Davies/Report



Tony Sleep



Chris Davies/Time Out



Chris Davies/Time Out

Under pressure from squatting, the Greater London Council devises new methods of using its 'hard-to-let' flats and its derelict houses. Above: people queue all night for a flat. Below: GLC leader Horace Cutler gleefully announces the lucky winners of a chance to 'home-stead' a derelict property to an audience of luckless homeless people clearly less amused by the scheme.

decade meant that squatting activists were frequently capable of mounting campaigns which led to defeat for councils or, at least, meant that owners had to use increasing force to achieve their aims. Massive police presence at evictions became commonplace and frequently this cast the owner in a poor light. A stalemate had been reached and as licensed squatting had proved to be insufficient to cope, there was a need to look for other 'solutions'. Some councils began to explore ways of making their housing systems more flexible and providing more accommodation particularly for single people who were making up an increasing proportion of squatters. In a similar vein, central government encouraged the growth of the co-operative housing movement.

### Hard-to-let

One of the more ironic responses to squatting was initiated by the GLC. When it evicted the Hornsey Rise squatters in early 1976, it told them there were no empty properties available to give them on licence. The occupants of the 1,172 known unofficially occupied GLC dwellings were told the same thing. Yet a new lettings scheme had just been started for which there appeared to be no lack of available empty properties. This was the 'difficult-to-let' scheme, whereby dwellings which applicants on the waiting list had consistently turned down are leased to single people and childless couples on a first-come, first-served or ballot basis. When the scheme was inaugurated in December 1975 by the release of 101 homes in Southwark, over 600 people turned out to queue for them, many waiting all night. The next month, a further 120 dwellings in Tower Hamlets were put on offer and the scheme mushroomed. Suddenly there seemed to be no shortage of empty, unwanted accommodation. The arbitrary allocation system too was not what might have been expected from a Council which had attacked squatting so consistently, precisely because squatters did not operate any priorities based on housing need.

### Amnesty

While they alleviated the plight of people who might otherwise have been forced to squat and although they undoubtedly were a response to squatting, the difficult-to-let schemes were not aimed specifically at squatters. It was not until 1977 that the Conservative administration at the GLC elected

the previous May directly confronted the issue of squatting. In October, in a sensational about-turn, it suddenly offered to legitimise the occupancy of every squatter in GLC premises.

The number of GLC squatters had reached an all-time high. The GLC estimated there were 1,438 of its properties occupied by squatters but it turned as out to be over 1,850; the difference between the two figures being some 400 squats that the GLC did not find in its survey.<sup>9</sup> The Conservative leadership realised it would be impossible to evict the 7,000 people living in these squats and decided instead to offer tenancies in GLC properties to every squatter living in its dwellings on 25 October, provided they registered within a month. After that, it proposed to use 'all measures which the law allows' against future squatters or those who did not register. This was seen as 'a positive step to end the practice of squatting in Council accommodation and to facilitate a *restoration of law and order*'. It was not then a policy rooted in any change of attitude towards squatters, but a means of 'dealing on a *realistic basis* with those already in unauthorised occupation' It would provide the 'first step' in 'an attack on the *problem of squatting*'.<sup>10</sup> (Author's emphasis throughout).



advert in Time Out

The Conservatives remained committed to their election pledge to end squatting in GLC property and the decision to regularise the position of people already squatting was taken for pragmatic reasons. There was no recognition of the fact that squatters take over houses because of housing need. By making concessions to squatters already in its property, the GLC was hoping to stop all future squatting. It adopted imaginative and flexible policies at this stage merely to facilitate implementing totally rigid and reactionary policies at a later date. Its attitude was contradictory; if people squatting in GLC dwellings on 25 October 1977 deserved legitimate tenancies, then what was likely to be so

different about squatters who moved in after that date?

In one sense, by moving squatters into poor condition flats which really needed to be modernised, the GLC were institutionalising bad housing. Thus many squatters were rightly suspicious of the GLC's motives as *Squatters News No 7* commented: 'Although the GLC is accepting responsibility for more people, it is also *officially* increasing the pool of people living in the poor conditions dictated by the housing cuts.' Housing conditions acceptable to squatters were not necessarily adequate if rent had to be paid for unfit housing.

Squatters in 1,300 properties responded to the GLC offer, comprising 1,700 households which contained 5,000 people or about 70 per cent of those eligible. However, the extent of squatting in GLC dwellings remained considerable after the amnesty. There were 550 squats whose residents did not register or who had moved in after the amnesty.

Some squatters were given tenancies or licences to properties they were occupying, but the majority eventually received offers of rehousing in other GLC homes. According to figures released by the GLC for the first 300 such offers, 90 per cent were accepted. Most of the refusals were in the GLC's West London District where squatters were offered rehousing as far away as Slough and Borehamwood. Since the GLC made only one rehousing offer per household, unpopular ones like those presented the recipients with difficult choices. In general, though, it seemed that the GLC tried to be reasonable. For example, it offered 150 Bengali families squatting in Pelham Buildings in the East End rehousing in the same area which many of them were afraid to leave because of racist intimidation and violence in other parts of East London. The GLC also allowed several squatter communities to remain in their homes as housing co-operatives.

Needless to say squatting did not cease in GLC property following the amnesty and the Conservatives carried out their promised crackdown. An anti-squatting squad was established consisting of 'one man and four heavies', according to Housing Policy Chairperson George Tremlett. On discovering squatters in a property, a visit was made and if the squatters did not agree to leave immediately, possession orders were sought from the courts. Between March 1978 and July 1979, 787 possession orders were obtained, there were 557 evictions and 389 'voluntary' vacations. At a press conference in July 1979 Tremlett declared proudly, but perhaps not



altogether accurately, ‘squatting is contained’. Yet despite the imperfections of the amnesty and the subsequent crackdown, the squatting movement had forced a remarkable concession out of a previously implacable opponent. One important factor behind these concessions was the change in attitude of certain influential housing officers. Their experience, day by day, court by court, had convinced them that there were too many organised squatters in GLC property for it to be possible to evict them all. A conciliatory approach was also made easier because a DOE-commissioned survey of squatters, finally published in the previous summer (after a long delay and numerous leaks), provided incontrovertible evidence that ‘The majority of people have squatted because of shortage of accommodation and not because they are opposed to law and order or they wish to live rent-free.’<sup>11</sup>

In addition the media was presenting a more positive picture of squatting. During the year, a TV documentary ‘Goodbye Longfellow Road’, had shown squatters in a favourable light and a number of newspapers carried less hostile articles (most notably the *Evening Standard* under the editorship of Simon Jenkins). Even the *Daily Telegraph* carried a pro-squatting feature.<sup>12</sup>

This sudden apparent conversion of the media was partly a product of prevailing economic circumstances. Public expenditure was still being cut and there was a search for cheap solutions to social problems. Squatting is one of the various movements which embrace a belief in, or concern with, the principles of self-help. While for most the attraction of self-help is philosophical or political – people solving problems collectively by mutual aid – the attraction for both local and central government lies in its cheapness.<sup>13</sup>

The wide-ranging possibilities of self-help in housing, which squatters helped to demonstrate, were being examined with growing enthusiasm during 1977. Consequently, many of the properties released by rehousing squatters during the amnesty were used for the GLC’s new ‘homesteading’ scheme. People bought derelict houses on a normal mortgage basis but had the first three years interest waived and were supposed to spend the money saved on restoring the property. The high price of even derelict houses in London prevented many people from taking part in the scheme, but the fact that 15,000 people responded when it was first advertised showed the strong demand for some form of self-build.



David Hoffman

### Co-ops

A more positive product of the growing interest in self-help solutions in housing was the co-operative movement and many squatters formed co-ops in the hope of securing permanent accommodation as communities. Co-operative organisational forms were not new to squatters, having been used by both licensed and unlicensed groups since 1969. Indeed the extensive experience of short-life housing groups in the field of tenant self-management had provided some of the evidence that encouraged wider government interest in increased ‘dweller control’ and participation. For instance. Mike Kinghan (author of the DOE sponsored survey on squatting), used the example of family squatting associations ‘to demonstrate that the devolution of housing management need not necessarily result in the disasters forecast by the pessimists.’<sup>14</sup> So when the 1974 Housing Act made Housing Association Grants accessible to housing co-ops, interest among squatters and short-life groups in formal co-operative structures began to grow rapidly.

The notion of squatters forming housing co-operatives was pioneered by the Committee for the Faceless Homeless which squatted Sumner House in Tower Hamlets in August 1974. The 50 families who moved into the flats quickly formed the Sumner House Co-op. They never succeeded in their original aim of obtaining permission to take over and rehabilitate Sumner House as they were evicted in 1976 but a group of people connected with that squat finally formed a bona fide housing co-op, the Poplar West Housing Co-operative. Poplar West has since been wound up by the Housing Corporation for alleged irregularities in the handling of money, but its role as a pioneer in the field of co-ops for squatters was a vital one.

### Different fates for squatting communities.

*Above: Squatters in several streets in East London successfully make the transition to a housing co-op with permanent tenure and government funding. Above right and far right: A wake is held on the night before eviction of squatters in Tolmers Square. Everyone is rehoused by Camden Council after a bitter campaign but the community is broken up, 1979. Far right: Villa Road squatters commemorate the loss of one side of the street but battle on to stay permanently in the remaining houses (p 149).*

During 1975, the idea was picked up by a number of squatter communities. Unsuccessful efforts were made to form a co-operative at Cornwall Terrace and elsewhere but at Seymour Buildings in Westminster which was squatted in 1975 the first successful transition from squat to co-op was made (see Chapter 13 for details).

The success of the Seymour Co-op, which took two years of hard work, gave encouragement to licensed groups, many of which were already looking into the possibility of forming co-ops as a means of transferring the self-management they had tried out in short-life property to a permanent setting. Lewisham Family Squatting Association, Islington Community Housing (an offshoot of SCH) and other short-life groups had already formed housing co-ops by the end of 1977, and there were at least eight co-ops established from short-life housing groups by mid-1978.<sup>15</sup>

Squatters, too, showed interest in the events at Seymour Buildings. The GLC amnesty produced a series of proposals from squatter communities for the establishment of co-ops, and at the beginning of 1978 the first of these was agreed in principle at Bishops Way, Hackney. Numerous other schemes have emerged among ex-GLC squatters and, while



Nick Waters



Nick Waters

not all of them have been successful, a considerable number have taken over management of their homes. Indeed of 161 housing co-ops and interested groups listed in the Co-operative Housing Agency’s 1978 Directory, 11 had been formed by squatters and 13 had a substantial input from squatters or ex-squatters.

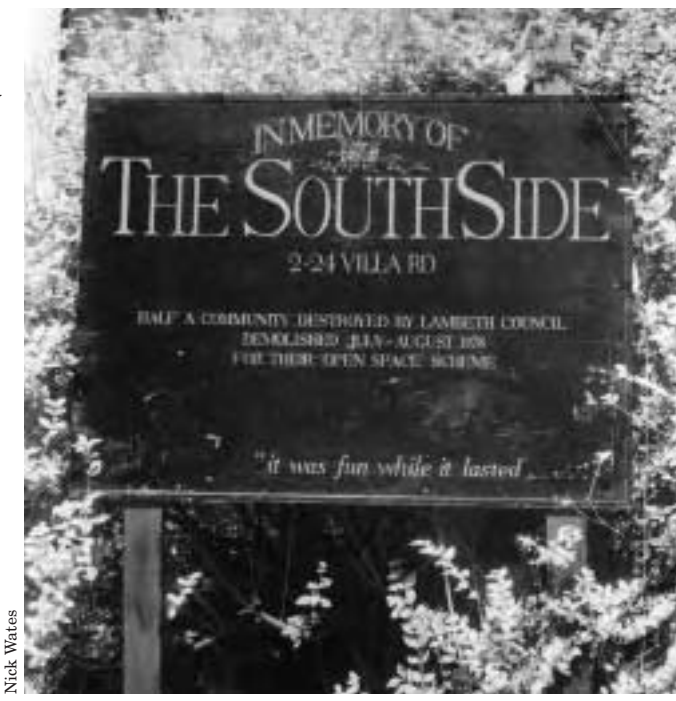
Self-help in housing was getting increased institutional support but the success of co-ops did not mean that the *principle* of self-managed communities was accepted by councils. Each co-op had to be fought for and those that succeeded did so mainly because at a time of cut-backs, they presented cheap alternatives to councils’ plans. For instance an attempt to establish a co-op by a community of squatters in Bristol Gardens, West London failed when the GLC found it could make more money by selling the houses.

Ironically, there was sometimes more chance of success in Tory areas than Labour ones; the Tory councils were happy with anything which relieved them of their housing responsibilities, whereas Labour councils tended to stick dogmatically to their plans on the grounds that it was in the best interests of people on their waiting lists. For example, a thriving community of squatters and

licensees in Winchester Road and Winchester Mews in Labour-controlled Camden met with little success. By 1977, over 70 people were squatting there, many of whom had put considerable energy into renovating the derelict buildings (pl78). The community spawned several craft workshops, youth organisations and a wholefood cafe employing school leavers from the local youth club. A market sprang up on a vacant site and was used by people from all over the borough. Festivals were regularly organised. Yet Camden remained intent on its redevelopment plans, describing the site in its 1977 planning report, *A Plan for Camden*, as ‘largely vacant, temporary’.

As with other squatting communities no effort was made to understand its positive qualities, and in 1979 the remaining squatters were evicted. The houses in Winchester Road were converted back into family units, but after demolishing the Mews, plans for building new housing fell through. The site remained derelict and the Council started negotiations with hotel developers.

The notion of the squatting community was carried to its ultimate conclusion in 1977 when 120 squatters in Freston Road, West London, occupying GLC property carried out an imaginative stunt.



Nick Waters





International Times Vol 4 No 4

They made a unilateral declaration of independence from Great Britain and declared a 'Free Independent Republic of Frestonia'. Full membership of 11 the United Nations and the EEC was applied for, and a telegram sent to the Queen.

All the squatters in Freston Road had been offered alternative accommodation under the GLC amnesty but the offers were scattered and meant leaving a locality in which many of them worked and had developed close ties. They wanted to be rehoused in the neighbourhood together and close by. The GLC only recognised families as a unit for rehousing, so all inhabitants adopted the surname Bramley, and Frestonia's motto was 'We are all one family'. A full cabinet of ministers was appointed and all those not in the cabinet were made ambassadors. A letter from the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, David Rappaport-Bramley to the Secretary General of the United Nations declared:

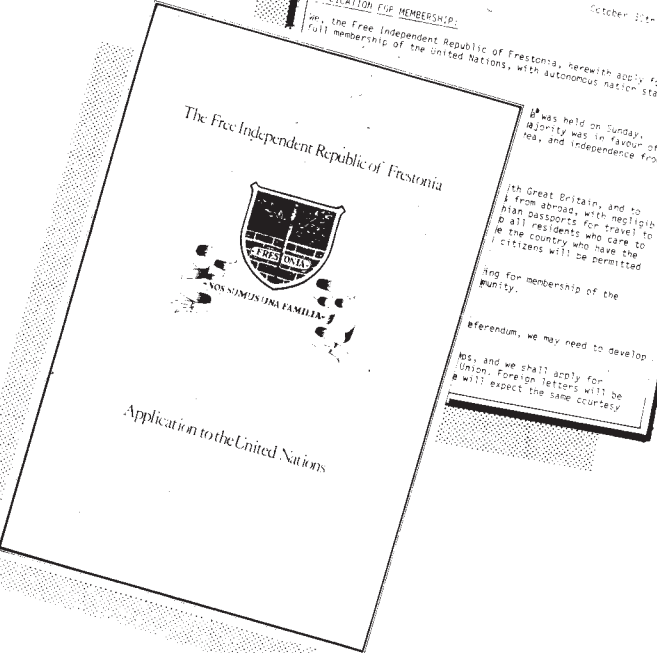
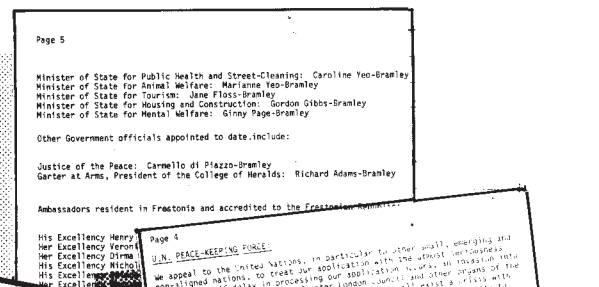
'A Referendum of each inhabitant of Frestonia was held on Sunday, 30 October, 1977, and the overwhelming majority was in favour of self-determination for the people of the area, and independence from the previous rulers, Great Britain.

The area was recently acquired by the Greater London Council, an organ of the British Government, and by its own confession, the area was allowed to deteriorate over the years into a derelict site, with tenants moved out of their homes, the well-established community destroyed, and empty sites of demolished buildings fenced off with corrugated iron and used for dumping rubbish, with half-demolished houses next to people's homes.

Our case is that the GLC and the British Government, through a long history of neglect and mismanagement of Frestonia, have forfeited the right to determine the future of the area.

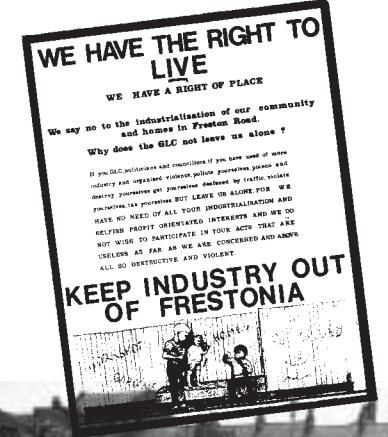
If delay in processing our application occurs, an invasion into Frestonia and eviction by the Greater London Council and other organs of the British Government may occur, in which case there will exist a crisis with international ramifications, and the necessity may arise for Frestonia to require the UN to send a token peacekeeping force. These are developments which we must at all costs avoid.'

The United Nations did not reply. But the media loved it, eagerly taking photographs of the four year old Minister of State in his pushchair and for weeks the street was full of TV crews from all



Tony Sleep

Frestonia in West London where squatters declare independence. Below left: Frestonia's first birthday. Below: One of three communal gardens created out of wasteland. Below right: Christmas party, 1979.



Tony Sleep



Tony Sleep



Tony Sleep



Tony Sleep



over the world.

At first the GLC insisted it would continue its plans for demolishing the houses and developing the site for industry. Some of the squatters accepted their amnesty offers but some returned to Frestonia when they found their new homes to be too isolated and distant. A housing co-op was formed, local opinion was mobilised against the plans, and the support of several local organisations was obtained. Bowing to this pressure and eager to save money, two years later the GLC agreed to hand over the site to the Notting Hill Housing Trust which planned to build new houses and craft workshops. At the time of writing it appears that the squatters will be able to stay in the new scheme but that their plan for preserving most of the houses and retaining the communal gardens have been ignored.

Co-ops were not always a success and many squatters who became involved in them were critical of the bureaucratic controls and restrictions imposed on them by the Housing Corporation through which funds for co-ops are channelled. Despite being the most democratic form of public housing, the dependency on public funds of most co-ops limits the amount of control that individual members have over their housing. These bureaucratic barriers and the delays they inevitably created often left many ex-squatters disillusioned about co-ops.

#### Other concessions

Other mildly concessionary policies on homelessness were also implemented. The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act came into force on 1 December 1977, the same day as the Criminal Law Act. This placed an obligation on councils to provide housing for certain groups of homeless people deemed at risk – basically people with children, pensioners, the handicapped, the sick and pregnant women. The Act has not lived up to the high expectations of its supporters mainly because of loopholes (like the Calderdale Clause, p 63) and because many groups of people, including the single and childless couples are not helped by it. Nevertheless, the fact that it came into force simultaneously with the new law on squatting showed that the state's approach towards the homeless was ambivalent.

A few months earlier, councils had been urged by central government to improve their use of empty property. A circular, sent out in July 1977 to councils, stated:

'Authorities should aim to develop a constructive and close working relationship with the housing association movement and responsible voluntary organisations in a position to use short-life property to alleviate the housing needs of special groups in their area. Local authorities should consider the possibility of licensing responsible groups who apply to occupy empty property which cannot be brought into use in any other way, and who otherwise might feel driven to unlawful squatting.'<sup>16</sup>

The last sentence shows that squatting provided the impetus for this move.

The formation of agencies specialising in the use of short-life property (such as Shelter's Housing Emergency Office, the Federation of Short-Life Housing Groups, the Self-Help Housing Resource Library and innumerable local organisations) and the introduction of the 'mini-HAG' (Housing Association Grant) whereby finance was available through the Housing Corporation for repairs to short-life dwellings, also facilitated the increased use of empty property.

In Lewisham, for example, where the first licenses were given to a squatting group in 1969, the Council had continued its efforts to use the positive contribution of squatters. Lewisham Family Self-Help Housing Association, as the original Family Squatting Association had been renamed, still provided homes for 79 families in June 1977. The Council had a policy towards unlicensed squatters which, in theory, was the best that might be expected. According to a paper by the Assistant Borough Housing Officer, when unlicensed squatting did occur, 'No action is taken . . . until the properties are required for redevelopment or there is evidence of serious nuisance or annoyance to adjoining residents.'<sup>17</sup> The paper went on to describe how the Council had also offered difficult-to-let properties to single people, couples and sharers, including an entire estate of flats dissected by a major road and several tower blocks from which families had been vacated. Single person new-build schemes were planned too. The paper readily acknowledged that squatting had played a vital role in bringing the Council's attention to the need to provide housing to people other than nuclear families.

#### Yet squatting continues

But such flexible approaches had not become the norm and central government recommendations

were often meaningless at the local level. In Portsmouth for instance, the local squatting group was involved in a long fight against the Council gutting and demolition of houses in the Cumberland Road area *prior* to a public inquiry into its future. Attempts to obtain houses for short-life use met with little success and in an internal memo of 29 November 1977 the City Engineer made the Council's policy clear:

'Properties acquired in this area are acquired for clearance purposes and will not be re-used. They are then rendered unattractive to potential squatters by breaking up the insides, rendered unattractive to small-time thieves by removing valuables such as lead, copper etc which again involves a certain amount of breaking out and steps are also taken to combat rodents etc by sealing sewer connections which again necessitates a certain amount of breaking out'

When this policy failed to deter squatters, the council resorted to demolition instead.

In 1978 the largest police presence ever seen at an eviction smashed down barricades at Huntley Street, one of Britain's best organised squats. The eviction was unnecessary, as it was already known that the squatters had, the day before, won an agreement for rehousing all the squatters.

Five adjoining blocks of flats in Huntley Street were squatted in February 1977 in an initiative by the Squatters Action Council. One block was allocated to women and children from a battered wives hostel, and a ground floor flat was used for meetings and an office first for the Squatters Action Council and later for the London Squatters Union. The 54 flats which had been empty for four years eventually housed 160 people including 30 children. Three days after the occupation, the Area Health Authority, the owner, announced plans to convert the flats for nurses and doctors. But it also intended to abandon a lease on a nearby nurses home and turn down purpose-built flats provided by Camden Council. The squatters and the local community campaigned bitterly against the plans which would have reduced housing and turned a playground into a car park.

After the Authority obtained a possession order at the second attempt in July 1978 the flats were barricaded and round the clock watches maintained. But no barricades and no amount of support for the occupiers could have prevented the eviction when it came. At dawn on 16 August, 650 police armed with riot shields and grappling



London Express



LSU badge

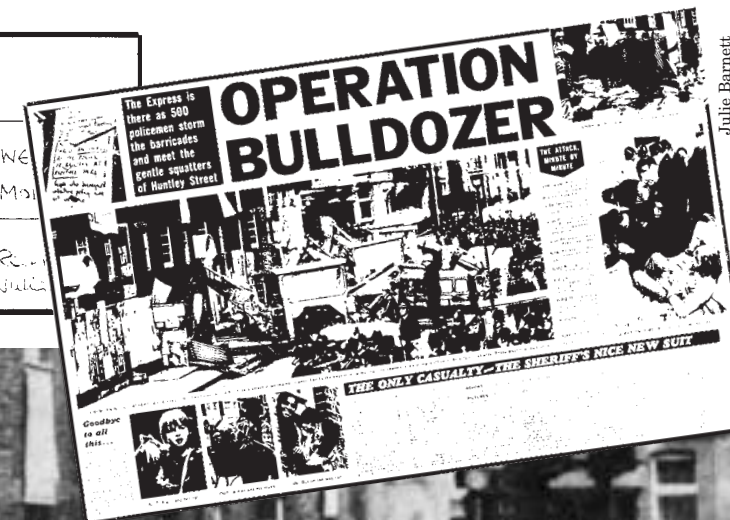
Evening Standard

A paramilitary style eviction ends the Huntley Street squat, 1979.

Middle left: Two police officers known as Nigel and Mary cleverly volunteered to do early morning watch duty at the time of the eviction.

Middle right: Neither newspaper reporter could count. It emerged at the trial that there were 650 police at the eviction.

ROOF ROTA			
TIME	NAME	HOUSE	
2-4	JULIE	10, Howard	NE MS
4-6	Nigel Mary	12P 12P	R JULIE



Julie Barnett









Housing Action's attempts to take this protest action a stage further by occupying an entire block of GLC flats on the Ferry Lane Estate in Tottenham also drew in a wide range of supporters. The flats had been empty for two years while the GLC prepared plans for their sale to private buyers and they stood among some 500 empty GLC dwellings on the same estate. The local tenants association, the Labour MP and the Liberal parliamentary candidate for the area pledged their support. One tenants association in Dulwich sent a telegram addressed to 'The Rightful Occupiers of Ferry Lane Estate'. Even the security guards employed to defend the properties against squatting expressed sympathy (an attitude which was probably important in persuading the police not to intervene when the occupation first occurred).

A similarly wide range of support had been obtained by the Stop the Blitz Campaign when it organised the occupation and repair of over 50 empty houses in three streets in Redbridge at the end of 1978. It was the same area which had been the focus of the famous pitched battles between bailiffs and squatters in 1969. At that time the Council was gutting and demolishing perfectly good houses in a deliberate attempt to force the public inquiry inspector to agree to their demolition to make way for a grandiose central area redevelopment scheme. Nothing changed much. Despite losing the public inquiry in 1970, the Council drew up another plan which was due to go to a public inquiry in 1979. In the meantime it continued to gut and demolish, presumably hoping to do better second time around. To cover up its wanton waste

of resources, the Council consistently lied to the electorate, presented false figures to official surveys about empty property and harassed and blackmailed residents. So eager was it in pursuing its goals that on one occasion council workmen by mistake gutted a privately-owned house and boarded it up, preventing the owner from getting in.<sup>19</sup>

The Stop the Blitz occupation was intended more as a protest against the demolition or gutting prior to a public enquiry than as a squat. Nonetheless, it involved many veteran squatting activists and was described as a '10th birthday celebration' of the contemporary squatting movement.

Neither the Ferry Lane squat or the Stop the Housing Action mounts an occupation of Greater London Council flats in Tottenham left empty for two years awaiting sale, 1979.



Campaigners against 'prior demolition' courageously attempt to stop the bulldozers in Portsmouth 1978 (left) and stage a well-organised protest squat of several streets in Redbridge, 1979 (above and right).



Blitz campaign were very successful. In Redbridge, the Council's increased understanding of the law on squatting and the removal of loopholes which had benefitted squatters in the past led to eviction in three weeks. At Ferry Lane the GLC dithered longer, perhaps unsure of the strength of the opposition. Ultimately a combination of electricity cut-offs, the Conservative general election victory and the fact that none of the activists involved in organising the occupation actually lived in the flats, led to defeat (and the arrest of 15 supporters when police broke up peaceful pickets called in protest against the eviction). The degree of planning and organisation behind such actions, and the number of people involved in them (over 100 in each case) demonstrated a commitment to direct action which augured well for the future.

The Redbridge and Ferry Lane occupations

were also important in publicising the fact that squatting had not been made illegal, and during the latter half of 1979 the decline in the number of people squatting came to an end. Every agency dealing with squatters or would-be squatters reported a renewed activity or heightened interest. Islington Council, in London, reported that the number of squats in its property doubled during 1979 to almost 200 units, though it failed to see how, in scrapping its housing scheme for single sharers, it was partly the author of its own misfortunes.

The Self Help Housing Resource Library reported an increase in squatting outside London, quoting cases of sizeable new campaigns in Cambridge, Bristol, Stoke-on-Trent and Birmingham during the summer of 1979. In London, a number of squats made the news, including the occupation of a large DOE-owned property in Bloomsbury which had

been designed by the famous architect John Nash. The Area Health Authority responsible for the eviction of Huntley Street had a nursing home over-looking Highbury Fields (and empty for five years) squatted by a group who remained in occupation for a number of months without mains gas, water or electric supplies. Even St Paul's Cathedral had its Chancery squatted.

Massive cuts in public spending (p 225) and the end of any government commitment to provide homes for all resulted in the renewed growth in the number of people squatting. Single people, trapped at the bottom of the housing pile, made up a large proportion of the new squatters, though people with children were still being forced to squat despite the Homeless Persons Act. Groups which had been on the verge of collapse were given a fresh impetus by the upsurge. The Advisory Service for





Credits on p 234

1979-80; Squatting continues ...

**WHOOPS! IT'S ALL A MISTAKE**

Wreckers who moved into a small firm in Hackney Road, left behind them a trail of destruction after they systematically ripped the building to bits.

They tore out the telephone, pulled out the electricity fuses, picked up a television and threw it to the ground and broke tables and chairs.

And when they left they boarded up the windows and doors with corrugated iron sheets.

But it was all a dreadful mistake. For the "wreckers" turned out to be Tower Hamlets Council workmen, who were sent to the building at the corner of Dimont Street on an official town hall order to make the place uninhabitable.

What they were not told was that the building is divided into two. The front had been illegally occupied by squatters.

At the back, Moral Brothers Company had been carrying on a sawdust contracting business for which they paid council rates.

For the "wreckers" turned out to be

Owner Mr. Tom Jenkins said: "The problem was the building is split and the council boarded up my place as well."

"They took out anything of value and disconnected the phone and electricity."

"We will be getting our possessions back and hopefully business will soon be back to normal there."

At the time of going to press a Tower Hamlets Council spokesman was unable to explain the council's action.

**It's curtains for squatters!**

By CHRIS GOODALL

It's a new weapon in the arsenal against squatters - a curtain law.

The housing committee wants to appoint someone to put up net curtains in empty council houses to make them less attractive to squatters than they are.

But the idea has come under a bitter attack from the leader of the council's Conservative opposition, Councillor Neil Kerr.

He said: "This sort of nonsense brings local government into disrepute. The council should be concentrating all its efforts on bringing into use standing empty

the hundreds of homes that are currently standing empty - not empty for long periods. It wouldn't need to worry about squatters taking them over."

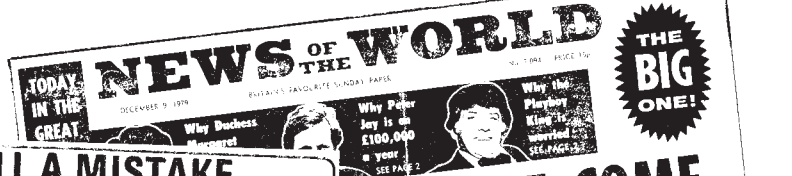
At the last council meeting homes were occupied by squatters. This represents a 50 per cent increase compared with a year ago.

A report to the last meeting of the housing committee revealed that more than 1,000 council houses are currently standing empty.

Housing chairman Councillor Chris Pryce defended the proposal. "It's easy to make cheap political capital out of this. The fact is that putting up net curtains is a cheaper and more effective method of keeping squatters out than boarding up empty houses."

"We have been using net curtains in this way for a long time. It's not a political gimmick. It's a sensible idea. We should undertake that work here or we would also start to look at other ideas."

At the time of going to press a Tower Hamlets Council spokesman was unable to explain the council's action.



Squatters, for example, survived the withdrawal of most of its long-serving collective (who, after up to four years of unpaid advice work, were simply worn out or wanted to spend their time on other things) and continued to function. The London Squatters Union, which had been virtually inactive for a number of months, revived itself at the beginning of 1980, using the Housing Action office three nights a week for advisory and organisational work. The LSU later moved to offices near Trafalgar Square. Other organisations did fold, however. Most local squatting groups, for instance, were moribund by the end of 1979, and the Federation of Short-Life Housing Groups (which at one time could claim almost 30 different short-life and squatting

groups among its members) only met twice during 1979. Others like the Self Help Housing Resource Library, ASS and LSU stumbled on with the efforts of a smaller number of active supporters. Without an influx of energy and activists into such groups, their future seems uncertain - and without the minimal organisational and advisory capacities of such groups, the future of squatting would become even more uncertain.

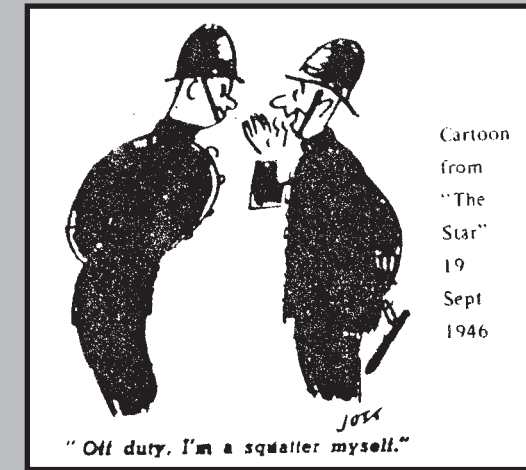
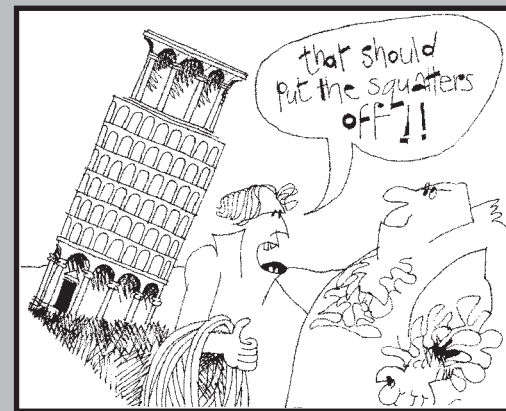
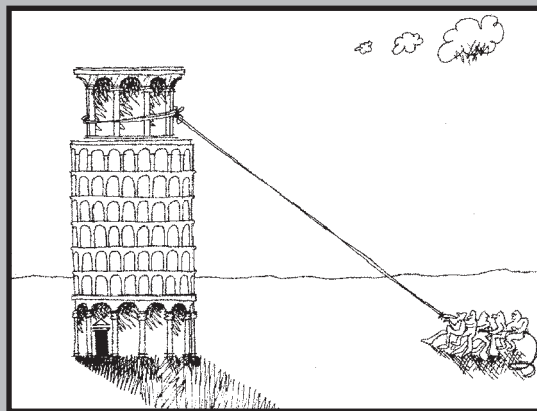
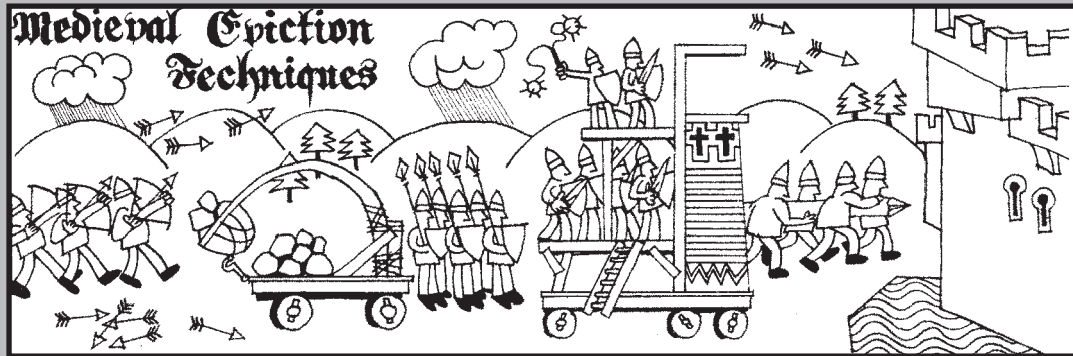
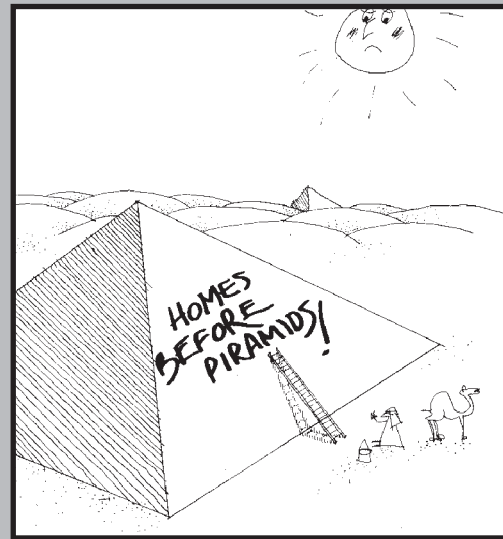
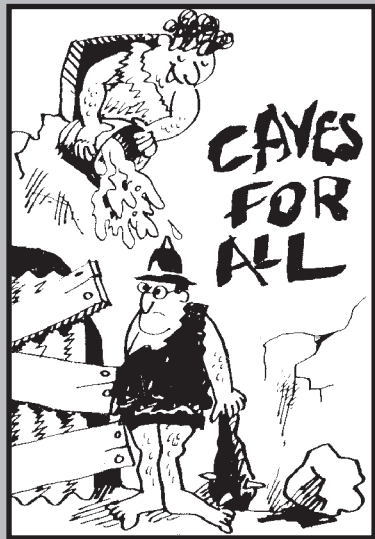
The overall political climate has changed drastically since the seventies, and it is doubtful whether the concessions won by the squatting movement in the past will be readily repeated. Squatters will need to be better organised in future in order to win less. They will need to draw upon much wider

support and develop the links that have begun to be made with other organisations.

Squatting will inevitably continue on an individual level. Isolated squatters without links with any wider movement will continue to take over property in order to solve their immediate housing needs. Projections of the housing situation leave no doubt that the crisis will worsen substantially in the eighties and that homelessness will increase greatly. The number of people needing to squat will rise. Whether squatting will be merely the last resort of desperate individuals, or whether it might also be an organised means for people to secure better housing, depends upon how well squatters can organise as part of wider housing and political movements. •

We are still winning!





# Some history

Squatting in Britain before 1968

**8 The early squatters**  
Six centuries of squatting

**9 The post war squatters**  
What happened when there were no homes for the World War Two heroes



# The early squatters

by Colin Ward

## Chapter 8

Six centuries of squatting



New York Public Library

*Second century Roman amphitheatre at Aries, France, cleverly remodelled for living in during the middle ages. The 'squatters' were evicted in 1830, their dwellings razed and the remaining fabric reconstituted as a ruin.<sup>19</sup>*

Squatting is the oldest mode of tenure in the world, and we are all descended from squatters. This is as true of the Queen with her 176,000 acres as it is of the 54 per cent of householders in Britain who are owner-occupiers. They are all the ultimate recipients of stolen land, for to regard our planet as a commodity offends every conceivable principle of natural rights.

Two centuries ago the philosopher Thomas Spence argued that the ultimate logic of the private possession of land is that the landlord 'can oblige every living creature to remove off his property' (which to the great distress of humanity is

too often put into execution).<sup>1</sup>

Over a century before Spence, Gerrard Winstanley declared that 'the poorest man hath as true a title and just right to the land as the richest man. Winstanley also held the view, widespread amongst radicals of his day, that the Norman Conquest had deprived the people of their land and that with the defeat of Charles I, as ultimate heir of William I, the people had won back the land by right of conquest. He thus argued that the people who worked on the land had a legal title to it as well as a natural right.

Most cultures have the tradition that the land

was once the common property of the people. 'The landlord owns the peasants but the peasants own the land' is a Russian saying from the days when landowners measured their wealth in 'souls'. In England most people mistakenly assume that the pathetic remnants of the common land are in fact common property. This belief can be seen as a survival of ancient popular wisdom. For in legal fact, as the historians of the commons assert, 'All common land is private property. It belongs to someone, whether an individual or a corporation and has done so from time immemorial.' However, they go on to conclude: 'Common rights were not

something specifically granted by a generous landlord, but were the residue of rights that were once more extensive; rights that in all probability antedate the idea of private property in land, and are therefore of vast antiquity.'<sup>2</sup>

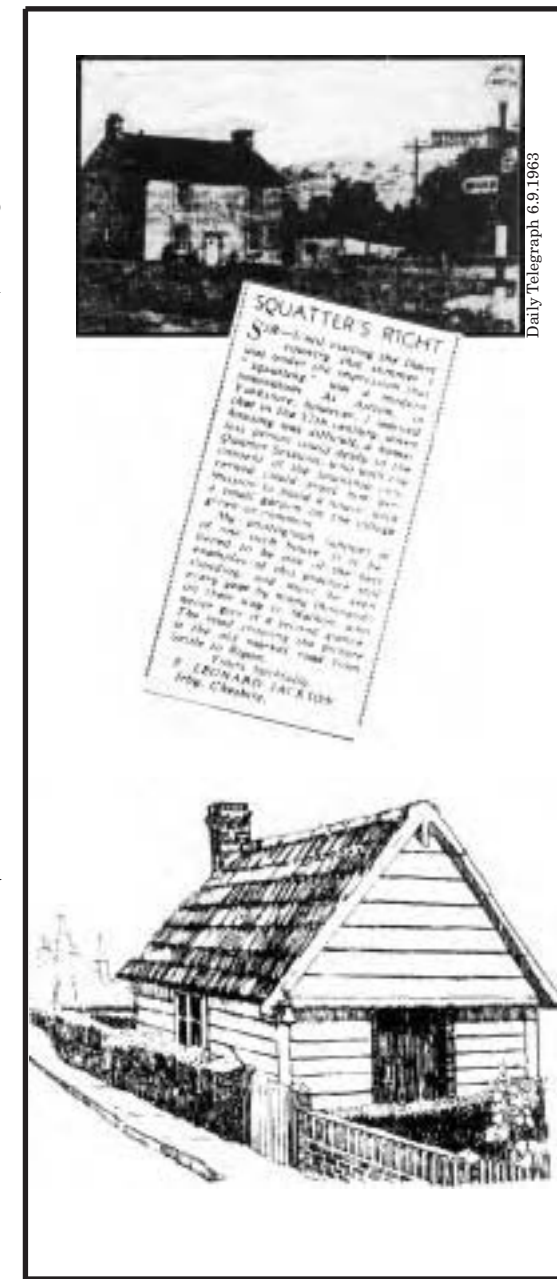
The Forcible Entry Act 1381 was enacted to establish order in land disputes. It forbade forcible entry on any land for any purpose – or so it appeared. It states:

'And also the King defendeth that none from henceforth make any entry into any lands and tenements but in case where entry is given by law and in such case, not with strong hand nor with multitude of people, but only in lawful peaceable and easy manner. And if any man from henceforth do to the contrary, and thereof be duly convicted, he shall be punished by imprisonment.'

In other words, even a squatter who was on land when there was a forcible entry committed could prosecute for forcible entry, affording squatters protection from violent eviction. Technical amendments to the Forcible Entry Acts were made by the Acts of 1391, 1429, 1588 and 1623.

The rights of access to, and use of, common land were absolutely vital to the self-sufficient peasant economy of the 14th century, even though the extent of such land had already been reduced by enclosures. The series of dreadful epidemics known as the Black Death reversed the trend. Mud enclosed arable land reverted to rough pasture and waste, and many holdings whose inhabitants had died or fled were squatted by landless survivors. By the latter half of the 16th century the population of England and Wales had reached the same size as before the Black Death, and there was once more enormous pressure, both from lords of the manor and from poor commoners, to enclose the common land.

A folklore (or common law) of squatting grew up. Both in Britain and in many parts of Europe, it was widely accepted that if a person succeeded in erecting a dwelling on common or waste land between sunset and sunrise and lighting a fire in it, they could not lawfully be dispossessed. There are innumerable variants on this formula and on the definition of the amount of land that might be enclosed. 'As much as he could inclose in the night within the throw of an axe from the dwelling' was the belief in Radnor in Wales. There are also a variety of mistaken beliefs as to the period of time for which property should be occupied unchallen-



Daily Telegraph 6.9.1963

*Top: Seventeenth century squatter's house on the village green at Airton, Yorkshire.  
Bottom: Roadside squatter's cottage in Essex, c1780.<sup>20</sup>*

ged to gain title ranging from six months to 30 years. In fact, in English law squatters obtain 'a good title' (ie ownership) when they have retained peaceful possession for twelve years against the owner.<sup>3</sup>

Many squatter houses of the 16th to 18th centuries can be recognised on sight or by studying large-scale Ordnance Survey maps. In some counties they are built close by the roadside and parallel to it; in others they are irregularly scattered around the village green or randomly distributed on it. One historian states:

'Manor court rolls all over England and Wales contain numerous references to these squatters on the wastes in the 17th and 18th centuries. Frequently they were people who had been squeezed out of the lowland villages where no more land was available. Hence in a county like Northamptonshire we find that the so-called 'forest villages' in the 17th century were on an average half as populous again as the non-forest villages, because they had attracted so many of the rural poor who found the various common rights in the forests sufficient to give them a precarious living.'<sup>22</sup>

An Act was passed in the reign of Elizabeth I 'against the erecting and maintaining of cottages', with the aim of 'avoiding of the great inconveniences which are found to grow by the creating ... of great numbers and multitudes of cottages.' The Act was really directed against the poor though according to one account it:

'allowed cottages for the impotent poor to be built on the village waste, with the consent of the lord of the manor and the parish officers. Other cottages might be licensed by the justices in Quarter Sessions, and much of the business of the Sessions in the 17th century was taken up by the pressing question of cottages, with ordering their demolition or sanctioning their erection, always as a measure connected with poor relief and the parish poor.'<sup>24</sup>

In 1662, after the restoration of the monarchy, the Act of Settlement was passed to restrict the movement of those who were not freeholders or who could not afford a rent of £10 a year. It declared that 'by some defect of the law, poor people are not restrained from going from one parish into another and, therefore do endeavour to settle themselves in those parishes where there is the best stock, the largest commons or wastes to build cottages, and the most woods for them to burn and destroy'.



## Winstanley and the Diggers

Between these two pieces of legislation directed against ‘cottagers and paupers’ ie squatters, there occurred the most famous of what we would now call ‘ideologically-inspired squats’ – when Gerrard Winstanley and others calling themselves the ‘Diggers’ took over waste ‘common’ land at Walton-on-Thames in Surrey in 1649 and started to cultivate it communally. They hoped that poor people everywhere would follow their example and that property owners would voluntarily surrender their estates and join in communal production. The Digger movement was the culmination of a century of unauthorised encroachments on forests and wastes by squatters and commoners, pushed on by land shortage and pressure of population. Setting the background, historian Christopher Hill wrote:

‘The Midlands rising of 1607, in which we first come across the names Levellers and Diggers, was caused by enclosure. Risings in Western England in the late 1620s and early 1630s turned in large part on royal enclosure and rights of squatters in the forests. Just as the breakdown of the authority of the state church in the 1640s allowed underground sects to surface, so the breakdown of secular authority released a series of riots against enclosure all over the country.’<sup>5</sup>

In the pamphlet *The New Law of Righteousness* written in January 1649, Winstanley set out his criticism of the private appropriation of land:

‘And this is the beginning of particular interest, buying and selling the Earth, from one particular hand to another, saying “This is mine,” upholding this particular propriety by a law of government of his own making, and thereby restraining other fellow-creatures from seeking nourishment from their Mother Earth. So that though a man was bred up in a Land, yet he must not work it for himself where he would, but for him who had bought part of the Land, or had come to it by inheritance of his deceased parents, and called it his own Land. So that he who had no Land was to work for small wages for those who called the Land theirs. Thereby some are lifted up in the chair of tyranny, and others trod under the footstool of misery, as if the Earth were made for a few, and not for all men.’<sup>6</sup>

This is the cry of the landless peasant everywhere, in his day and ours, and throughout his

**THE DIGGER'S SONG**  
You noble Diggers all, stand up now, stand up now,  
You noble Diggers all, stand up now,  
The waste land to maintain, seeing Cavaliers by name  
Your digging does disdain, and persons all defame,  
Stand up now, stand up now.

The lawyers they conjoin, stand up now, stand up now,  
The lawyers they conjoin, stand up now,  
To arrest you they advise, such fury they devise,  
The devil in them lies and hath blinded both their eyes,  
Stand up now, stand up now.

The clergy they come in, stand up now, stand up now,  
The clergy they come in, stand up now,  
The clergy they come in, and say it is a sin  
That we should now begin, our freedom for to win,  
Stand up now, stand up now  
Stand up now, Diggers all.

The tithes they yet will have, stand up now, stand up now,  
The tithes they yet will have, stand up now,  
The tithes they yet will have, and lawyers their fees crave,  
And this they say is brave, to make the poor their slave  
Stand up now, Diggers all.

*Propaganda produced by the Diggers in the seventeenth century, (the language has been modernised).<sup>5</sup>*

pamphlets and public manifestos, Winstanley returns to the same theme, declaring for example in his *New Year's Gift for the Parliament and Army*: ‘Therefore I say, the Common Land is my own Land, equal with my Fellow Commoners; and our true propriety by the Law of Creation. It is every one's, but not one single one's.’

The Diggers' invasion of ‘common’ land next to Campe Close at St George's Hill began on Sunday 1 April 1649 and the Council of State was immediately informed by a local landowner that people

were sowing the ground with parsnips, carrots and beans, with the intention of restoring ‘the ancient community of enjoying the fruits of the earth’. The Council of State sent the letter on the same day to Lord Fairfax, Lord General of the Armed Forces of the Commonwealth, urging him to send some forces ‘to Cobham in Surrey and thereabouts, with orders to disperse the people so met, and to prevent the like for the future, that a malignant and disaffected party may not under colour of such ridiculous people have any opportunity to rendezvous themselves in order to do a greater mischief.’<sup>6</sup>

The Diggers were harried and eventually transferred themselves to Cobham Heath, a mile or two away, where after further persecution, and the burning of their huts and furniture, their settlement was abandoned, exactly a year after the original squat. By the beginning of 1650, other Digger colonies were beginning to appear, at Wellingborough in Northamptonshire, Cox Hall in Kent, Iver in Buckinghamshire, Barnet in Hertfordshire, Enfield in Middlesex, Dunstable in Bedfordshire, Bosworth in Leicestershire, and at unknown places in Gloucestershire and Nottinghamshire.<sup>5</sup> But by the end of that year the movement had collapsed.

## Squatting by stealth

Squatting continued, as it has always done, on the level of the individual family. Most of the privatisation of common land was accomplished not by the landless peasantry but by landlords with the aid of Enclosure Acts and by wealthy people whose encroachments were unchallenged. Between 1760 and 1860 the enclosure of common lands by landlords was at its height. In Radnor between 1810 and 1882, there were 34 Acts of Parliament for enclosing some 50,000 acres of common land.

‘A very small portion of this large area was reserved for the commoners; most of it was added to the existing estates of landowners, and the first action of many landowners was to evict the squatters. In this they usually succeeded, but in one famous case a solicitor of Presteign (Mr Cecil Parsons) fought the squatters’ case up to the Court of Common Pleas, in 1835, and won. When the news of this decision reached the backwoods of Radnor, church bells were rung, dinners given in celebration, and ‘the cottagers’ champion’, as Parsons was called, received a handsome presentation. The effigies of certain landowners were publicly burnt.’<sup>7</sup>

John Topham

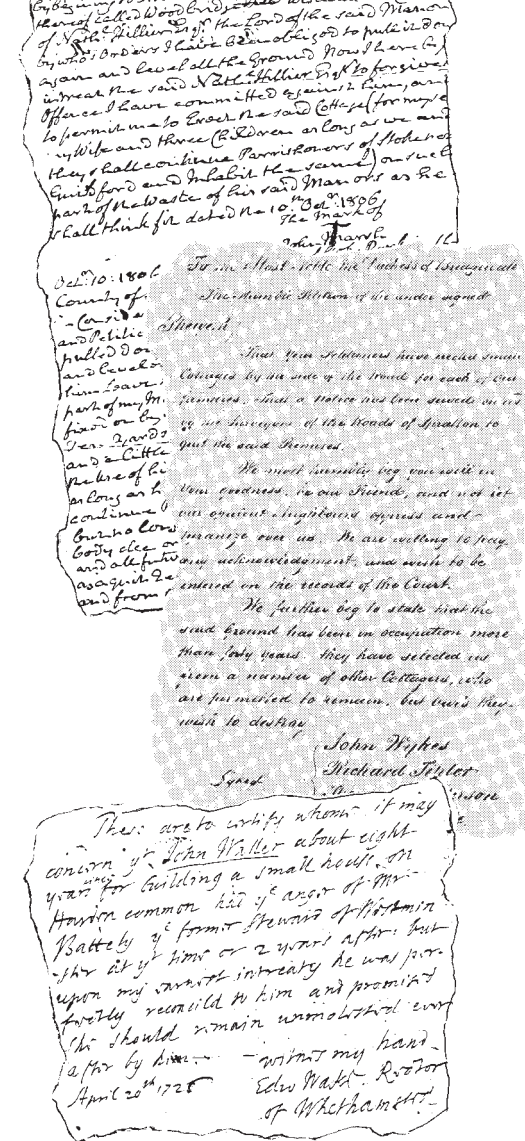
Theirs was a dramatic version of battles that were fought all over Britain. Perhaps the feeling that the Crown in particular had usurped the land, was responsible for the widespread nature of squatting on land which in various guises belonged to the royal family. The Rev. S. Baring-Gould claimed that the building in about 1835 of Jolly Lane Cot, near Nexworthy on Dartmoor, was the last occasion when the custom of building a house between sundown and sunrise was put into practice. A small rental was put upon the place by the Duchy of Cornwall. But in 1932 another writer declared that ‘only a few years ago several small enclosures with cottages were stated to have been built on Dartmoor between sunset and sunrise.’<sup>7</sup> A Victorian historian of Windsor Castle says that at one time paupers had squatted in many of the towers.<sup>8</sup> In the early 19th century an apple woman called Ann Hicks annexed a portion of Hyde Park at the east end of the Serpentine. Her shanty was known as the White Cottage, and was steadily improved.

‘From a stall with an awning, a lock-up shop was evolved. Then a small back enclosure appeared including four walls with windows and a door. The height of the building was next increased, and under the excuse of repairing the roof a chimney was provided. The next step was to get a hurdle erected to prevent the curious from peeping in at the window. The fence by degrees was moved outwards, until a fair amount of space was enclosed. At this stage the authorities interfered and secured possession of the domain of Ann Hicks who was granted a small allowance.’<sup>9</sup>

Another squatter who gradually increased her holding was Mrs Kit Nash, who at the turn of this century had a cottage between Hamer Green and Burnham Green in Hertfordshire.

‘Year by year she extended the boundaries of her plot by trimming the Bramble hedges always from the inside, allowing them to spread and flourish on the outside. There was a complaint, but she dealt with that by brandishing a pitchfork. She had only a squatter's title to the land, but after her death this was legally registered in her name by the local authority, and it was sold, so that they could recover the money which she owed them.’<sup>10</sup>

By comparison with the landless labourer, the squatter had seized a degree of freedom which, as my examples indicate, was tenaciously extended over time. One writer cites the complaint of the



*Seventeenth and eighteenth century squatters. Top: Extract from a petition by a family who had been forced by the Lord of the Manor of Stoke and Stoughton to demolish their squatted mud cottage. Following the petition, the Lord granted them an alternative site. 1806.<sup>22</sup> Middle: Petition by roadside squatters appealing to the Duchess of Bridgewater for her protection after a notice to quit had been served by the local surveyor. After 1831.<sup>23</sup> Bottom: Certificate from the Rector of Wheathamstead in support of a squatter on Harpenden common who feared that the Steward of the Manor would demolish his cottage. 1726.<sup>23</sup>*

churchwardens of the Oxfordshire village of Headington Quarry, about the Steel and Parsons families there: ‘Some 40 or 50 years ago two small huts were erected upon this land, and they were inhabited by some poor people, and from time to time the buildings have increased into two cottages and the occupants have enclosed a piece of the ground as gardens, but for none of this do they pay any rent.’<sup>11</sup>

## Property: theft or freedom?

There is a gulf between the approach to squatting of Gerrard Winstanley and that of Mrs Kit Nash who had poachers’ pockets sewn into her skirts. It is the gulf between socialism and individualism: a gulf spanned by the French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in two famous utterances. In 1840 he gave the world the phrase ‘Property is Theft’ (and these words were painted in letters three feet high on the walls of No 144 Piccadilly (p 22) in September 1969). But he also asserted that ‘Property is Freedom’, thinking of people’s right to control the house they live in and the land and tools they need to work and live.<sup>12</sup>

‘No man’, said Winstanley, ‘shall have any more land than he can labour himself, or have others to labour with him in love, working together and eating bread together.’ This is precisely the difference between the appropriation of land by squatters and that by enclosers.

There were a few examples of ‘ideological’ squats at the turn of this century. At Whiteway in Gloucestershire, a Tolstoy an anarchist colony was set up in 1898 and the title deeds to 40 acres of land were ceremonially burnt to symbolise the fact that it was held in common.

Eight years later, ‘land-grabbers’ occupied empty sites in several towns including Manchester Leeds, Plaistow and Bradford. The basic idea of the movement according to one writer ‘was to grab land (or in some cases borrow it) that was not being used and to cultivate it whereby the hungry could grow their own foods and obtain a living from their own methods.’<sup>13</sup> It was a response to massive unemployment, poverty and hunger and the organisers saw the ‘back-to-the-land’ approach as a way of breaking workers’ dependence on the capitalist system. In the event, none of these actions lasted very long. The Manchester occupation was quickly broken up with police support: ‘The turf buildings were knocked down, the crops





Bradford City Library

Bradford City Library



Bradford City Library



uprooted and the cooking utensils thrown down the highway.' In Leeds

'a gang of about 20 roughs led by a well-known local character raided the camp late at night. The camp was completely destroyed, most of the campers were beaten up and all their possessions heaped on the camp fire. It seemed pretty obvious that the landowners had paid the gang to carry out the raid.'<sup>13</sup>

The Bradford occupation was more fortunate but finally petered out after three months due to lack of support from the authorities, shortage of money and the approach of winter.

Perhaps a closer attention to local history, court records and the Land Registry will reveal forgotten sagas of the deliberate and public occupation of empty property or of vacant sites in the cities. The 19th century provides many examples of battles fought both in the courts and through direct action to resist the enclosure of urban common land, and those struggles are responsible for the survival of any urban commons today. But in these disputes the individual encroacher was just as much the enemy as the lord-of-the-manor encloser.

Evidence of the extent of urban squatting is hard to find, partly because illicit occupiers of a building would be unlikely to advertise their presence. For the overcrowded urban poor of the 18th and 19th century city, the difference in quality between the poorest of lodgings for which rent was paid and those which were occupied without payment was almost academic. The Medical Officers of the London Parishes complained to the Poor Law Commissioners in 1838 of 'the habit at lodging in previously deserted houses, cellars etc', and many of the occupants of hovels, sheds and cattle-stalls lived below the level of a three-pence-a-week rent.<sup>14</sup>

In the growing British cities of the 19th century, it is easy to imagine that there were houses whose owners – through death, emigration, imprisonment or abandonment – failed to collect

*Postcards produced by the Gillington 'Klondike' in Bradford, 1906. Derelict land owned by the Midland Railway was taken by 'land grabbers' who planted vegetables and built small stone huts. The squat was strictly organised with recognised leaders, communal meals and a ban on liquor. Impassioned orators, including a local councillor, spoke at open air meetings attended by up to 1,000 people. Winstanley and William Morris were much quoted.*

their rents, while the tenants became the *de facto* owners. This might only be revealed by 20th century redevelopment by which time the occupiers would have acquired what is universally known as 'squatters' rights'. Such instances only become news when the title is disputed.

Registration of title to land was introduced in England and Wales by the Land Registry Act 1862, 'to give certainty to the title to real estates and to facilitate the proof thereof. The registration system at present covers areas of England and Wales containing about two-thirds of the population and will eventually cover the whole country. Even then, it will still remain possible to acquire ownership through squatters' rights by squatting in the same place for 12 successive years (p 105).

In the past, there was no equivalent of the squatters' movements of today, precisely because there were never such glaring examples of both public authorities and private investors *choosing* to leave habitable properties empty over long periods, rather than rent them to people in need. In the period which ended with the First World War, when 90 per cent of housing was privately rented and there were no rent acts, ordinary houses in places where there was any demand were seldom empty for long. When a speculator miscalculated as in Pimlico in London, where the builder Cubitt anticipated another Belgravia of opulent one-family houses, but rapidly adapted to a humbler market to get some kind of return on his investment, it was unusual for landlords to forego rent income altogether. The tendency towards the replacement of a multiplicity of landlords of ordinary rented housing by one monopoly landlord – the local authority – is a side-effect both of changes in the economics of housing and of official policy. I have illustrated elsewhere<sup>16</sup> the resulting loss of freedom of choice and ease of movement which was once taken for granted even by very poor families. The state has failed to provide for the consequences of its intervention.

The 1945/46 squatters' movement (Chapter 9) was preceded, not only by several wartime seizures by homeless families of empty requisitioned property, but also by an event just after the First World War. During that war the government had built a large colony for Belgian refugees, Elizabethville, at Birtley in County Durham. George Woodcock records that

'there were about 650 concrete huts with drainage, water, electricity, roads, a school and a

hospital. The whole place was surrounded by heavy park railings with locked gates. At the end of the war the refugees returned home, the camp was deserted and locked up. Meanwhile the housing shortage had become acute, and one night the gates of the camp were broken down and a number of working class families established themselves in the huts. The number soon increased, and before the authorities awoke sufficiently to take action, a large settlement was already in being. The government, realising that some considerable measure of force would be necessary to eject the new dwellers, gave in and accepted the situation.'<sup>17</sup>

This same district of villages huddled around coal mines has a tradition of another kind of squatting. Before the nationalisation of the coal industry in 1947, the miners and their families lived in houses belonging to the colliery owners. A miner who was sacked was simultaneously evicted from the company's housing. Such families were obliged to move into the 'crees', cabins or huts they had built in the allotment gardens which they rented for 2s 6d a year from the local council. In the thirties, 32 families were living like this on the allotments in Horden, County Durham, while others were reduced to living in caves along the beach between Easington Colliery and Blackball. In one instance, a family was evicted three times in two days because the man was sacked from one pit, taken on at another belonging to the same company but sacked when this was discovered, and sacked from a third in similar circumstances. His unfortunate family shunted its belongings on a handcart from one village to another, ending in the allotment gardens. Boys who lost their jobs at the mines would be obliged to leave their parental colliery-owned home, and move into a hut on the allotments, returning at weekends for a bath. One family at Horden Colliery, resigned to living on the allotments, bought with their savings a hut from a mail-order firm and contrived a kitchen and other amenities.<sup>18</sup>

The pre-history of squatting can only be found in the margins of the history of housing. But the fragments of folklore and anecdote that we accumulate, whether of the occupation of land by the landless in rural society, or that of houses by the homeless in urban society, have as a common factor the assertion of the very ancient belief that once we are on this earth we have a natural right to a share of it. •



# The post war squatters

by Andrew Friend

## Chapter 9

What happened when there were no homes for the World War Two heroes

Britain entered the Second World War with an acute housing crisis. During the war the construction industry was cut by two-thirds and the remaining work force was almost exclusively engaged on state contracts. As a result, six years of house building was lost, an amount equivalent to nearly ten per cent of the housing stock. In addition, bombing destroyed 110,000 houses and nearly 850,000 more were evacuated because of structural damage. Demobilisation meant that new households were forming at an unprecedented rate, nearly a million marriages having taken place during the war.

The last two years of the war saw worsening housing conditions accompanied by a growing wave of hope and determination that there would be no return to the poverty and unemployment of the thirties. In the coalition Cabinet, the Labour leadership began to have increasing influence on social policy and the planning of post-war rebuilding. By late 1944, a section of the Conservative Party had swung behind the banner of social reform. Their spokesman Quintin Hogg summed up their position in a memorable sentence: 'Either we give the people social reform or they will give us social revolution.'<sup>1</sup> For the Labour Party, state welfare provision and the expansion of public housing were long-held goals. For the ruling class, the major section of which identified with the Tory Party, there would be clear economic advantages in having a healthy and well-housed work force after the war.

The result was a measure of consensus between the two parties which were both, by the end of 1944, making competing promises on housing policy. The public inference was that the organisational power of the state would not only harness the private building industry to the needs of the public sector, but would also override the

short-term interests of property, as it had through requisitioning during the war, in order to achieve decent housing for all. Throughout the war years, government leaders had been making extravagant appeals to national unity and obtaining the loyalty of the working class by making promises. As the General Election campaign of 1945 got under way, the homeless and those living in overcrowded conditions had high expectations of being helped to obtain improved housing.

### Phase 1 – the Vigilantes

In May 1945, the male members of seven families were arrested after occupying an empty mansion at Blantyre in Scotland. They were fined after being convicted of trespass – unlike in England and Wales, a criminal offence in Scotland since the Highland clearances. A few weeks later in Brighton, a group called the Vigilantes began breaking into empty houses and installing both themselves and other homeless households. The group's activities received considerable local support in an area where landlords often left property empty in order to profit from high holiday rents during the short summer season.

Civil action for possession, which could only be started by the absent owners, was slow. By the first week in July, the Vigilantes (or 'the Secret Committee of Ex-Servicemen') were claiming a membership of 1,000 and squatting was beginning to spread along the coast to other resorts and to cities like Birmingham, Liverpool and London. This movement was the result of local initiatives rather than an organised extension of activity by the Brighton group. However, the press, by reporting each incident in some detail, helped to establish communication and from this a measure of organisation was fostered. By mid-July, leading members of the Brighton group – anarchists with

experience of unemployment and anti-fascist struggles before the war – were travelling to other towns to address public meetings.

The role of press reporting in helping squatting to spread was well understood by Churchill. In a Cabinet memorandum which advised law officers and the police to consider 'all means to putting an end to these pranks', he asked the Minister of Information to 'induce' the newspapers to curtail their coverage. Although avowing they were apolitical, the Vigilantes raised a radical demand: that empty property in the private sector should be requisitioned for immediate use by the homeless.

As one of its last acts, Churchill's government both in response to public support for the Vigilantes and as a piece of electoral opportunism – introduced powers for local authorities to requisition for civilian purposes. This move, plus increased police action and the advent of a Labour government, led to the decline of squatting in private property until the following year.

The requisitioning measure gave local authorities the *power* to take over empty houses but did not impose a *duty* on them to do so. The extent to which this power was used varied widely. Extensive requisitioning took place in some Labour-controlled towns and cities where there were long waiting lists. Bristol's policy of requisitioning every house advertised for sale attracted the wrath of the London *Evening Standard* which saw it (correctly) as a threat to the private sector. In other areas where lawyers and estate agents were on the council, the powers appear to have been used little, if at all. *Reynolds News* noted 'there is a deep suspicion that while requisitioning notices are being put up to allay public criticism, a go-slow policy is being followed in order to prevent good homes being taken over. Owners of homes in the £4000-£5000 range fear their use by the homeless will reduce their value.'<sup>2</sup>

### Phase 2 – taking over service camps

As demobilisation gathered pace at the beginning of 1946, overcrowding grew, prosecutions for vagrancy became more frequent and waiting lists got longer. There was growing disillusionment

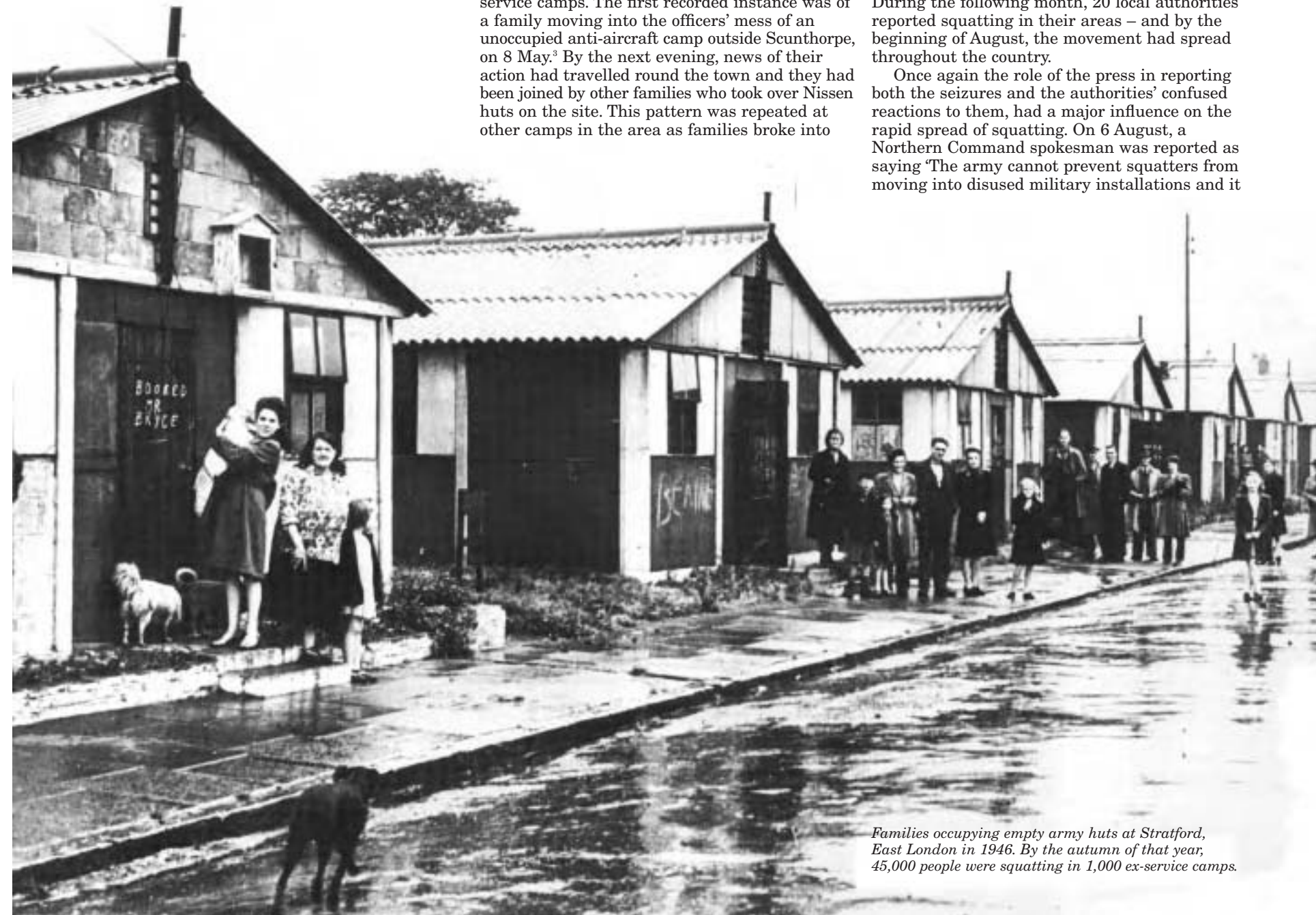
with the slow progress of the ambitious housing programme. At the same time, army camps and depots were emptying.

The second phase of squatting began in the late spring of 1946 and involved the mass takeover of service camps. The first recorded instance was of a family moving into the officers' mess of an unoccupied anti-aircraft camp outside Scunthorpe, on 8 May.<sup>3</sup> By the next evening, news of their action had travelled round the town and they had been joined by other families who took over Nissen huts on the site. This pattern was repeated at other camps in the area as families broke into

them, chalked their names on doors of particular huts (the common way of booking in) and then left to fetch their possessions.

After these events were reported in the press, several camps around Sheffield were taken over. During the following month, 20 local authorities reported squatting in their areas – and by the beginning of August, the movement had spread throughout the country.

Once again the role of the press in reporting both the seizures and the authorities' confused reactions to them, had a major influence on the rapid spread of squatting. On 6 August, a Northern Command spokesman was reported as saying 'The army cannot prevent squatters from moving into disused military installations and it



Families occupying empty army huts at Stratford, East London in 1946. By the autumn of that year, 45,000 people were squatting in 1,000 ex-service camps.



cannot turn them out'.<sup>4</sup> Over 30 camps, in widely different areas, were taken over in the next two days. The following day the War Office issued a statement saying that the squatters were trespassers but that no immediate action would be taken. As the extent of the administrative confusion became clear the pace of the occupations accelerated.

A report from the *News Chronicle* gives a good idea of what life was like in the Nissen hut colonies: 'It was a case of first come first served when it began. But only a few days passed before the chaos began to sort itself out. A camp committee was elected and began to establish its authority and the camp began to crystallise into a community of 500 men and women determined to make the best of their new homes. Sub-committees were established for health, social activities, construction work and camp amenities. A communal kitchen is operating and there is a clinic where the services of a local health visitor are available. Plans are now being considered for a co-op shop. Eight shillings a week is regularly collected for the camp fund.

Women play a big part on all the organising committees and a nursery has been organised. There is an almost palpable feeling of freedom, of having emerged into a wider life than had ever been thought possible. Help is freely given to those unable to do their own repairs. Builders, carpenters and decorators help their neighbours without any thought of payment.

Mrs Sones is camp secretary. I asked her if she thought they would stick it out. "Just go round and tell them they have got to go, and see what they say" was her reply.<sup>5</sup>

The degree to which families had to fight to stay where they were depended largely on the attitude of the local authorities. In some places there was tacit collusion reflecting antagonism between local and central government. For instance in Berkshire, a rumour went round a village that a local camp had been allocated by the War Office to Polish soldiers of General Anders' Army. The whole village, with a population of 3,000 and a waiting list of nearly 1,000, mobilised *en masse* to take the camp over. The next day Amersham Council issued a statement saying that it had been requesting the camp to be turned over to it for housing for the previous six months and had received no reply from the War Office. While the Council did not wish to take sides in the dispute between the War Office and the squatters, it

would connect the services and provide amenities in the interests of health and safety.

In other cases squatters met with both refusal of services and threats of being struck off the waiting list for permanent housing. Refusal of registration for milk rations became a means of harassment. In such areas the camps linked together to form Squatters Protection Societies as well as organising internally. Where confrontations with local authorities took place, the strong degree of support for squatters became obvious:

'A flag flew over the Manor Lane gunsite in Sheffield last night. The squatters had won a day long battle with city officials against removal to the workhouse from their Nissen huts.

Earlier, hundreds of people had lined the roads leading to the camp to watch the arrival of police, aldermen and officials. With them came two double-decker buses, an ambulance, police radio cars and two lorries carrying demolition men.

Men, women and children were cheered as they faced the eviction party at the gates. They listened while Alderman F Thraves, Socialist leader of the City Council, tried to persuade them to leave in their own interests. This was the signal for a general outburst. "We're not going to the workhouse. Our men did not fight to go to the workhouse. How would you like to take your wife to Firvale?" women shouted.

Deadlock was reached when the foreman of the demolition gang told the officials his men refused to pull down the huts while the people were in them. At this point the official party retreated.<sup>6</sup>

In Bristol, where a 'squat city' of 800 people had formed, the local Council was split by the issue. While some councillors publicly supported the squatters and called for conversion work to be done on the camp, the Council's leaders held that squatting was 'akin to mob law' and set dangerous precedents through by-passing the waiting list. As

*Service camp squatters in 1946. Top left: A barricade of army lorries fails to stop an ex-sailor and his wife from moving into a camp near Amersham. Top right: Two squatters constructing a radio set for their Nissen hut home at Bushy Park, Hampton. Bottom: Collective organisation of repairs, cooking and child care was a feature of life in many squatted camps as shown in this former US Air Force dance hall used as a nursery for 100 children. Far right: Langley Way, Watford.*



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a result, services were refused on the grounds that if they were connected the squatters would stay and a slum would develop.

Six months after the Fielding family moved into the officers mess at Scunthorpe, Parliament was told that 45,000 people were thought to be squatting at 1,000 sites throughout the United Kingdom. The camp squats represented direct action and self-organisation of the homeless on a massive scale. As such they presented problems of management and public order to the state. Army units did not see the protection of unwanted camps as part of their duty – in fact it seems that departing commanders often co-operated with the first squatters to arrive, especially when they were demobbed soldiers. Regional commanders referred the problem to the War Office and from there it reached Cabinet level. On 13 August the Cabinet considered a report from the Parliamentary Under Secretary at the War Office: the dilemma was that concessions would lead to further squatting whilst wholesale evictions would not be tolerated by public opinion. Guarding empty camps also presented problems: public opinion was unlikely to tolerate refugee guards protecting them prior to the arrival of their compatriots but the only other troops available were new recruits in training. The prospect of raw troops confronting demobbed veterans was unacceptable to the Cabinet. Unable to decide on a course of action, the meeting agreed to set up an inter-departmental committee to look at possible police action, the future of the camps in general and the possibilities of persuading the press to cut down on its coverage.

Four days later the Ministry of Health which was responsible for housing issued a statement accusing squatters of sabotaging the fair and orderly progress of rehousing and announcing that the camps had to be cleared before winter. In fact no decision had been reached on a deadline but it was clearly an attempt to stem the tide of occupations. The government's intention came across in its appeal to public opinion: 'It is doubtful whether the people will support a local authority in not only acquiescing to queue-jumping but in going further and providing the queue-jumpers with improvements in adapting the camps to family use.' It was also announced that jobs as camp caretakers would be advertised at labour exchanges in order to prevent squatting.

Squatting in camps continued during the following days and spread to other types of building:

disused schools, a race track and greyhound stadium, and on 29 August, two big hotels in the centre of Glasgow. Police intervention backed by Scotland's criminal law quickly brought the latter occupations to an end but the Ministry of Health statement had done little to stem the tide. The Cabinet met and decided to start 'methodical squatting' or – to use the terminology of the sixties – to offer licences in short-life property. The Ministry of Health announced that in nearly all cases people would be allowed to stay where they were but management responsibility would pass to local authorities who would collect rent and rates. Legal action would be taken only in extreme cases and rehousing would be offered to those displaced.

It was far from a total victory for the homeless or a total loss for the state as the next two years were to show. But the important factor was that direct action had been seen to change policy and to get housing for thousands of families in need. The stage was thus set for a far more direct challenge to the authority of the Labour Government and 'the rule of law'.



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Illustrated London News



Illustrated London News



Keystone



Illustrated London News

*Squatters take over luxury flats in London, 1946.*  
*Left: Moving in – Ealing, West London.*  
*Below: Belongings being handed over a locked gate at Fountain Court, Pimlico.*  
*Right: Queuing for Sunday lunch cooked on an open wood fire behind Duchess of Bedford House.*  
*Far right: Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party, addresses an open air squatters' meeting near Duchess of Bedford House (12 September).*

### Phase 3 – into the West End

On Monday 9 September 1946 *The Times* ran this story under the headline: '1500 Squatters Occupy Luxury Flats. Audacious Operation in West End'.

'Squatting spread to West London yesterday. Groups of people carrying bedding converged on High Street Kensington at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. In a well organised operation they seized Duchess of Bedford House – a seven-storey block of flats in Campden Hill. Within ten minutes 1,000 people, about 400 families, were through the doors and being directed to individual flats. Other Kensington premises seized were in Upper Phillimore Gardens and in Holland Park Road.

The block of flats, which command a rent of about £15 each, are the property of the Prudential Assurance Company but have lately

been in the control of the Ministry of Works, who are due to carry out renovation work on the building before returning it to the owners for leasing . . .

Several of the families were those of serving soldiers who spent an afternoon of their leave moving in. The squatters were mainly young married couples carrying the bare essentials for the night. Police arrived and made themselves helpful to people and an inspector arranged for a WVS van to supply hot drinks.

Mr Denis Godwin, Secretary of the Communist Party's London District, said; "We have been waiting a long time for places such as these to be taken over for housing the homeless. We hope the action taken today by 1,500 Londoners will call attention to the existence of places such as these."

Before the squatters went to bed, block

committees were set up to look after the arrangements for heating and cooking. Nominal rents will be collected from all the families. This morning a deputation will be sent to Kensington Town Hall to ask for the flats to be requisitioned and for all amenities, gas, water and electricity to be supplied.'

Over the next two days 60 families forced their way into Fountain Court, Pimlico and smaller groups occupied the 630-room Ivanhoe Hotel in Bloomsbury and Abbey Lodge, a block of flats near Regent's Park. The occupations were evidently well planned and Communist Party (CP) members, many of whom had been active in pre-war tenants' struggles in the East End, played a prominent organising role. From the outset, the London occupations had a more directly political face as CP councillors gave public pledges 'to help this movement spread until local councils act.'

Through the pages of the *Daily Worker*, and in letters delivered by delegations to Downing Street and the Ministry of Health, a series of demands were raised: requisitioning of the occupied buildings, connection of services and security of tenure for squatters. On questions of wider policy, the ending of de-requisitioning, central government compulsion where councils failed to take over empty houses and stricter control on licences for repairs (i.e. that working class houses should be repaired first) were demanded. As a way of raising these demands, action around Duchess of Bedford House was entirely appropriate as Kensington Council had refused the block when offered it by the Ministry of Works on the grounds that the flats were not suitable (i.e. too good for) homeless families. Furthermore, the block was in a bourgeois area where many houses had stood empty since the upper class exodus during the Blitz and pre-

vious resources were being spent on repairing it for its return to the luxury end of the private rented sector.

Fountain Court was not such a good target, either in terms of the living conditions for the squatters, or in terms of planned future use: alone among the big blocks occupied, it was already destined for the public sector and Westminster Council had already approved a scheme of works. This allowed anti-squatter reports to infer that all the block occupations were the work of queue-jumpers and made it easier to obscure the organisers' real intent – to prevent the resuscitation of the private sector at the expense of the homeless.

During the two weeks following the September occupations, the government was thinking of way of preventing a new wave of squatting, in the knowledge that overtly oppressive action could not be taken against the squatters unless public opi-





nion had first been turned. Government strategy emerged as a combination of propaganda – primarily aimed at splitting the squatters and the CP – and deft use of the legal system and the police. A Cabinet memorandum of 12 September records: ‘Ministers considered that further steps should be taken to bring it home to the public that the squatters were overriding the claims of many people who had been waiting a long time for houses and that the effect of their activities would be to delay the completion of rehousing’. In turning public opinion, the Labour Government now found willing allies in the Tory press. It is interesting to compare the reporting of the camp squats with that of the block occupations. During the summer, factual reporting on the news pages was usually combined with human interest material (e.g. squat births and marriages) on the features pages. Editorials often congratulated the squatters on the happy side-effect of their initiative in exposing the maladministration of the

Labour Government: those members of the upper classes who felt that the presence of a Labour Government in Westminster was equivalent to enemy occupation were not particularly hostile to squatters while they confined their activities to state property. With the seizure of privately-owned central London blocks all this changed: editorials called for stern action in defence of the legitimate rights of property owners and rallied to the government. ‘The homeless who are being duped by the Communists’ became stock characters in the reports. The *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* excelled at trying to stir up feeling against squatters, by giving front page coverage to unsubstantiated reports of householders afraid to go out shopping for fear their houses would be squatted and of a rush to buy padlocks throughout suburbia – very reminiscent of the same lies perpetrated in the present-day squatting movement. Alone among all the papers, the *Daily Worker* gave serious coverage to the housing issues involved.

At a Cabinet meeting on the day of the Duchess of Bedford seizure, it was felt that criminal prosecutions against squatters could fail because juries might be unwilling to convict because of sympathy with the squatters cause. The government gave instructions to the police to guard all empty buildings in the centre of London and all police leave was cancelled. Further instructions were sent to local authorities (both in London and other major cities) to refuse services and Sir Hartley Shawcross, the Attorney General, was instructed to start possession proceedings to recover government property and to contact the owners in other cases. The Special Branch (which had to admit to having no advance knowledge of the occupations) was instructed to investigate the squatters organisation and ascertain its future plans. Police cordons were set up at the Abbey Lodge and Ivanhoe occupations. While food and bedding was thrown in, people could not come and go as they wished, and for the squatters it became a

case of sitting it out. Confrontations between supporters and both foot and mounted police failed to break the cordons. Some arrests were made. No large blocks were occupied in the latter half of the week, although the original occupations did have a triggering effect and isolated privately-owned houses were squatted independently throughout the London suburbs. On the political level, squatters delegations met with consistent brush-offs. By Saturday 14 September, the Director of Public Prosecutions had obtained Cabinet permission to obtain the arrest of the five CP members prominent in the squatters organisation – they included the London District Secretary, three local councillors and the secretary of the residents committee at Duchess of Bedford House. They were charged with conspiring and incitement to trespass. That afternoon 12,000 people rallied in Leicester Square in support of the squatters. Two days later, the five appeared in court and

were bailed to reappear. The next day, the High Court granted the Attorney General an interim injunction against the continuance of the trespass by certain named people at Duchess of Bedford House. Downing Street promptly issued a press release intended to distort the meaning of the judgement, offering an effective mixture of carrot and stick to the squatting families: ‘Her Majesty’s Government think it right to call the attention of all those in unauthorised occupation of houses and flats and certain other buildings required for public purposes to the fact that the High Court today made orders at the instance of the Ministry of Works against various trespassers in the premises known as Duchess of Bedford House forbidding the continuance of the trespass. The High Court has accordingly made it clear beyond all doubt that the action of those occupying the premises without legal authority is illegal. Those who have squatted in such

premises no longer have any excuse for not recognising the illegality of their actions and should quit the premises at once. It will be the duty of the police to prevent further occupations. The Government will not press proceedings for damages against those who have left voluntarily. HMG will recommend to local authorities that those who now leave voluntarily should not lose such claims to priority rehousing as they may already have had.’ The day after this press release, the families at Duchess of Bedford House announced they would leave the following Friday – they also asked for the London County Council to make a rest centre available for those who had nowhere else to go. Before Duchess of Bedford House was evacuated, the other buildings had already been voluntarily vacated. When the squatters left Duchess of Bedford House, *The Times* applauded the ‘return to common sense’. The families, who had reduced



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Daily Mail 13.9.1946



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Under siege at Abbey Lodge. Far left: Squatters appeal for support from behind a police cordon. Left: Police question a woman who threw a parcel of food to her husband inside. Above: Passers-by hear the squatters’ appeal.



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12,000 people demonstrate in support of the squatters (left) but the government is unmoved and a few days later the squatters have to leave (above) after the Attorney General is granted an injunction.



*I asked them how they had liked squatting. 'It's been marvellous! No landlady to say "Be quiet! . ." When I first heard the kids making a row at Bedford House I wanted to say "Sh-h-h!" We used to have to walk across our room in carpet slippers. And the bath! We boiled up water and put it straight in it! Squatting there was an experience I shall never forget. Everybody was so kind, you only had to say what you wanted and they'd get it for you. There was no time to get disheartened, with the concerts and everthing, and we felt we were doing right, although some people might not think so. You see, one half of the world doesn't know how the other half lives. As to the way the squatters stuck together, I was surprised at it myself. People say the working classes get disheartened quickly, and even I was surprised at the way they all stood together.'*

*Woman squatter, quoted in pilot papers, November 1946, 'Who are the Squatters' by Diana Murray Hill.*



the waiting lists by housing themselves in empty property, went to a rest centre and were slowly rehoused by the London County Council. Duchess of Bedford House was eventually returned to its owners for luxury renting after the Ministry of Works had spent £5,000 on repairing it.

### **The cause of failure**

It is difficult to judge at this distance the degree to which the Communist Party controlled the organisation of the London occupations. It is clear that having placed itself in a position of leadership, it failed to mobilise popular or trade union support and that this must be seen as a major factor in the sudden collapse of the occupations.

During the summer of 1946, trade unionists in several northern towns had blacked work involving the wrecking of buildings as a deterrent to squatting. Direct labour force workers in North London had organised work parties to divert building materials to two squatted camps. Miners in Yorkshire had imposed an overtime ban when mine officials had tried to evict a family squatting in a colliery house. During the week of 9-16 September, officials of the building trades unions were inundated with resolutions supporting squatters, and demanding requisitioning and an end to the black market in repairs. De Havilland workers in West London announced they would strike if force was used to evict squatters. On the day the High Court injunction was granted, the London Trades Council, theoretically representing 600,000 workers, backed the squatters.

These events show that there was not merely sympathy for squatters among organised workers – the two groups overlapped far more than they do now – but that there also existed the potential for workplace action in support of occupations of residential property. Yet at no time did the CP call for industrial action to get services connected or to further the demand for wider requisitioning. This is surprising considering that in 1945 the Communist Party, with a membership of 45,000, was at the height of its influence in the trade union movement. Tactics were confined to organ-

ising the Leicester Square demonstration and sending delegations to Atlee, Bevan and the town halls. This meant that once the authorities' hard line in defence of property had emerged, the squatters found themselves increasingly engaged in conflict on the authorities terms, whether in the courtroom or behind cordons. When the court orders were granted, there was no attempt to organise resistance to the evictions. The conspiracy charges had instilled the desired effect of intimidation despite the scale of the Leicester Square demonstration that had been organised at such short notice.

In retrospect, it is clear that only the widening of support through industrial action could have brought an end to de-requisitioning, the declared aim of the Communist Party, by sustaining the London occupations and exposing the contradictions of Labour's housing policy. The chances of success for this demand can be judged by a Cabinet minute of 12 September. Aneurin Bevan, after indicating the slow progress of the rehousing programme and the seriousness of the housing shortage, requested that some London hotels about to be de-requisitioned should be used for the homeless:

*'The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the President of the Board of Trade said they would have very great difficulty in agreeing as there was a serious shortage of hotel accommodation in London.*

*For the purposes of the export drive the most important thing was that buyers should be able to come freely to London. Plans had also been laid to attract to this country in 1947 about 150,000 tourists who would spend a substantial amount of foreign exchange. These plans could not be carried into effect without adequate hotel accommodation.'* So foreign exchange was deemed more important that permanent housing and de-requisitioning continued.

The winter of 1946/7 was a bitter one for the camp squatters and 'hut-dwellers' as they came to be known. They found themselves increasingly isolated at the bottom of the housing pile – despite the recognition they had won during the summer. As the winter approached the Minister of Health, Bevan, blamed the camp squatters for the diversion of building materials, and linked this to the slow progress of the housing programme; a convenient fiction given the mounting unpopularity

of the government.

The story of a family of six from Liverpool illustrates the double bind many of the camp squatters found themselves in. They had moved from a slum house which they had shared with two other families, into a service camp. Six months later they moved back into their original house after two of their children had died of pneumonia – overcrowding being preferable to Nissen hut conditions in winter.

A large number of camps had services connected and although in some areas camp associations kept up effective pressure for rehousing, many of the camps taken over in 1946, remained in use as the 'runt-end' of the public housing system until the end of the 'fifties. Others were used by the social services to house homeless families and were only gradually phased out as 'reception centres' were introduced. In many ways the camps became the forerunners of today's bed-and-breakfast establishments.

The squatting movement of 1945/46 was a sudden affair by comparison with the present one and appears more overtly 'politicised'. In many ways squatting was nearer the mainstream of working-class life but the unity of squatters was fragile and quickly dissipated under the impact of adverse publicity. As a movement it drew more on a tradition of self-help and on the high levels of expectation fostered by the war, than on a mass socialist current consciously rejecting the reformism of the Labour Party. It is important to remember that it occurred at the beginning of the post-war era when the promise of the Labour Party to provide decent housing for all through intervention in a mixed economy had yet to be exposed as a lie. The suddenness of the movement can be accounted for by the fact that it was born of extraordinary pressures – particularly those resulting from enormous population movements in a short time – rather than from the steady working of the system's contradictions that led to the re-emergence of squatting in the 'sixties. Ironically, had the occupations of the luxury blocks not failed, the 'sixties squatting might never have happened. For on 12 September 1946, *The Times* revealed that the Cabinet had instructed the Home Office to draft a law making squatting a criminal offence. In the event, because of the quick collapse of the occupations, no Bill ever came into Parliament, sparing later squatters from the yoke of the criminal law. •





# Success on the streets

Four successful squatting campaigns

## 10 Better than the telly any day

Outwitting a private landlord in London's East End – Myrdle and Parfett Streets

## 11 We won, you should fight them too

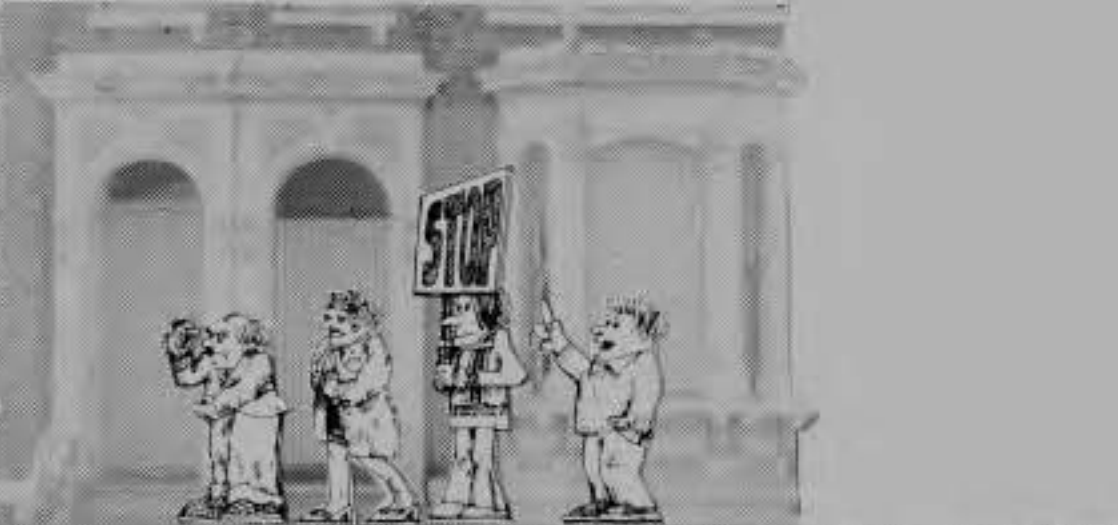
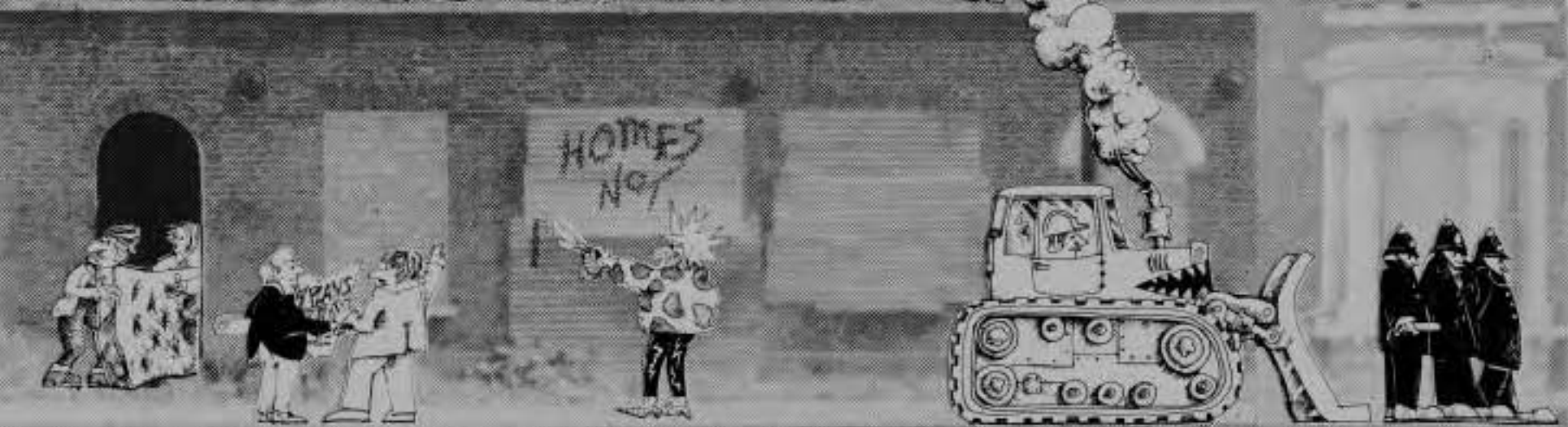
Grinding down the Greater London Council in West London – Elgin Avenue

## 12 Victory Villa

Challenging the planners in South London

## 13 Is there life after squatting?

Winning a permanent home by forming a co-op in central London – Seymour Buildings





# Better than the telly any day

## Chapter 10

by Ann Pettitt

Outwitting a private landlord in London's East End – Myrdle and Parfett Streets

*Come all you good people,  
And hear what we sing,  
For a home to live in,  
Is a wonderful thing.  
With friends all around,  
Who all feel the same,  
So don't go and join in,  
The Profiteers Game.*

*From hostel to hostel,  
We've wandered around,  
We've slept in the gutter,  
We've slept on the ground,  
We're all sick and tired,  
Of what this all means,  
So squatting must conquer,  
These property fiends.*

*We don't mind at all,  
If we kick out the police,  
They don't seem to want us,  
To live here in peace,  
And as for the bailiffs,  
We'll treat them the same,  
They all play their part,  
In the profiteers game.*

*Come every East Ender,  
Come round and join in,  
We know demolition,  
Is a horrible thing,  
We must save the spirit,  
And fight for our lives,  
For our streets and the river,  
To all stay alive.*



My involvement with squatting began in 1969 when, as a single person clattering about on the roulette wheel of London's housing market, I landed in a shared house rented from the Greater London Council (GLC), round the corner from the Arbour Square squat in the East End.

The Arbour Square squat was started by a group called the Campaign to Clear Hostels and Slums – an off-shoot of the Redbridge campaign (pp 18-21). Flats in Arbour House, which had been vacant for 18 months after being emptied by Tower Hamlets Council 'for rehabilitation', did not squat. Most of the people involved in this tiny, informal group – including myself – did not consider their own housing needs to be very important. We continued the tradition begun in Redbridge that people who actually squatted were working-class families, with the initiative coming from young radical non-squatters whose motive was to expose the inadequacies of the housing system through the use of direct action. After almost two years of court cases, harassment, barricading and much internal dissension, the squat ended with the establishment of the Tower Hamlets Family Squatting Association which operated along similar lines to family squatting associations in other boroughs (p 26). As its name implies, this organisation enshrined the principle of family-based respectability – single people were not considered 'eligible' for squatting. It soon acquired a waiting-list of its own and eventually petered out.

The real impetus of squatting turned in another direction. In 1970, housing provision still reflected the belief that young people ought to live with their parents until marriage and then put their names down for a council flat or buy a house with a mortgage. But since the late fifties there had been an increasing number of young people who had left their parents' home, often because of bitter

quarrels over cultural and political differences, and who then competed for a dwindling number of over-priced flats and houses owned by private landlords.

My own housing story was typical; a history of constant threat of eviction from a bewildering variety of flats and houses, all furnished as furnished tenants had virtually no rights at that time. All were done up in the same taste with large brown furniture that cost nothing because nobody else wanted it. Landlords charged absurdly high rents and when taken to rent tribunals, exercised their legal right to throw out the tenants after six, and in some cases three, months. Tenants began to get tired of looking for a flat, forking out four weeks rent in advance, going to the rent tribunal which halved their rent and getting a notice to quit. All over London, people who could not be called 'families' and who therefore had not the remotest chance of getting housed by local authorities, were queuing up outside flat agencies, getting up early for the first edition of the *Evening Standard*, borrowing the universal 'key money', living hemmed in by junk furniture and petty regulations and not knowing whether the landlord might take it into his head to evict. And if one was not an engaged couple waiting to move into a newly-bought house, or two single men looking like the good guys in British 'B' movies of the fifties with references going back ten years, then there was little chance of getting a flat. There were a lot of rather desperate people.

So why did the simple and obvious solution not occur to us sooner, us being well-educated, bright and all? Somehow we accepted the reasoning which implied that if one wasn't in a 'family', then one didn't need a permanent home of one's own. My own train of thought went something like this: 'Me? But I've got a degree! How can I justify needing to squat? I don't look deserving enough. It'll make squatting look silly if people like me do it, with no cockney accents and no children.' Then it occurred to me, and to many others like me, that if people like us did *not* squat, private landlords could carry on doing what they liked – and anyway, didn't we, after all, need housing as much as anyone else? Then there was another argument in favour of squatting, more forcible than all those rationalisations: we had nothing to lose, since even if we played the game right and housed ourselves 'legally', we still got thrown out anyway.

### Myrdle Street

There was then the question of where to squat. We chose a short street of three-storey terracing (four if you count the basement) called Myrdle Street, just to the east of the City of London. 'We' consisted of myself, at that time employed as a teacher and four others, all unemployed and all of whom had been involved in the Redbridge squat or in libertarian politics.



David Hoffman

The housing was privately owned, much of it by Epracent, a small textile business. In the fifties Epracent had bought a lot of properties in Myrdle Street and adjacent Parfett Street for a few hundred pounds each, and was allowing them to run down by failing to carry out repairs and leaving houses empty as tenants died. Tower Hamlets Council had designated the area for clearance but had, as yet, no plans for purchasing the properties. The house we picked had been empty for two years and others had been empty for up to four.

We squatted No 20 Myrdle Street one night of nervous fiddling with windows and jemmies in March 1972. We bunged in our furniture, reconnected the electricity, decorated the place and it became a cheerful – well, not always, but cosy – home.

However much we quarrelled amongst our-

selves about the world in general, we knew we would fight together to defend our home. There wasn't any argument on that point. If Epracent had offered us a rent book, we would have paid up provided the amount was reasonable. We really wanted a stable home and we were used to paying rent. We were less clear about whether we would have accepted rehousing in a different sort of accommodation. We rather liked living in old houses. Architecturally they suited our lifestyle which was to have several people in a household, each with their own room but sharing a kitchen and living room. Houses that might have been awkward for nuclear families were ideal for us.

Shortly after we moved in, another Epracent house in nearby Parfett Street was squatted by four young people – a trainee teacher, an accountant, and an actor and director working in a fringe 'community' theatre (the Half Moon) which had just been established in an old synagogue nearby. Had these last two not squatted, they would have had to travel long distances to work because there would have been little chance of finding housing in the East End which has very little private rented housing.

After three months, Epracent started county court proceedings against us to regain possession. We threw in as many legal ploys as our advisers – solicitors from the Child Poverty Action Group and from a Hackney firm – could find, and we played for time knowing that the more publicity we generated, the more support we'd get.

The best weapon we had was our telephone. This was the secret of our success with the press. Not only could we phone them up at all hours of the day and night, keeping up a steady barrage until it began to sound like a good story simply because of the sheer familiarity of the name (the same principle that sells washing powder), but they could phone us. By the time we eventually lost the case in court the name Myrdle Street rang a bell with most news editors.

Politically, we decided to put pressure on the Council. Although it was not directly involved, it could do a lot more about housing than Epracent who were pretty small fry landlords. As our eviction approached we marched to the Town Hall to ask the Council to take over the properties and use them for housing and we distributed leaflets appealing to local people for support. We looked about as 'local' as a herd of *wildebeeste*, but reactions from many people were sympathetic.





Martin Slavin

(tune: 'Wraggle-Taggle Gypsies')  
*Three hundred squatters stood,  
 On the town hall steps,  
 Their voices rang all around the town,  
 The town clerk hid,  
 Behind his desk,  
 As every house came crashing down.*



David Hoffman



Martin Slavin

*Squatters and supporters march to the town hall demanding that an eviction by a property company be stopped, but a council spokesman (left) says the council will not intervene.*

### Grey raincoats and fish-net tights

Most of our active support came from people like ourselves – young members of London's libertarian left. The Trotskyite groups did not support squatting at this stage, chiefly, I think, because not enough people were involved to call it a 'mass movement'. That sweeping phrase, 'the broad masses of the homeless and badly-housed', had yet to be concocted. We had the consistent support (by this I mean turning up when numbers were required for marches or evictions) of people in the local Communist Party and the local claimants union.

The grey-raincoated CP stalwarts presented a piquant contrast to our supporters in Gay Lib who would turn up no matter how foul the weather in full evening dress, fish-net tights, silver lurex feather boas and all. The chairman of the Stepney Trades Council would eye the leggy 'ladies' bleakly from the shelter of the flats opposite, no doubt wondering what strange political twist had brought him into such a partnership. The eyes of the local population opened wider and wider and then frequently narrowed to unappreciative slits. It mattered that we made sense to them, so we printed leaflets and got up a petition. We were opposite a block of grim thirties tenements that looked like the set for a Jack the Ripper film with narrow unlit arches between the tiny flats and the constant drip of water from something leaky somewhere.

Many of the flats were still occupied by the ageing CP members who had made Stepney 'red' in the 'thirties through organising rent strikes, fighting the fascists. These people supported us from the start and really seemed to enjoy seeing a bit of defiance. But taking our petition round – arguing on someone else's doorstep why one shouldn't be thrown out of one's home – wasn't easy. Although we always stressed our willingness to pay rent, there were plenty of people who believed that we squatted simply to avoid what they saw as 'man's inevitable lot', namely the paying of rent, and that we shouldn't get away with such cheek. The best comment came from a Parfett Street tenant who said we were 'better than the telly any day'. But people in the immediate neighbourhood had been having battles with their landlords for years over repairs and were glad to see someone else standing up to them. When we first opened up empty houses in Parfett Street, it was terrific to look out of the back window and

see people waving and cheering out of their windows.

In those early days, courts gave one a date on which one might reasonably expect to be evicted (a practice which ended with the Myrdle Street eviction). This was why the Myrdle Street campaign was so well covered by the press. We were on the phone non-stop and were rewarded with the presence of many reporters and three camera teams. One BBC2 team was inside the barricaded house with us and this film won the 'News Film of the Year' award! (I can't think why, because much of their film consisted of stilted 'meetings' staged in our kitchen and shots of us waving at the crowd below.) Our barricades, although lovingly fashioned, were pretty symbolic since most of our belongings had already been shifted to our new squat round the corner in Parfett Street, another house belonging to Epracent. The tactic of simply re-squatting the same house after eviction did not occur to us then.

So why did we bother to resist? Quite simply for the sake of the event. Given the orientation of the British press, events are the only means by which to get a message across. This makes us sound like cheap thrill-seekers. But someone has to call the landlords' bluff. Evictions are acts of violence, and every one points out the fact that we still live in a society where that basic human need for a home is not guaranteed. Furthermore, evictions cost landlords money and every one that is awkward to enact, because it is resisted, encourages others to resist and discourages landlords from evicting. This is why we 'chose' to be evicted rather than to leave quietly.

By the time the bailiffs arrived we had about 200 people sitting down outside the house. The police, who had set up cordons across the ends of the street, trampled on people as they tried to clear a path for the man who carried a somewhat symbolic-looking hammer. What nobody in the street knew was that behind the discreet-looking curtains, the window was solidly boarded up. The man smashed the glass with a mighty blow of his hammer, whereupon it rebounded splendidly, and he gave up. The police retired, everyone cheered, our supporters went to the pub, and we wondered what to do next.

We settled into an odd life behind the barricades, comforting ourselves with massive meals and climbing in and out by a ladder to the first-floor window. Those of us who worked would



David Hoffman

*Bailiffs try to evict squatters from a house in Myrdle Street but 200 people sitting in the street and barricades concealed behind the windows defeat them.*



Martin Slavin

*All I want is a home somewhere,  
 Far away from the cold night air,  
 Without a landlord there,  
 Oh, wouldn't it be louverly!  
 Oh, so louverly,  
 Squatting in a house,  
 Just where we will,  
 We won't budge if the bailiff creeps,  
 Over the window sill.  
 Someones hammers bashing on my door,  
 Don't know what they're doing it for,  
 They can't get in any more,  
 Oh, wouldn't it be louverly!*



Martin Slavin





The Times



David Hoffman



David Hoffman



David Hoffman



Peter Harrap/ Report

leave by this unorthodox fashion in the morning not knowing whether the ‘real’ eviction would have happened by the time we got back. The most uncomfortable thing was going to bed at night not knowing whether one would be woken at dawn by the sound of a sledge-hammer smashing down the front door.

About a fortnight after the foiled eviction attempt, I was woken early one morning by a shuffling noise from the back yard. I looked out of the window and saw a line of large men. The first one was raising a sledge-hammer to our back door and the last one was emerging from the back door of our next door neighbours. (It was a pity about our next door neighbours: one of them was a self-confessed fascist and they all hated us, delighting in any pretext to call the police.) We were all up in the dawn grey, pulling on clothes like we were backstage with the bell ringing. I went to the front window and there were another dozen or so biggies getting to work on the front door. I went to the telephone, sat on the floor and started on our press and call-out lists. Someone pulled out the telephone and blue legs said ‘Come on, out’. You can’t argue very much when surrounded by big men with sledge-hammers and policemen, so out we went. We took up residence in Parfett Street round the corner.

### Parfett Street

Epracent put a lock on the door of our old house in Myrdle Street and left it empty. The company owned seven other empty houses in Parfett Street, only two of which were squatted. By now we were well-known and were being rung up not only by friends and acquaintances eager to get out of the restrictions of life in ‘private rentaville’, but also by the Social Services Department of the Council asking if we could help their really desperately homeless families to squat. One Sunday with the help of the future occupants, we opened up all five remaining empty houses connecting up the electricity as we went.

We were now a very mixed group, including several families, a pair of couples who would tell hair-raising tales about their partner’s violent tendencies and a household of men who remained up to the morning of the eviction when they scurried

*The squatters’ street theatre provokes a variety of responses from the long-standing residents.*

off carrying a suitcase, anxious to avoid contact with the police. Two of the families had been sharing accommodation with their parents who were tenants in the street. One of these later denied they were squatters and ‘sold’ their squat to an Asian family, an East End practice that became quite widespread.

When we moved into Parfett Street we felt we’d had enough of moving. Our old house was squatted after a couple of months so we might as well have moved back straightaway ourselves. We made a private resolution that this time we wouldn’t be shifted and that if we were evicted we’d go straight back. Court proceedings were soon started against five households.

We moved to Parfett Street in February 1973 and by October, Epracent once again had a warrant to evict. Over the summer we picketed their offices and held a street theatre event. This latter festive occasion came to an abrupt halt when, just as pretend ‘ogre capitalist’ confronted pretend ‘oppressed tenant’, a head shot out of an upstairs window. Its owner (a real oppressed tenant) delivered the following diatribe for the benefit of the assembled press: ‘Why don’t you all shut up! I work nights, I’m trying to get some bleedin’ sleep. Why haven’t you all got jobs? What are you all doing down here anyway, load of bloody layabouts dressing up and dancing about with nothing better to do?’

An uncomfortable silence followed and everybody shuffled off down the other end of the street to watch our oppressed tenant finally outwit our capitalist ogre; a performance far outmatched in gusto by the arguments which our neighbour’s outburst had unleashed up and down the street.

Parfett and Myrdle Streets are what is described in estate-agentese as ‘intimate’. To sit by a window on the street is a full-time occupation for some residents. There is no doubt that the squatters provided enormous entertainment value particularly at the height of the summer when our numbers were swelled by exotic visitors from the continent.

As eviction time approached (unlike the first time we didn’t know exactly when it would happen) we carried on living strictly as usual in our houses. A tension developed between those who thought that barricades and a stockpile of heavy things on the roof was the best response to an eviction threat, and those who wanted to damage

the house as little as possible in order to return after an eviction and carry on living in it. No barricades at all was a bit much for those for whom squatting and barricades went together like cheese and onion. So we compromised and had ‘light’ barricades, designed to give us enough time to get our knickers on in the event of a dawn eviction. (Evictions always happen at dawn, which for the left-wing activist, who always stays up nattering until at least 2 am, is the groggiest time of the twenty-four hours.) Another household put up ‘heavy’ barricades.

The police at this time were conducting dawn raids all over London on houses with political connections, ostensibly in connection with Ireland, but more probably just for general info-gathering. They decided to raid the house that had (unbeknown to them) been heavily barricaded. Naturally we all thought it was the expected eviction being carried out in a rather amateur fashion by three men kicking at the door. The Special Branch men must have been surprised to find windows flying open all along the street as people shouted ‘Leave them alone you bastards! All they want is somewhere to live.’ Their shouts of ‘Open up! This is the police’ were met with derision: ‘Don’t come that with us. We know you’re bailiffs.’ It took them three-quarters of an hour to get inside and they must have been disappointed not to find the London HQ of the Irish bombing campaign.

This event shook us but we still refused to make any preparations for eviction, such as packing up stereos, bits of china, plants and so on. Our attitude was more one of stolid obstinacy than of fiery militancy. We refused to concede any possibility that we might have to leave our homes.

### Homes for dogs?

When the eviction did come, about a fortnight after the police raid, it was in style. Five pantechinons hired by Epracent (‘Look at that – they even get their removals for free’ one neighbour remarked sourly) arrived at dawn, complete with a police cordon at both ends of the street. Within a few minutes every house was entered by police and hired workmen who brought in packing cases and plastic bags into which they began throwing all our property. The operation lasted until midday by which time friends, neighbours and a few reporters had gathered. This time the





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Peter Harrap/Report

David Hoffman



indispensable phone, with the vital lists, was in a squat across the road not threatened with eviction.

When everything was packed up and we were all standing around in the road with the press taking photos of the family with two little girls (who were probably in the worst position but looked remarkably cheerful about it), Epracent's agent put flimsy locks on the doors. The reason for the flimsy locks then came round the corner. A van full of Alsatian dogs was driven up and a flinty-faced character led one dog into each house. The press, who had been losing interest and were on the point of drifting away, leapt forward to snap the doggies and got on the phone to their papers. An emotion united the crowd in the street like jam reaching its setting point. Even those hostile to squatters were scandalised at the prospect of Alsatis as neighbours. Jeers, songs ('How much is that doggie in the window?') and painted slogans ('People used to live in this house, now it's gone to the dogs') were instantly thrown up. We had been downcast by the eviction but now elation spread.

We phoned every squatting group we knew. We didn't plan anything but just asked people to come down and told them what had happened. We phoned all the papers which had yawned and said 'What, again?' when we'd told them we had been evicted. The new development was a great story, with plenty of 'visuals' provided by dogs hanging their heads out of upstairs windows barking ferociously. By the evening the street was full of people. Then, as it grew dark, a squatter from Lewisham who had worked for Securicor said he was confident that he could take the dogs out safely. An impromptu street meeting was held from the steps of one of the houses and everyone was in favour of smashing the locks and taking the dogs out.

The crowd gathered around the first house while the lock was smashed off and our intrepid dog-handler entered. People went to both ends of the short street to form a cordon in case the police turned up, as everyone expected them to at any minute. A shout from inside the house for

a broom and a plate of dog-food which were duly provided. Then, after what seemed like a terribly long time, with everyone very tense, a shout came: 'We're coming out!' Instant, complete silence fell and the crowd took a step backwards as though a grizzly bear were about to make its appearance in the doorway. The man appeared holding a rather pleased-looking young Alsatian on a lead and to cheering and popping flash-bulbs, he led it out to a car and locked it in.

We moved across the road to the second house, while neighbours swept out the first as the dog had shat in the house, and carried in mattresses for the occupants to sleep on. The second dog was quickly taken out of the next house and put in another car. Then a few police arrived putting a stop to any more lock-smashing. The evicted squatters and some supporters spent the night in the two liberated houses to guard against a raid.

Early the next morning, the security firm which had hired out the Alsatis came to remove the dogs from the remaining houses which were then reoccupied by squatters. A high-up official in the local police station later told a squatter that the police on parade had cheered that morning when told that the squatters were back in occupation.

Our audacity certainly made us popular locally and it made a jaunty news story too. As the *Guardian* put it, 'Squatters 5, Alsatian dogs 0'. This time it seemed Epracent was beaten. The company could have taken us to court again but presumably we'd have had to be jailed for contempt. And we'd gone so far that we would have gone to jail for our homes. But we didn't have to. We continued to live in Parfett Street and are still there now, seven years later.

#### Aftermath

Our policy was always to put pressure on Tower Hamlets to compulsorily purchase the houses – with us in them, of course. It was potentially a most lucrative site, right next to the expanding City and we knew that the only hope of preventing office development was for it to become publicly-owned. This was also the only way we'd be able to stay in the houses for any length of time. In 1975, two years after the dogs episode, the Council finally passed a resolution to compulsorily purchase our properties but 'with vacant possession of the properties illegally occupied'. In

other words it was putting pressure on Epracent to get us out first.

We immediately asked for a meeting with Council leaders and officers and, presumably on our track record, were given one. We put forward a case that squatters were a positive and vital force within the community, often initiating projects such as playgroups for children or literacy classes for immigrants: we argued that single people had to be housed somewhere and that we would not go without a battle as we had put a lot of work into making the houses our homes. Whether it was the persuasion or the threats we do not know, but this line met with success and the Council decided to let us stay with a licence for £2 per week.

At the time of our big battles we were considered paragons of organisation and efficiency. Of course we weren't but we did get a few things right. I've already mentioned the importance of a phone. There's also the point that we did improve our squats, carrying out structural alterations, installing bathrooms, mending roofs and so on. People have said 'Why bother to do all that when you're going to get thrown out anyway?' But that's the point: why accept that one's going to be thrown out? Someone should be living in that house; it might as well be you.

Lefties are too fond of putting themselves into categories apart from the people whose needs they theorise about. In Parfett Street some of us were working-class families with children whilst others were highly educated middle-class young single people (and one of us was a grandmother and an ex-Hackney councillor) but we all had a firm basis of common ground: our desire and need for a home. 'The personal is political' is a truism that slips lightly off the lips of new lefties. Squatting shows the truth of this very well and this is why the term 'squatting for political reasons' is nonsensical. You squat because you need to and that is political. •

*Red is the Colour,  
Housing is the game,  
We'll stick together,  
Cos' living is our game,  
So squat right on thru wind and rain,  
Cos' 'Stepney Squatters' is our name.*

*On eviction day in Parfett Street, the police seal off the road. The squatters are ejected and their belongings bundled into furniture vans. They decide to sleep on the pavement but later that night reoccupy the houses where they are to remain for many years.*



# We won, you should fight them too

Chapter 11

by Piers Corbyn

*'It was a great achievement. The most important thing was the Street meetings where we voted as one body. We decided where we were going. I was excited and scared for a fortnight before the day. I was scared to go to court, but after it I was more determined. Even if we lost, it would have been worth it – we would have won our self-respect. I've never fought for anything til now. I now think more people should fight. If I see any injustice again I'll fight it.'* (Mr Callaghan, a 40-year-old seaman from the North who came to London with his wife and three-year-old daughter to look for work. He got a job as an assistant schoolkeeper but had nowhere to live.)

Grinding down the Greater London Council in West London – Elgin Avenue



Peter Harrap/Report

## The end and the beginning

'We won, you should fight them too. It's not what *they* say but what *we* do that counts'. This is the statement which was painted on corrugated iron in Elgin Avenue to mark the victory of squatters over the Greater London Council (GLC) on 15 October 1975. On that sunny day, 200 people squatting in Elgin Avenue gathered behind barricades made of corrugated iron, wood, barbed wire, old doors and anything else people could lay hands on. More squatters, tenants and trade unionists came from other parts of London to support them. The street was full of TV cameras and journalists. Squatters climbed along roofs, some armed with bottles and stones. The Sheriff, police and GLC officials were impatiently waiting for the squatters' inspection team to return from looking at houses offered by the GLC for rehousing.

An hour after the original deadline given by the Sheriff, a representative of the team returned and, after a quick meeting of our negotiating team, I made a speech over the loud speaker: 'Fellow squatters from this street and around London, members of the Paddington Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations, members of Westminster Trades Council, Paddington Labour Party and the Young Liberals, we can now say the day is ours. Our joint delegation has inspected the offers to single people in Camberwell and a sample flat for the families. We are happy to report that all these are satisfactory. We will therefore take down the barricades and the GLC is providing us with transport to our new homes.'

All around people cheered, cameras whirred and journalists scribbled. It was a moment of great emotion. The pent-up anger from years of homelessness and being mercilessly moved on from squat to squat screamed out as we shouted 'EVICTIONS – OUT; HOUSING FOR ALL – IN!' at the tops of our voices smashing down the barricades with great fervour.

The Elgin Avenue victory was a massive step forward for the whole squatting and housing

movement to the consternation of reactionary politicians in local and central government. The papers were full of doleful reflection for weeks. Despite physical hardship, despite our self-doubts and those of our supporters, despite a barrage of anti-squatting hysteria, *we had won*, and our victory was reported in Australia, Spain, the USA and the Soviet Union.

The struggle began with small steps. It would not have been won if we had not won those first steps. The squat known as 'Elgin Avenue' occurred in a number of tumbledown Victorian houses numbered 9-51 Elgin Avenue, Maida Hill, London W9. The GLC compulsorily purchased these and other houses in the area during the late sixties and early seventies, and left them empty because its plans were 'delayed'.

The first squat in the street took place in March 1972 when two houses were taken over by ex-mental patients from Horton Hospital and 'hippies'. These people were violently evicted without a court order by police and GLC agents. But the GLC was embarrassed by the evictions and shortly afterwards agreed to hand over empty houses to Student Community Housing (SCH), a Camden-based short-life housing organisation affiliated to the Family Squatting Advisory Service (FSAS) (p 29). In a curious bureaucratic compromise, the GLC only handed over half the empty houses in the street and the rest were squatted that summer.

My brother and I squatted with some friends in No 19. We checked with SCH that the house had not been allocated to them and then asked the GLC for permission to stay. The house was suddenly handed to SCH, making us SCH members. I did not become interested in what was happening to the street until May 1973 when SCH announced its intention to give back all its houses in the street to the GLC which wanted them for redevelopment but was not prepared to provide rehousing for the people in them.

At this time both squatting and licensing arrangements were increasing. Licensing, although largely an attempt by councils to limit and

control squatting, had the opposite effect in many areas. It seemed logical to many single homeless people that if empty houses were available for 'giving' (licensing), they were also available for taking if not given. Increasing pressure from squatting meant that the licensing system which involved handing back houses without rehousing guarantees was bound to break. Elgin Avenue was the crunch-point for that system.

## Breaking the reformists' grip

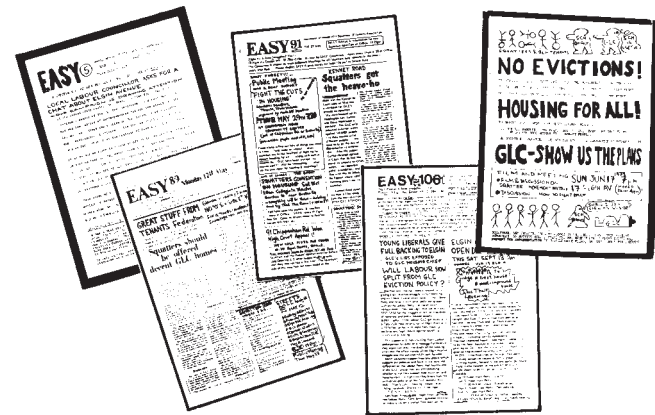
As a member of the International Marxist Group (IMG) I discussed the situation of Elgin Avenue with comrades locally and it was agreed to 'take up' the issue. Three of us produced a duplicated leaflet which called a meeting for people in the street and contained three historic slogans: 'No evictions! Housing for all' and 'GLC, show us the Plans.' A few days later 25 people met in the garden behind 19 Elgin Avenue and discussed our predicament. Most people did not believe we could defeat SCH; some thought we should 'squat on' elsewhere without a fight; some wanted nationalisation of all land; and some said we should demand 'Free Housing For All'. But we did decide on one thing; to struggle against the proposed eviction by SCH and the GLC. We agreed to have regular weekly meetings and to produce a weekly news-sheet to keep everyone involved. The decisions of that day were the seeds of victory. We produced a news-sheet called *Elgin Avenue Struggles? Yes! or EASY*. At this time only a handful of people were interested in the struggle.

Our first success was at a meeting at Elgin Avenue of SCH members on 3 July 1973. We proposed a resolution which read:

'SCH supports the right of SCH tenants and squatters in Elgin Avenue to fight against eviction and for housing for all, and supports their decision to stay in Elgin Avenue until the plans have been thoroughly discussed and accepted as reasonable and everyone – squatters and SCH tenants – is guaranteed rehousing'







Although people from SCH head office opposed the resolution (suggesting instead that we should be evicted by SCH if necessary), it was passed by 17 votes to 9. But this was by no means the end of the matter. The principal SCH office workers were livid at the decision and saw (rightly) the struggle as a test for their own survival. They told us that our struggle would 'upset the polite arrangements SCH had with the GLC' and that our actions were 'against the interest of more deserving people on the waiting list'. Two weeks later they succeeded in reversing the decision at another meeting which was not billed to discuss such a reversal and at which there were no Elgin activists.

We were annoyed by this manoeuvre – the first of many. Our struggle had to expand its horizons. We formed a link with left-wing SCH workers and with the people who had just squatted 220 Camden High Street, a shop near the SCH office (p 34). We organised a picket of SCH's head office and drew in squatters and SCH mem-



Jenny Fleet/Time Out

The battle within the squatting movement. Elgin Avenue squatters picket Student Community Housing, a licensed squatters' organisation.

bers from other parts of London. We put forward a complete line on the whole way forward for both the licensed and unlicensed squatting movement because we realised that if we did not do so our struggle would become isolated and defeated. We argued that licensed and unlicensed squatters must unite in action and that all 'official' squatting organisations should actively support unlawful squatting to get houses from the authorities. We said the 'waiting list' was a political device to divide and weaken the real housing movement; the homeless are not responsible for homelessness and no-one should have to wait for a home. Instead, empty houses should be used.

On 24 July, the biggest-ever SCH meeting was held. Our resolution was passed by 50 votes to 16 with 60 abstentions. Our success surprised and boosted people in Elgin Avenue, most of whom had not believed we could 'beat' SCH. Yet the necessity to get a firmer base of support was clear.

### Exploding horizons

Our regular 'street unity meetings' had been expanding to involve people from nearby streets and on 7 August we adopted the title 'Maida Hill Squatters and Tenants Association', the aim being to draw in all local squatters, SCH members and tenants. Although initially no different from what had gone before, the creation of an organisation was a great help in cementing the struggle which soon moved to a higher plane.

At the beginning of August, SCH's head office received a letter from the Family Squatting Advisory Service which the two organisations had cooked up together. It threatened to disaffiliate SCH if it refused to keep its agreement with the GLC to clear Elgin Avenue for redevelopment. In *EASY* No 11 we spelt out our response:

'FSAS expelling SCH does not matter to anyone who wants to fight for a roof, because FSAS does not support actual struggles, they rely on the Law. The reason why FSAS adopts this bizarre role is because they are desperate to show how 'nice' they are and deserving of finance from charity bodies. The dominant group in SCH office and FSAS are prepared to use the organisations and their members, which they are supposed to serve, as political footballs to further their own narrow "I'm all right, Jack" interests.'

We took the matter to a meeting of the recently formed All London Squatters (ALS – p 69). We proposed a resolution which was agreed without opposition: 'ALS do not accept that any organisation which professes to be part of the 'broad movement of the homeless and the badly housed' can support, promote, or carry out the eviction of any people – be they squatters or tenants – who are fighting for a roof over their heads.'

It also warned that unless FSAS withdrew its threat: 'FSAS will be expelled from the All London Squatters organisation and the activities of its affiliated organisations which support FSAS policy will be opposed in every locality.' Of course this last section of the resolution was partly humorous because FSAS was not interested in participating in ALS anyway.

On 11 August, FSAS held a conference for its affiliated groups and we attended as part of the SCH contingent. We hammered away our message that evictions were unacceptable and that FSAS was consolidating the weaknesses, not the strengths of the squatting movement.

Despite the vehement opposition of some of the FSAS leadership the meeting voted overwhelmingly for 'the suspension of the important FSAS decision on SCH and Elgin Avenue'. We used FSAS's claims to democracy to force the issue into the open. The motion asked member groups to discuss the question and give the votes of their meetings to the FSAS office.

We sent letters to all FSAS groups requesting meetings to discuss the issue. We organised a left caucus in SCH – consisting of a few IMG members and many sympathisers – to develop the campaign. We argued vigorously at meetings of licensed squatting groups all over London. The majority supported us, forcing the FSAS leadership to backtrack. The FSAS management committee meeting in September agreed that 'breaking, or threatening to break agreements may sometimes be justified' but then voted for 'conditional disaffiliation' of SCH from FSAS, whatever that meant.

In these months we were witnessing the breaking of the reformists' hold on the licensed squatting movement. We said that the 'official' groups had a choice: either they must rely on the state and become co-opted into the framework of council policies to provide a slum roof for the waiting list, or they must rely on a united movement of unlicensed and licensed squatters with

backing from the labour movement. As the basis for reformist policies shrunk, so ours expanded.

### Living our ideas

We did not rest on the laurels we had won so rapidly in the three months since the first Elgin Avenue street meeting. The SCH left caucus and Maida Hill Squatters stepped up activity to get support from beyond the squatting and housing movement. We took resolutions to conferences and organised solidarity support for squatting and housing struggles everywhere. We argued that SCH and other licensed squatting groups should actively take over empty houses and fight to keep them.

The first test came on 24 September at 69 Warrington Crescent, a 25-room hotel-like building in a quiet, expensive part of Maida Vale. A 'brigade' of 14 squatters from Elgin Avenue and some SCH workers took it over, hoping to use it for student and other accommodation. But the police were tipped off by neighbours and broke in at midnight, only half-an-hour after we had started the operation. Most of us spent the night in cells and an SCH worker and myself were planted with drugs.

In the morning the Chief Inspector gave me a lecture: 'Squatting is one thing, you have to live somewhere. But squatting in Maida Vale is another. Stick to your own patch'. We turned this attack, and indeed every other attack in the next two years, back onto the authorities: Maida Hill Squatters picketed the police station protesting against harassment. The drug case against me was dropped when the police realised I had got off a previous drug frame-up and that they would come unstuck. However the SCH worker had previous convictions and six months later he was sent to prison. The failure of 69 Warrington Crescent did not stop us and in the next few months a number of houses were taken over, particularly in Camden.

In November we initiated a conference through which we hoped to draw together licensed and unlicensed squatters. The conference, which had been planned in the left caucus, was supported by ALS and organised by activists at 220 Camden High Street. It was attended by 150 people including representatives of licensed groups as well as many new and long-standing 'mainstream' squatters. We suggested that there should be more vigorous efforts to squat better property and that

we should defend more squats by escalating campaigns such as occupying more property belonging to owners threatening to evict squatters.

The main debate was between 'anarchist/libertarian' currents and 'revolutionary/marxist' currents. John Pollard and Sid Rawle, long-standing Camden squatters, put forward the call for 'Free Housing for All'. Our line was 'No Evictions – Housing for All' and we said that the question of rent was largely a question of income. Our view was that putting forward 'Free Housing for All' only confused the labour movement. One group of 'libertarians' continually interrupted at the beginning of the meeting because of their opposition to anything 'too structured'. This current, in various shapes and forms, has acted on other occasions over the years to the detriment of the movement. However, despite these differences on general matters, it was accepted that joint activity could be organised in defence of squats and in mounting campaigns.

### Back on the home front

The intense activity and involvement of Maida Hill Squatters outside the area inspired more local actions. At the end of October we embarked on a campaign against the Church Commissioners, God's housing managers on Earth, which had hundreds of empty houses. They were also raising rents and evicting squats. Our campaign helped gain support for squatting from local tenants organisations in the newly-formed Paddington Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations (PFTRA) of which Maida Hill Squatters and Tenants Association was a founder member.

Many tenant activists did not accept squatting in council property (eg Elgin Avenue) because they believed it was somehow jumping the 'waiting list' but they did think that squatting in private property was useful. Our campaign against the Church Commissioners and other private landlords enabled us to get support from tenants for squatting which was then used to support our struggle in council housing.

These hectic external campaigns did not mean that day-to-day life of the Maida Hill community was ignored. On the contrary, activity increased. Street meetings organised clean-ups to remove rubbish from gardens. On 5 November Maida Hill Squatters held a fantastic bonfire and fireworks which drew 200 local people. Jumble sales wer

organised to make money and spread propaganda to local tenants.

At the end of November, the street meeting took an important step forward in organisation by deciding to ask everyone to pay 10p per week 'voluntary contribution' to a street fund to finance leaflets, tools, paint, *EASY* and so on. We opened up two empty shops and turned them into Maida Hill Squatters community centre. We organised a community 'self-defence force' to deal with anti-social people in the community (like thieves) and to protect ourselves from illegal eviction and police harassment. These activities were part of a coherent political whole. People did not have to accept any 'whole' to join in the many parts, but the fact that some people had such an understanding was very important in unifying and motivating what we did.



### Fighting the LEB

By November 1973, even though the GLC politicians were dithering, GLC bureaucrats, worried by our success, decided to use back-door methods of harassment through an alliance with the London Electricity Board (LEB). One day, LEB workmen dug holes in the street outside squats in Waltherton Road, which adjoins Elgin Avenue, intending to cut off supplies but an instant picket stopped them dead in their tracks. In the days that followed the holes were successively dug up by LEB workmen and filled in by squatters.



Maida Hill Squatters, through Paddington Law Centre, issued a summons to stop the cut-offs. The LEB was acting on GLC instructions; in legal jargon the GLC was ‘restraining them from entering the premises for the purpose of connecting electricity’ (p 162). Not wanting to escalate the struggle at this time, the GLC climbed down temporarily and allowed the squatters to have electricity. However, after a month of confusion about plans for the street (simultaneously ‘imminent’ and ‘a long way off’) the GLC and LEB announced a renewed intention to cut off supplies. They wanted to test the matter in court, and a case was scheduled.

Meanwhile, other councils, particularly Islington, were attacking squats through the LEB. ALS set up an Electricity Action Committee of squatters from Maida Hill and Islington to obtain ‘Electricity-for-all’. The occupation of three alternative LEB showrooms was planned. On 11 January 1974, 100 squatters met in Kensington Gardens and misled the police and LEB into believing they were going to attack the showrooms responsible for Walterton Road, in Queensway. The crowd was led off to a non-existent bus and in Notting Hill Gate ran into the LEB showrooms there instead.

Police were locked out and LEB officials were asked to bring in top brass to negotiate. The police stood 200 yards away from the door as the high officials entered and crowds of people inside and outside the building chanted and waved. Some headway was being made with the negotiations when Special Patrol Group police smashed their way in upstairs. The occupiers were dispersed with 31 arrests. Twenty-six of them were charged and most were eventually fined though one man from Islington got a six months prison sentence.

The occupation and arrests made front page news in most daily papers, and were reported on BBC World Service News. The police had overreacted. The GLC was embarrassed and asked to meet us. Gladys Dimson, chairperson of the GLC Housing Development Committee, apologised for ‘grave mistakes’ and said the GLC would allow the LEB to reconnect. But the authorities still insisted that the court case should go ahead. The Electricity Action Group held a number of public meetings around London and in February organised a picket of LEB offices first at Ergon House in Westminster then at the LEB head office in the City.

At Marylebone Magistrates Court a few days

later, the court ruled that the LEB won its case ‘by the narrowest possible margin’ on the ground that squatters were not ‘lawful’ occupiers. However the GLC and LEB had already agreed to connect Walterton Road. The campaign had won in the streets and lost in the courts!

### Permanent expansion

Our concept of organisation in Maida Hill by the spring of 1974 could be best described as ‘permanent expansion’. To ‘stand still’ would be to shrink, because many squatters naturally moved on if they found better homes and the most active in campaigns and struggles were often the more recent arrivals. Squatters from Elgin Avenue were actively involved in other militant squatting campaigns including the defence of No 220 Camden High Street and Dover Street (p 34 and p 70).

Homeless people flooded to us referred from housing advice centres, council social workers, the police (yes!) probation officers and from many other unlikely sources. They were generally youngish workers and poor families, not the ‘hippy types’ who had dominated the scene two years before. In March 1974, Maida Hill Squatters started an offensive against Westminster City Council. ‘Canal Flats’ on the Harrow Road were squatted to take the expanding flow of homeless people. The Council intended to demolish these flats to make way for the most unwanted ‘park space’ imaginable – a six-yard strip bounded by a smelly canal and a busy road.

There was much local opposition to the plans so the squat got support. The Canal Flats struggle – Maida Hill’s ‘front line’ at the time – was an important dress rehearsal for gaining the support that we would need in the future. I stood as ‘the Squatters and Tenants’ candidate for Westminster Council in the Harrow Road ward in the Council Elections in early May. We made Canal Flats, Elgin Avenue and the whole question of housing an issue, arguing that squatting was the frontline of the struggle for decent housing. I got over 150 votes beating several other minority candidates.

The crunch came for Canal Flats in June. We had pickets of the Council and at the court where the possession orders were being heard. Leaflets, posters and petition forms were produced. We even got the backing of Westminster’s Labour councillors but the Tory leadership was not quite

forced to give in. The downtrodden people in the building were willing, if erratic, fighters but were unsure of the need for barricades. Events on 14 June helped to make up their minds. The front page of the *Daily Mirror* reported how squatters at Terminus Road in Brighton had successfully held off bailiffs (p 81). Canal Flats had been tipped off about their eviction date – Monday 17 June. Over the weekend squatters poured cement in water cock holes to stop them being turned off, barricades were built and a look-out system outside the flats organised.

Two busloads of bailiffs and police arrived at 8 am on Monday morning. After a token knock

*Squatters evicted from the Canal Flats sit dejectedly on the street but are cheered later in the day when they take over other houses.*



Graham Lee/Time Out

on some of the doors, they used sledgehammers and a battering ram to try to get in. Rubbish was thrown from the windows and the police sergeant in charge was hit by a dustbin load of sewage water.

It took an hour for the 70 occupants to be evicted. They sat on their belongings heaped in the morning drizzle on the pavement. People on their way to work gazed in amazement and buses slowed down to look at the grim sight of kids on the pavement. The squatters moved up the road and took over the Social Services waiting room. The families were offered ‘bed and breakfast’. They refused it and demanded ‘breakfast for all’ instead! The social workers agreed to finance a van to take people to new squats. In keeping with Maida Hill’s guarantee to find a home for everyone who struggled, a group went off to open new

squats nearby (Westminster Council property of course!) and everyone was moved at Council expense!

The struggle made a tremendous impact on local tenants. For the next few weeks we could squat on the nearby Queens Park estate more or less at will, with the active assistance of local children. We made a point of putting families referred to us by Social Services into those houses.

### Round two

The GLC had set SCH various deadlines by which Elgin Avenue had to be cleared, but all these dates – July ’73, February ’74, May ’74 – passed without incident. In May the GLC hurriedly called a meeting at County Hall for SCH and Maida Hill representatives to ‘see the plans’ for Elgin Avenue. They showed us a very nice balsa wood model. We said it looked fine but we would not go unless we got rehousing for all. A month later GLC officials came to Elgin Avenue seeking the names of occupants for ‘possible rehousing or legal [ie eviction] purposes’. This was followed by public statements of hostility. The GLC announced a ‘humane but firm’ policy towards squatters in general and took steps against them in other parts of London (p 48). ALS hit back and set up a GLC Action Group comprising of ‘mainstream’ and licensed GLC squatters.

The Action Group started off with pickets of the GLC on 2 July – the full Council meeting – and three days later when Stepney Squatters met Gladys Dimson. She agreed to meet Maida Hill Squatters on 17 July so we organised a series of activities building up to that meeting. We painted and improved the houses in Elgin Avenue and printed leaflets for the public. A ‘day of explanation and activity’ and an ‘open day’ impressed a lot of local people who read our display on the wall at the corner of Elgin Avenue (which became a permanent feature of our struggle) and visited our houses.

On 11 July over 100 squatters and tenants attended a public meeting to defend Elgin Avenue. The Vice Chairperson of the GLC Housing Committee and a high official (Fred ‘I did it off my own bat’ Hogbin, a nickname earned for his role in the LEB cut-off struggle) came. Supporting speakers at the meeting included people from PFTRA, Student Community Housing and Westminster Trades Council. The meeting reflected

the rainbow of people in Elgin Avenue’s shifting population. There were druggies, junkies, students, ‘together people’, ‘nutters’, battered working-class families with children and older childless couples. But despite the diversity we had a common cause. We made three points:

- The struggle of Elgin Avenue was part of the fight against the general rot and run-down of Paddington.

- Plans for the street must be seen and approved by the community and, whatever the outcome, there must be no evictions and all occupants should be rehoused.

- The GLC, instead of rushing against us should start work on nearby vacant building sites.

Our style of negotiation was never cap-in-hand, but ‘offensive’. To keep the initiative we squatted empty ‘high rent’ GLC property. Labour had supposedly abolished this category and the leadership was embarrassed. Next, we took over a block of disused firemen’s flats in Carmelite Street off Fleet Street which the GLC had sold to speculators.

A lively picket backed up the negotiations at County Hall on 17 July while the *Daily Telegraph* carried a ‘no concessions’ call to the GLC. Our delegation consisted of representatives of Maida Hill, SCH and PFTRA. The Vice Chairperson of the Housing Committee agreed to offer rehousing: rented accommodation for families and short-life housing for single people. His offer appeared to be in good faith but we were uneasy since we knew he was on the right of the Labour Party. We inspected the offers for single people. A few of them were satisfactory but as a whole they were totally unacceptable: some were bricked up, had all their services cut off and had holes in the roof and a few had even been demolished! We rejected the offer. The GLC suggested a few more token houses and then announced we were ‘unreasonable’. In August, eviction summonses were issued for a court appearance on September 10.

Still hoping to get the ‘hearts and minds’ of more local tenants, and anxious to appear politically reasonable, the GLC gave an exhibition of the plans as we had demanded. We welcomed this and held our own counter-exhibition and video show simultaneously in the same building!

About 100 squatters joined the court picket. Eviction orders were granted after a three-day hearing but we won a stay of execution pending consideration of an appeal. The six weeks between





Squatters at Elgin Avenue (left) following their successful appeal against a possession order in the High Court earn the congratulations (right) of local residents.



Peter Harrap/Report

the first court case and the appeal were a testing time. Some of the 'together' people left and more desperate people came to the street. Maida Hill Squatters embarked on an extended public campaign, making use of the October 1974 general election. We intervened in election meetings, spoke at meetings to students, squatters and tenants (as far away as Portsmouth), harassed the GLC Housing Vice Chairperson at his home, and occupied the GLC Western District Office. EASY No 63 summed up our 'internal' campaign: 'As the crunch looms for Elgin Avenue, DON'T JUST WATCH - JOIN ACTIVITY NOW!

- Together: every house should be 'together' and on guard against thieves. In this period the community suffered from fear of eviction and it was more important than ever for the street meetings to take action against people who took advantage of the 'untogetherness'.
- Barricades: they would strengthen our political campaign and viceversa.
- Alternatives for housing had to be ready in case of any evictions.

- The external campaign. The Appeal was finally held in the High Court on 23 October. The three judges were not the usual hard line squat bashing crew but more moderate 'legal minds'. In negotiations the GLC had given us a licence to stay till 1 September but had started proceedings before that date. The court ruled that possession proceedings could not be started until licenses had been terminated. The GLC's case was thrown out. We were jubilant.

### The phoney war

The GLC was furious, its lawyers were badly shaken and the politicians had to prepare the ground for another confrontation. So nothing happened for a while apart from the GLC publicly repeating its hostility and declaring itself 'incommunicado'. We used the time of this 'phoney war' to throw the GLC's arguments back in its face. The Maida Hill Squatters community had been strained by the summer anti eviction struggle. The period of the 'phoney war' gave time to regain strength. EASY No 65 which announced the victory at the Court of Appeal discussed 'What is

Elgin Avenue?': 'To many people the most important thing about Elgin was always "community feeling". This feeling is really a product of the state of the struggle. As the struggle changed so did the community feeling. To other squatters Elgin Avenue is just "a place to live" which needs fighting for. To London's homeless Elgin Avenue is a place to find a home. For the housing and labour movement Elgin Avenue is "the homeless and badly housed fighting back". Elgin Avenue is all of these things. That's why it is important.'

A committee answerable to street meetings was chosen to produce the newsletter, collect the street fund, and mobilise people to come to street meetings. An office was opened every evening in 19 Elgin Avenue to find squats for homeless people and be a permanent centre for repairs, education, agitation and organisation. The GLC started niggling harassment and broke its promise to 'unconditionally' rehouse Elgin Avenue families saying 'all offers were off'. One particular single mother had been given an offer which she accepted only to be told it was

'withdrawn'. She squatted the house whereupon the GLC re-instated the offer! On 20 January 1975 the GLC launched a massive political offensive at a press conference. 'Smash-and-grab squatters' were invented. This 'new breed', it was claimed, had damaged GLC houses in Warwick Avenue and there was photographic evidence to prove it. These were the type of 'hippies, drop-outs, political agitators and young tourists' who lived in Elgin Avenue the GLC leadership blurted, promising to evict us 'soon'. Maida Hill Squatters hit back with a press statement, and All London Squatters GLC Action Group, the only really active part of ALS, called a press conference. We showed, also with photos, that the GLC were the 'real vandals' and had deliberately smashed up houses to stop squatting. The GLC was shedding crocodile tears over isolated incidents in order to create a bogey image of squatters. Our counter attack negated most of the effect of the GLC's propaganda locally.

### New ways in self-sufficiency

There was no time to lose in the struggle to forge Elgin Avenue and Maida Hill into a self-reliant fighting force which could meet another GLC offensive. Squatters' work tokens were introduced as a means by which unemployed people could

work for the community and benefit directly. Anybody who did community work such as mending roofs, building barricades or distributing leaflets could claim work tokens. A one hour work token was exchangeable for a meal at That Tea Room, Maida Hill Squatters' community cafe in Great Western Road. The tokens could not be exchanged directly for money and were financed by the street fund and subsidised by That Tea Room. Work parties consequently became bigger and more effective encouraging even more people to join in many of whom did not claim the tokens.

People's Courts were formally created to combat rip-offs by anti-social elements and to bring disputes which could not be resolved in a single house under collective jurisdiction. The People's Court was a special open street meeting which was simultaneously 'judge, jury and executioner'. For example, one People's Court banned a certain Mousey' from Maida Hill squats for stealing lead off the roofs of Elgin Avenue while another set up a Committee of Inquiry to resolve a dispute between two people over the ownership of certain property.

A number of Maida Hill squatters helped Radio Concorde, an illegal radio station which often broadcast squatting news. Although not started by squatters, the station frequently broadcast from squats such as 101 Walterton Road, the home of

the illustrious rock (embryonic punk) band the 101ers. Along with others, I was arrested for illegal broadcasting.

### GLC war of attrition

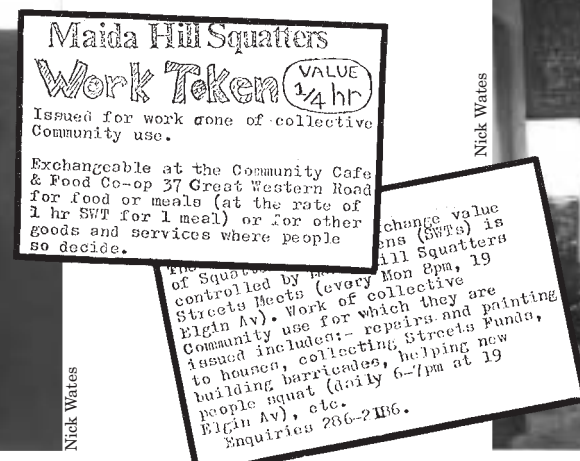
The GLC followed up its political attack with physical harassment in a sort of war of attrition conducted in conjunction with other authorities. At the beginning of March, armed Special Patrol Group police raided three houses in Elgin Avenue 'looking for bombers'. They chose the more disorganised houses in the street and broke down doors in James Bond style.

A few days later. Gas Board workers pretending to be from the post office, cut off all the gas to Elgin Avenue squats. An official inadvertently admitted that the GLC had ordered this although the GLC denied this later. The excuse given by the Gas Board was that the mains in Elgin Avenue were likely to be unsafe even though tenanted houses on the same mains were not cut off!

Demolition was the next round of GLC harassment. In April, it stuck demolition notices on empty wrecked houses and some occupied ones. This was a clear attempt to structurally weaken occupied houses and demoralise squatters in them. We responded with pickets and presented a discussion document on 'How Elgin Avenue could be vacated



Maida Hill Squatters' community cafe provides meals for people who earn work tokens by undertaking communal work. Started in a squat in 1974 the cafe lasted for six years.



Nick Wates



Nick Wates





Peter Johns/The Guardian



Press Association

*A war of attrition with no surrender from either side.*



Martin Slavin



Corrugated Times No.3

*Preparing for the bailiffs: building barricades and campaigning.*



Tony Stevens/Report

peacefully'. The GLC drew back from demolitions and agreed to leave the roofs on the derelict houses next to squats. It reverted to gutting instead.

These trials were not the only ones. In February, the sewage pipes gave trouble and were only cleared after much pressure. The post delivery and dustbin collection stopped coming for a while in the spring. When people complained that their dole cheques had been suspended they were told: 'Elgin Avenue is empty as far as we know'. Our supporters were kept involved in the fightback against these physical harassments and all our actions were reported in the press. So although we lost our gas, and the street looked more of an 'eyesore', the struggle gained more political support and the newer squatters in Elgin Avenue learned quickly about their enemy.

In May, the GLC housing leadership changed, but the new boss, Richard Balfe, was unwilling to talk. At the same time two local squatters repeated their efforts to get into the Labour Party. They had been obstructed by local party hacks two months previously because they were squatting.

This time we put pressure on Transport House, so they were able to join and put our line within the party.

At the beginning of June, local GLC councillor Jean Merriton who had been appointed GLC 'evictions co-ordinator', announced that the GLC intended to throw us out shortly. We replied that we would fight behind barricades if need be. We felt ready to face the GLC and the mounting press attacks. Our confidence was boosted at the second birthday of Maida Hill on 14 June. Four hundred people joined festivities on a new 'land squat' behind That Tea Room. Food, amusement stalls, sale of old *EASYS*, fire-eating, dancing and games followed by a bop with squatters' bands in the evening, reminded us all we had something worth defending.

#### **A long hot summer**

Thanks to our forthright response to every action, Elgin Avenue was stronger than ever but the GLC was determined to get rid of us. We knew something had to happen. On 11 July, the infamous

organised squat-bashing campaign began with the Harper letter in the *Times* (p59) and a few days later court summonses were served on the street for the second time. A lively picket marked the first preliminary hearing at the High Court on 7 August when it was arranged for a judge to consider on 20 August whether the case should be heard over the court vacation.

Elgin Avenue was militant and defiant in the face of the GLC's legal moves. A street meeting decided to enlarge the *EASY* Committee into an Action Group which met almost daily throughout the summer. We picketed the High Court on 20 and 21 August when a judge considered the GLC's application for an emergency (vacation) hearing. However the judge, probably preferring golf to sitting through days of a heavy case, fixed a hearing for 8 October stating that the GLC had had a whole year to prepare the case, so it could not have been so urgent.

The street meeting's decision to build barricades and the fact that Elgin Avenue had by now become a test case 'hooked' the media. Everything we did, good or bad, got publicity. Even

more homeless people flooded to Elgin Avenue. We housed some by expanding into formerly derelict houses and into those which we had repaired after the GLC gutted them. September was 'make or break' for Elgin Avenue. The internal 'togetherness' campaign had to succeed in getting everyone to stand and fight together. The external campaign had to turn the tables on the GLC. *EASY* declared that 'Elgin Avenue itself will be an exhibition of struggle'. Work was organised to paint and repair houses and improve their appearance. A photograph exhibition was held permanently in the office at No 19 Elgin Avenue. Its opening words were 'The GLC treads on the most needy and weak, but fears those who organise'.

The open day and 'best kept squat' competition were a great success. Visitors were convinced that we should be actively supported. Local papers printed photos of an occupant of the 'best kept squat', a little girl who the 'GLC want to evict'.

The struggle made a crucial political advance at the Young Liberals National Housing Conference in Brighton on 7 September. The Young Liberals were keen and active supporters of Elgin

Avenue. Their help included practical work in building barricades and political action. They invited Richard Balfe and I to speak at the conference without telling Balfe I was coming. Balfe at first refused to hear my questions ('for legal reasons') but he could not avoid making statements after I had made a speech. He made three baseless claims which gave us the ammunition we needed to split the local Labour Party:

- 'Elgin Avenue squatters are holding up development.' In fact the GLC could have rehoused us one year before.
- 'Elgin Avenue squatters are demanding to be rehoused all together.' A lie created by the GLC to justify eviction.
- 'The local Labour Party called for the eviction of Elgin Avenue.'

On this last point we wrote an open letter to the local Harrow Road Ward Party and the Paddington General Management Committee to force a debate. This revealed that neither of them had called for the Elgin Avenue eviction. The Paddington Labour Party was split on the issue and referred the matter to its executive committee.

#### **The last seven days**

In the final week, Elgin Avenue squatters completely turned the tables on the GLC. We had the initiative all the time. The GLC dithered and then surrendered. This was a dramatic reversal of July's week of co-ordinated squat-bashing. The week started with leaflets and press and TV coverage which reached millions of people.

The High Court on 8 October was buzzing with squatters from all over London and a picket was mounted outside. Many newspapers printed the first paragraphs of my court statement (affidavit): 'The history of Elgin Avenue and its occupants is a history of the worsening housing situation and the desperate struggles of tens of thousands of homeless and badly housed people in Britain today. The GLC and its leaders sees the resistance to homelessness of the occupants of Elgin Avenue and the example this sets for other housing struggles as a serious threat to the housing policies of themselves and the government . . .'

After three days, the Judge granted the eviction order. However, he had clearly formed the





Workers Press

impression that we were not all ‘evil scroungers’ and that a confrontation with us would damage the image of both courts and councils. In a very favourable summing up, he said he had ‘listened sympathetically to some very sad cases of homelessness from perfectly decent people’ and advised the GLC to make ‘a phased evacuation in discussion with Mr Corbyn’. This was a clear call to the GLC to rehouse us. We had never hoped to win the court case legally but we had succeeded in using it politically.

But immediately after, the Under Sheriff, Michael Harris, warned us that he ‘may well be round early next week’. The weekend was spent energetically building barricades and painting slogans to make ‘a Steel Elgin’. Journalists were constantly around. The most untogether, freaked-out individuals found a purpose and joined in. A

certain ‘Shaky Dave’ for example, who had nervous shakes and normally did nothing, was vigorously building barricades. The struggle in those weeks did more for many people than years of drug prescriptions, doctors and social workers.

“The Big 3” – Michael Harris, Commander Hunter of the Metropolitan Police, and Chief Superintendent Howell of Harrow Road Police – paid our office a visit on the morning of Monday 13 October. They asked if we would go peacefully and warned threateningly that resistance to eviction was illegal under the Sheriffs Act. I replied, ‘The position is that no one voluntarily leaves unless everyone is given rehousing’.

At lunch-time we held a press conference entitled ‘How the GLC can peacefully resolve the Elgin Avenue confrontation and how decent housing for all can be achieved in Britain in one

*Under-Sheriff Harris (left) and Commander Hunter (right) visit the squatters’ office to warn them not to resist. The author is on the phone to his MP and is with the squatters’ solicitor.*

year’. There we revealed a confidential letter in which a GLC housing official stated that the GLC had more empty property than it could cope with, and was considering letting to people ‘who do not normally qualify’ (the beginning of the ‘hard-to-let’ system later much used, p 89). The *Evening Standard* lessened the GLC’s embarrassment by ignoring the fact that we had exposed this and instead portrayed it as a new policy which put the GLC in a reasonable and sensible light.

Arthur Latham, the local Labour MP, sent his apologies to the press conference and said we could make his support public.

In the afternoon, we received a phone call from the GLC solicitor asking for a delegation to meet the GLC with a full list of all the occupants of Elgin Avenue. The meeting was bizarre. Balfe stated we would all be rehoused according to the campaign formula: families and old people in GLC rented flats, and single people in licensed short-life housing. We wanted to know what would happen to the single people after their short-life housing was wanted back by the GLC and were told the whole deal was with the full understanding that there would be ‘every co-operation in the future.’ That meant we could expect to be rehoused again! However, Balfe refused to ‘interfere’ with the Sheriff’s deadline of Wednesday morning, claiming it was ‘impossible’ – which everyone in the room knew was utter nonsense.

Next day, GLC officials visited Elgin Avenue to check details of the families but they had no list of short-life houses for the single people. Later that day, at a televised meeting in Elgin Avenue, Michael Harris and Commander Hunter confirmed they would come the next day (Wednesday) and asked if we would go ‘peacefully’. We said all the rehousing offers had to be inspected and accepted before we left. The full GLC meeting debated the matter all afternoon and Balfe appeared on TV at 6.30 pm saying that the lists were ‘on their way’. The short-life list arrived at 10 pm and our inspection team went to Camberwell in South London to look at the houses.

At 11 pm a packed meeting of squatters agreed a unanimous position statement: both the ‘short-life’ and the ‘family flats’ lists had to be received and inspected by the time the Sheriff came and if they were not, we would ‘insist on time to resolve the situation’. A delegation consisting of representatives of single people, families, the Tenants Federation, Trades Council and Young Liberals was chosen to negotiate in front of the barricades.

The strengthening of barricades was continued overnight. The inspection team reported back in the small hours. The houses for single people were OK, much better, in fact, than Elgin Avenue. In the morning Graham Walters (acting for the families) and I went to the GLC Western District Office to demand the family housing list. They agreed under pressure that a sample flat (the one allocated to Graham Walters’ family) could be inspected, and brought the rest of the list at 11.30 am. When Graham Walters returned happy half an hour later, we knew we had won.

### The three lessons of Elgin Avenue

Well over 1,000 people lived in Elgin Avenue for various lengths of time. They were a cross section of London’s homeless who, after a desperate search for somewhere to live, had found themselves ‘at the end of the line’ in Elgin Avenue. They included young ‘roughnecks’, middle-class drop-outs, ‘hippies’, building workers, dishwashers, the sick and unemployable, families and more, though at the end the middle-class people had almost all left. They were not generally political when they arrived but the environment they were thrown into overcame the isolation and atomisation of most living situations and they learned fast.

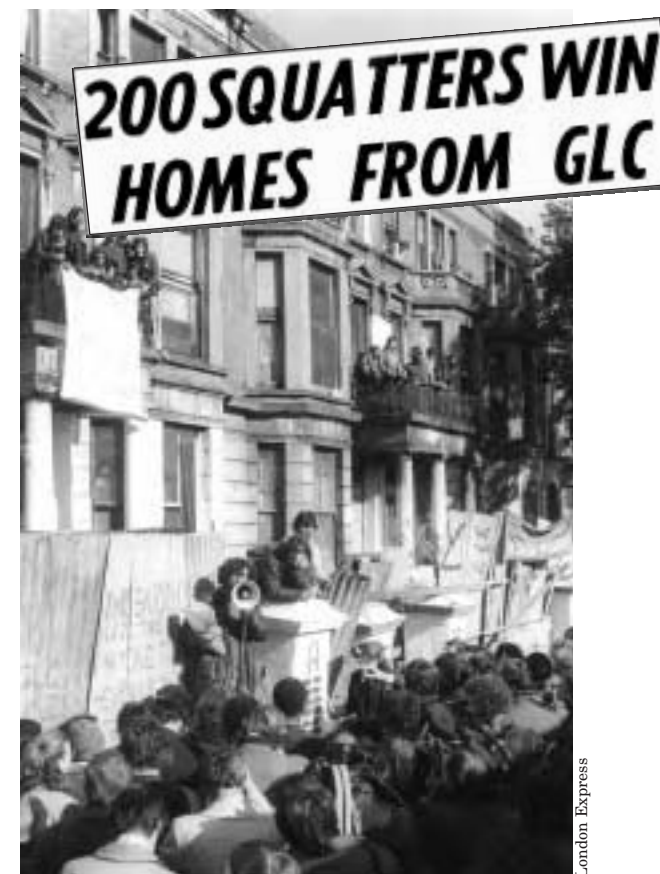
Elgin Avenue’s struggle won for three reasons:

- First, we had public campaign policies which related to the whole housing crisis. That way we got *political* support from the labour movement. We showed how our struggle was part of the whole fight for decent housing for all, how the waiting list is a con trick, how there *is* a solution to the housing crisis and how the squatters struggle can be in the forefront of it.

- Second, we were *democratically organised* so that everyone could join in and know that what they did was part of what everyone was doing. Street meetings, social events, elected delegations, work tokens and *EASY* all contributed to this democratic cohesion.

- Third, we were ready to *defy the law*. We built barricades which took our stand to its logical conclusion. This proved we were serious and not squatting for fun. It made our words about the housing crisis more meaningful and our message stronger.

Together these three factors ensured that in the final confrontation human justice would be on our side and the GLC and other authorities would lose too much if they evicted us. Whatever happened they had to lose and we had to win. The victory of Elgin Avenue, like so many struggles of the downtrodden, proves the indomitable spirit of humanity. The lessons from that street and other struggles before it will be used in a thousand struggles to come in housing and the workplace until capitalism is finally smashed and our world will be ours. •



London Express

*Victory is announced*

*‘If the GLC had not given us what we wanted I was ready to resist. They would have had to put me and my child out screaming. The most important thing was the way we stuck together against their months of harassment. People on the waiting list should fight too. I’m going to tell tenants in my new block they could have good things if they fought.’ (Sonia White, aged 27 with a one-year old son).*



Philip Wolmuth



# Victory Villa

by Nick Anning and Jill Simpson

Challenging the planners in South London

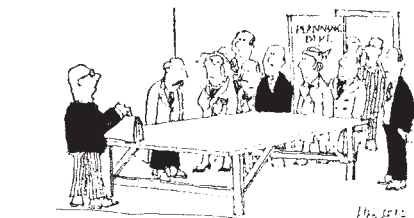
## The planners' plan

The area around Villa Road is still rather quaintly labelled 'Angell Town' on the maps; a legacy of a past which includes the old manorial estate of Stockwell and the eccentric landowner John Angell who died in 1784. To those who live here now, this is part of Brixton in the London Borough of Lambeth with the market and the Victoria Line tube station a few minutes walk away.

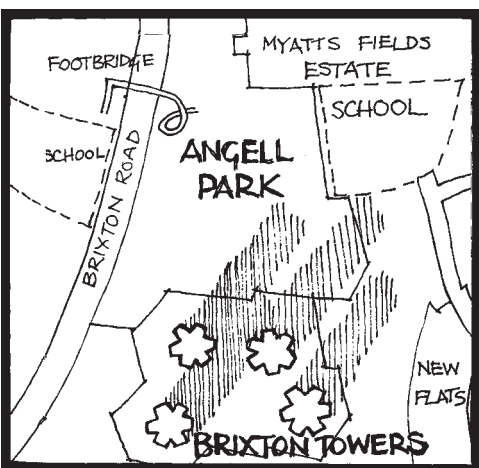
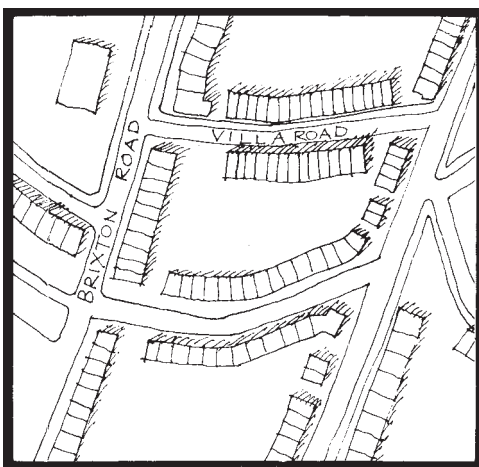
What the maps do not show is the present state of the immediate vicinity of Villa Road. A century and a half of social change has transformed an upper class prosperous Victorian merchant enclave into an area of mainly working class housing. But the change wrought in just a few years by Lambeth Council's planners has been far more radical than that gradual transformation. The majority of houses which stood in 1965 have been demolished and Villa Road too, would have disappeared if the planners had had their way. The fact that most of it still stands is the result of a protracted battle between the squatter community and the Council's bureaucrats and councillors.

The origins of this battle can be found in *The Brixton Plan*<sup>1</sup>, an intriguing document produced by Lambeth in 1969, and in the events that led up to its publication. Indeed, Villa Road's very existence as a squatter community arises from the Plan, its initial shortcomings, its lack of flexibility in the face of economic changes and the refusal of leading Lambeth councillors and planners to engage in meaningful consultation. Their intransigence in refusing to admit that the plans might be wrong or open to revision was a further contributing factor.

The Plan had its roots in the optimistic climate of Harold Wilson's first government in the early sixties. The Greater London Council (GLC) asked the recently enlarged London boroughs to draw



"We haven't bothered with models or anything. You all know what a redevelopment scheme looks like by now."



Villa Road area, 1970 (top), and as envisaged in the Brixton Plan (above).

## Chapter 12

up community plans in line with the GLC's overall strategy for taking the metropolis gleaming into the seventies. Lambeth responded eagerly to this prompting, only too anxious to establish itself as one of the more enterprising inner London boroughs.

The scale and scope of its redevelopment plan was tremendously ambitious. Lambeth was to be transformed into an even more splendid memorial to the planners' megalomania than neighbouring Croydon with Brixton as its showcase. Brixton town centre was to be completely rebuilt, incorporating a huge transport interchange complex where a six-lane highway, motorway box, main line railway and underground intersected.

Brixton's social mix was to completely change with middle-class commuters flocking south of the Thames, to bring renewed prosperity and to rejuvenate business and commerce. Ravensett, the property company which gave nearby Elephant and Castle its unloved redevelopment, expressed interest in the plan for Brixton. Tarmac, the road building firm, was given permission to build an office block on condition it helped to fund a new leisure centre. The Inner London Education Authority talked of new schools and a new site for South West London College. The dream seemed possible.

The plan would involve demolishing the fading bastions of Brixton's Victorian and Edwardian splendour, epitomised by the very name Villa Road. These houses were to be replaced with modern homes for the working class of Lambeth. Angell Town was zoned for residential use, Brixton Road was to become a six-lane expressway and three proposed new housing developments (Brixton Town Centre, Myatts Fields and Stockwell Park Estate) would completely remove old Angell Town from the map. About 400 houses were to be demolished and their occupants

'decanted'. Some low rise, high density modern estates were to be constructed but at the core of the plan was the construction of five 52 storey tower blocks. Brixton Towers was the apt name chosen for this development which, at 600 feet high, was to be the highest housing scheme outside Chicago. A large park was planned, in line with the GLC's recommendations, to serve the 6,000 residents of the new estates. The scheme was a tribute to the planners' megalomania.

The aim seems to have been to establish pools of high density council housing with limited access, restricting traffic to major perimeter roads where a facade of rehabilitated properties would

The North side of Villa Road



give a false respectability to a disembowelled interior. Stockwell Park Estate, the first of the three estates to be completed, has already proved the disastrous nature of this type of development. Completed in 1971, it has suffered from dampness, lack of repairs and vandalism. For several years, its purpose-built garages remained unused and, until recently, it had a reputation as a 'sink estate' for so-called 'problem families'.

In the heady climate of the sixties, this type of 'macroplanning' was taken as approved by the ballot box and by public enquiries. It was assumed that the professional planners 'knew best' and the majority of Lambeth's 300,000 population were unaware of, let alone consulted about, the far-reaching nature of these plans.

## First stirrings

In 1967 Lambeth Council obtained a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) on the Angell Town area, despite a number of objections at the public enquiry. The familiar pattern of blight set in. Residents, promised rehousing in the imminent future, no longer maintained their houses as they were soon to be demolished. Tenants in multi-occupied houses found it increasingly difficult to press the Council for repairs and maintenance, and tried to obtain immediate rehousing.

The long years of Labour dominance in Lambeth were interrupted with three years of Tory rule but this was of little consequence to the monolithic plan. It drew support from Conservatives and Labour alike, although a radical caucus



in the Labour Party known as the ‘Norwood Group’ began to voice misgivings during Labour’s spell in opposition. By the time Labour regained control in 1971, Angell Town was a depressed and demoralised area, as voting figures for the ward in local elections showed. Though staunchly Labour, turn-out in Angell Ward has been the lowest of all Lambeth’s 20 wards since 1971, averaging only about 25 per cent of the electorate.

The newly returned Labour administration of 1971 contained a sizeable left-wing influence through the Norwood Group and had high hopes of cutting back the massive 14,000 waiting list for council homes. However by now they were prisoners of processes originating with the Plan. Population counts in clearance areas were proving inaccurate, mainly because live-in landlords, multi-occupiers and extended families were reluctant, through fear of public health regulations, to give full details of the number of people in their houses. As ‘decanting’ took place from development areas, more and more people began to find themselves ineligible for rehousing, or were given offers of accommodation unsuitable for their needs. Most houses were boarded up or gutted, adding to blight. Homelessness grew rapidly.

Despite the Labour Group’s optimism, the building programme slowed down. Lambeth’s target of 1,000 new homes per year from 1971-8 was never met. Many people, particularly Labour Party members, began to realise that sweeping clearance programmes destroyed large numbers of houses in good condition as well as unfit ones. With a tighter economic climate and a Conservative Government opposed to municipalisation in office, some of the steam had already gone out of Lambeth’s redevelopment plans by 1971, only two years after the publication of *The Brixton Plan*.

### The neighbourhood council

The Norwood Group of councillors both paralleled and reflected the upsurge of radical, libertarian and revolutionary politics in Brixton during the early seventies. Dissatisfaction with Lambeth’s planning processes and its inability to cope with housing and homelessness gave focus to a number of dissenting community-based groups. Activists in these groups were instrumental in establishing a strong squatting movement for single people – the main section of Lambeth’s population whose

housing needs went unrecognised.

The Labour Council began to establish Neighbourhood Councils at ward level on its return to power in 1971. Their creation raised the prospect of a genuinely more participatory form of democracy. For example, Angell Ward Neighbourhood Council quickly became the focus of well-organised agitation on behalf of local tenants. It aimed to be a representative body based on tenants associations and street groups. A delegated committee was established to campaign around local issues and to report directly to the Council via Lambeth’s Neighbourhood Councils Sub-Committee, to some extent outflanking the position of local councillor (one of whom was the Labour Group leader).

The St John’s Street Group was one of several street groups set up in 1972 under the wing of the Neighbourhood Council. Its membership included residents of both Villa Road and St John’s Crescent as the two streets were suffering from blight arising out of the same plans. Most of the immediate area was scheduled to be pulled down to form part of the new Angell Park. Villa Road tenants wanted rehousing while those in neighbouring St John’s Crescent were campaigning about the poor state of repair of their properties. The Street Group began a series of direct actions (eg a rent strike and the dumping of uncollected rubbish at the nearby area housing office) to put pressure on the Council. As a result, many Villa Road tenants were rehoused and their houses boarded up. Most also had their services cut off and drains sealed with concrete to discourage squatting. More sensibly, a few of the houses were allocated on licence to Lambeth Self-Help, a short-life housing group whose office was round the corner in Brixton Road.

### Squatters enter the fray

Some of the Neighbourhood Council activists moved into No 20 Villa Road, one of the houses handed over to Lambeth Self-Help, in early 1973. That summer another house in Villa Road was squatted. No 20 became the centre of St John’s Street Group activity, providing an important point of contact with the Neighbourhood Council, Lambeth Self-Help and unofficial squatters. In 1974, other houses on Villa Road were squatted, mainly by groups of homeless single people. Many had previous experience of squatting either in Lambeth or in other London boroughs where

councils were starting to clamp down on squatters, reinforcing the pool of experience, skill and political solidarity which was to be the strength of the Villa Road community. The fact that a certain number of people came from outside Lambeth was frequently used in anti-squatting propaganda.

Meanwhile, the Labour Council was moving to the right and a strong anti-squatter consensus had begun to emerge, particularly after the 1974 council elections. The new Chairperson of the Housing Committee and his Deputy were in the forefront of this opposition to squatters. Their proposals for ending the ‘squatting problem’, far from dealing with the root causes of homelessness, merely attempted to erase symptoms and met with little success. In fact, the autumn of 1974 saw the formation of All Lambeth Squatters, a militant body representing most of the borough’s squatters. It mobilised 600 people to a major public meeting at the Town Hall in December 1974 to protest at the Council’s proposals to end ‘unofficial’ squatting in its property.<sup>2</sup>

The rightward-leaning Council took all the teeth out of the Neighbourhood Councils and the one in Angell Ward, torn by internal disputes, ceased to function by the end of 1973. That was not to say that the issue of redevelopment for Angell Town was not still of major interest to the local residents. The Brixton Towers project had been dropped, throwing into question the whole plan. Furthermore, the programme of rehousing and demolition was proceeding slower than expected forcing the Council to consider its short-term plans for the area. It came up with the idea of a ‘temporary open space’ which was to involve the demolition of Villa Road and St John’s Crescent.

According to a Council brochure published in June 1974, this open space was to be the forerunner of a larger Angell Park with play and recreation facilities. Walkways linking the park to smaller areas of open space (‘green fingers’) alongside Brixton Road were to be built and a footbridge over that busy road was to link it with the densely populated Stockwell Park Estate.

The justification for the plan was that the high density of housing proposed for the nearby Myatts Fields South and Brixton Town Centre North estates required open space of the local park variety within a quarter of a mile radius. What was not publicly admitted was that the construction of

these estates would involve a much smaller increase in the area’s population than had been originally envisaged.<sup>3</sup> Instead of 3,000, the figure was now admitted to be nearer 800, hardly enough to justify the creation of a park that would involve the demolition of much good housing. In any case, money for the open space, let alone the park, was not to be available until autumn 1976, and in June 1974 housing officials declared that the Council would not require Villa Road houses until summer 1976.

Arguably, this amounted to a legal licence to occupy the houses. Probably the Council would have had little further trouble from the Villa Road squatters had it not been for two factors: the continuous programme of wrecking and vandalising houses in the vicinity and the Council leadership’s adherence to a hardline policy on squatting and homelessness. The combination of these two factors increased militant opposition to the Council’s politicians and bureaucrats which culminated in a full-scale confrontation in the summer of 1976.

A week of action in September 1974 led to more houses being squatted and saw the first meetings of the Villa Road Street Group (not to be confused with the by-then defunct St John’s Street Group). The members of the Group had come together fairly randomly and their demands were naturally different. For instance, there were Lambeth Self-Help members for whom rehousing was top priority; single people who demanded the principle of rehousing but wished to develop creative alternatives; and students and foreigners who were in desperate need of accommodation but whose transient presence or precarious legal status kept them outside the housing struggle which was taking place around them.

By the end of 1974, 15 houses in Villa Road and one in Brixton Road (No 315) had been squatted by Street Group members who now numbered about a hundred. Like in other squatted streets common interests drew people together and gave the street its own identity (see, for example, Chapter 17 on St Agnes Place and Chapter 11 on Elgin Avenue). The Street Group became a focus for the organisation of social as well as political activities. For instance, in the summer of 1975, a street carnival attracted over 1,000 people. A cafe, food co-operative, band and news-sheet (*Villain*) were further activities of the now-thriving street.

But it was a community living under a permanent threat and a stark reminder of that was the eviction of No 315 Brixton Road in April 1975. The house along with two others which were too badly vandalised to have been squatted, were pulled down as part of the Council’s preparation for the footbridge linking the proposed park with the Stockwell Park Estate. The dust had hardly settled after the demolition when the Council announced the cancellation of the footbridge plan.<sup>4</sup> The site was left unused for five years and then grassed over.

Events like this tended to harden the opposition to the Council in the Street Group. Another five houses had been squatted during 1975, including those with serious faults which needed a lot of sustained work like re-roofing, plumbing, rewiring and unblocking drains.

The population of the street was now approaching 200. Three houses in St John’s Crescent which had been emptied in preparation for demolition were taken over with the help of the departing tenants. Several other houses in the Crescent and Brixton Road were wrecked and demolished by the Council, still intent on implementing its temporary open space plan.

Squatters were increasingly becoming a thorn in the Council’s side. Following the failure of the Council’s 1974 initiative to bring squatting under control, the Council tried again. It published a policy proposing a ‘final solution’ to the twin ‘problems’ of homelessness and squatting. It combined measures aimed at discouraging homeless people from applying to the Council for housing – like tighter definitions of who would be accepted and higher hostel fees – with a rehash of the same old anti-squatting ploys – like more gutting. The policy was eventually passed in April 1976 after considerable opposition both within the Labour Party from the Norwood Group and from homeless people and squatters.

In a sense, Villa Road, and later St Agnes Place, were the testing grounds for this new policy. Although the Council had agreed to meet Villa Road Street Group representatives in February, its position was unyielding. Twenty-one of the 32 houses in Villa Road were to be demolished within four months and the street would be closed off for open space. Moreover, the Council told the Street Group that when the houses were evicted, families would be referred to the Council’s homeless families unit but single people would just have

to ‘make their own arrangements’. The future of the remaining 11 houses was less certain as they were earmarked for a junior school that, even in 1976, was unlikely ever to be built.

### The Trades Council Inquiry

It was clear that the Street Group could not fight the Council without outside support. There was already considerable local dissatisfaction with the Council for its failure to change the plans for the area and the Street Group, in an attempt to harness available support, organised a public meeting in April 1976 to discuss courses of action. At the meeting, which was well-attended, it was decided to initiate a Trades Council Inquiry into local housing and recreational needs. This idea was supported by a wide range of people and groups including the vicar of St John’s Church which overlooks Villa Road and the ward Labour Party. A committee including two Street Group representatives was set up to collect evidence and prepare a report.

The Trades Council Inquiry report was to be presented to a public meeting of 200 people at St. John’s School two months later. Lambeth’s Chief Planning Officer, its Deputy Director of Housing and an alderman came to hear their critics and see the meeting vote overwhelmingly in favour of the report’s recommendations. These were:

- No more demolitions, wreckings or evictions.
  - Smaller, more easily supervised play-spaces should be created from existing empty sites, rather than clinging stubbornly to a plan for one large park.
  - Money saved by stopping evictions, wreckings and demolition should be spent on repairs on nearby estates or rehabilitation of older property.
  - The Council should recognise the strong community in the area and take that as the starting point for allowing active participation by local people in the planning process.
- The Council’s representatives made no concession to these views except to suggest rather insultingly that the report might be admissible for discussion as a ‘local petition’. They firmly rejected the meeting’s recommendation that the Trades Council Report should be considered at the next Council meeting.





Union Place Collective



Chris Davies/ Report



*The wreckers. Top and bottom: Sound houses in Brixton Road are demolished for a park, 1978. Centre: A Lambeth Council van acquires an apt graffitto (and two flat tyres) while its occupants destroy a perfectly habitable house round the corner, Radnor Terrace, 1977.*

Whilst the Inquiry had been collecting its evidence, there had been a further series of confrontations between squatters and wreckers. The Trades Council had passed a resolution blacking the wrecking of good houses and the Council was forced to find non-union labour to do its dirty work. The squatters managed to take over one house in Brixton Road before it was wrecked (No 321) but another (No 325) was gutted by workmen under police protection. The culmination of these battles between squatters and wreckers was to be at St. Agnes Place in January 1977, an action which attracted widespread national publicity (p 85).

Both these wreckings and the Inquiry attracted local press coverage and support for the squatters widened. Several Norwood councillors, prompted by a letter from the Street Group, began to give active support as well as inside information on the Council's position. Links with the local labour movement were helped by squatters' support for a construction workers picket during a strike at the Tarmac site in the town centre and for an unemployed building workers march.

### To the barricades

With careful timing, the Council made its initial response to the Inquiry's report the day after it was released when all the houses occupied by the Street Group (except those on the school site) received county court summonses for possession. The court cases were scheduled for 30 June, a couple of weeks away, and the Street Group's response was immediate: a defence committee was organised to barricade all threatened houses, co-ordinate a legal defence, publicise the campaign, set up an early warning system and much more.

At the court hearing, the judge criticised the Council for its sloppy preparation and only eight out of fifteen possession orders were granted. Although this was a partial victory, the barricades obviously had to remain. The Street Group embarked on a series of militant actions with support from other Lambeth squatters aimed at forcing the Council to reconsider the Trades Council Inquiry's findings which it had rejected at a heavily-picketed meeting and at getting the Council to offer rehousing to Villa Road squatters. First, the Lambeth Housing Advice Centre was occupied for an afternoon in July and, a month later, following the breakdown of negotiations, the Planning Advice Centre received the same treatment. This



Union Place Collective



*Stopping the wreckers. Top: Squatters bravely by-pass police guarding the doors while Council workmen start gutting before the departing tenants have finished packing – the house is saved for a few more years, 1976. Centre: the squatters' van, 1976. Bottom: Town hall picket, 1977.*

Union Place Collective

did not prevent the planning and housing committees from formally rejecting the Trades Council Report but both occupations achieved their primary objective in getting Lambeth round the negotiating table. The Street Group's initial position was for rehousing as a community but as the talks continued, it was decided to agree to consider individual rehousing. Staying in Villa Road on a permanent basis was not an option considered seriously by either side at this stage. After the second occupation and a survey of empty property in the borough by the squatters, the Council representatives said they might be prepared to look for individual properties for rehousing. The Street Group's minimum demand was rehousing for 120 people knowing full well that any offer of rehousing would breach both the squatting and homelessness policies.

In October, the Council made an offer of 17 houses to the Street Group but the houses were in such a bad condition that the sincerity of its motives could clearly be questioned. The Street Group had no option but to reject them despite the strain that living behind barricades was causing. The defences could never be made impregnable and the difficulties of living permanently under the threat of immediate eviction was too much for many people who left, sometimes to unthreatened houses up the street. They were generally replaced by even more determined opponents of the Council and morale in the street was further boosted by the occupation of the remaining tenanted and licensed houses in the threatened part of the street whose occupants were all rehoused.

After the rejection of the offer, no further word came from the Council though it seemed clear that it was reluctant at this stage to send in the bailiffs. A war of attrition set in, marked by two interesting developments.

First, a sympathetic councillor was selected to stand in the by-election of November 1976 caused by the death of an Angell Ward councillor. The selection was a success for the Street Group's members in the ward Labour Party whose votes were decisive. It was a rebuff for the Council's leader whose nominee failed to win selection and helped to chip away the right's narrow majority within the Labour Group, contributing directly to the leftward movement that eventually put the Norwood Group with a left-wing leader in power at the local elections of May 1978.

Secondly, in October, the Department of the

Environment (DOE) held a public inquiry over the Council's application to close Villa Road. Several local organisations, including the Street Group, presented evidence against closure. An inquiry which should have been over in a day stretched to ten. Each point was strongly contested since the Street Group realised that if the Council was unable to close Villa Road its plan for the park would need drastic modification. The DOE inspector promised to make his report a matter of urgency.

### The turning point

As the Council still did not have possession orders on all the houses, it now restarted court proceedings against all the squatted houses (except those on the school site) – this time in the High Court. The Street Group hurriedly drew up a detailed legal defence, arguing a general licence on the grounds that official negotiations with the Council had never been formally terminated. Villa Road's case was strengthened by statements from two Lambeth councillors. The hearing opened in January 1977, marked by a picket, street theatre and live music outside the High Court.

Judging by its legal representatives' response at the preliminary hearing, the Council had not anticipated any legal defence and the case was adjourned twice. The Council's reason for going to the High Court instead of the county court was that a High Court order for possession allows the police to assist directly in carrying out the eviction. A county court order did not give the police power to intervene except to guard against a possible 'breach of the peace.' Events at nearby St. Agnes Place in January had set an ugly precedent and showed the Council was now prepared for full scale battles with squatters. Over 250 police had arrived at dawn in St Agnes Place to preside over the demolition with a ball and chain of empty houses although the demolition was stopped within hours by a hastily initiated court injunction by the squatters.

In the event, the St Agnes Place affair put Lambeth Council at a moral disadvantage and had an important effect on events in Villa Road. Labour Group leader David Stimpson had staked his hard-line reputation on an outright confrontation but the failure to demolish all the houses and the resulting bad publicity put his political future in doubt. To make matters worse for Stimpson, the DOE

inspector's report on the public inquiry into the closure of Villa Road was published around the same time. It ruled against the Council: Villa Road had to stay open until revised plans for Brixton Town Centre North were devised 'in consultation with all interested parties'.

The remnants of The Brixton Plan had already started to crumble around the Council when Ravenscroft, one of the major backers, had pulled out the previous summer. With the unfavourable report from the DOE inspector and news that the construction of the school planned for the top end of Villa Road was to be deferred indefinitely, the planners had to go back to the drawing board. *The Brixton Plan* was even more of a pipedream than it had been in 1969.

By the time the High Court hearing resumed in March, the Council had been forced into a position where it had to compromise. The judge encouraged the Council and the Street Group to settle out of court as, in the end, the granting of a possession order was inevitable. After some hard bargaining, the Street Group got a three months stay of execution to 3 June 1977 and costs of £50 awarded against it, a considerable saving on the estimated £7,000 the case had cost Lambeth.

June 3 passed uneventfully as did the first anniversary of the erection of the barricades. Indeed, they were to stay up almost another year until in March 1978 the squatters felt confident enough of the Council's intentions to take them down. No attempt had ever been made to breach them.

With the DOE inspector's decision not to close the road and the absence of revised plans for the area, the possibility now emerged that the fate of the two sides of the street could be different. The south side (12 houses) backed onto a triangle, two-thirds of which was already demolished for the open space. On the other hand, the north side (20 houses) backed onto a new council estate and its demolition would add little space to the park area even assuming that permission to close Villa Road were obtained. Therefore, the Street Group decided to accept demolition of the south side provided that everyone was rehoused, and to push for the houses on the north side to be retained and rehabilitated, ideally as a housing co-op for the existing squatters. Negotiations were resumed on this basis and Lambeth kept talking: clearly, it didn't want a repeat of the St Agnes Place disaster.





Angela Phillips/Time Out

### A new Council

The first tangible gain for the Street Group came in March 1978, when two short-life houses were offered to people being rehoused from the south side. But the most important event came two months later, when a new left-Labour Council was elected with Ted Knight, a 'self confessed marxist' and Matthew Warburton, a first time councillor, as leader and housing chairperson respectively. It was a significant victory in that it represented as radical a shift in policy as a victory by the Tories – in the other direction, of course. Squatters in both Villa Road and St Agnes Place had contributed directly to the leftwards swing and the new leaders had pledged to adopt more sympathetic policies.

Lambeth housing department officials now pressed for the demolition of houses on the south side, to make way for the new Angell Park, and suggested that all Villa Road Street Group members join Lambeth Self-Help Housing. It appeared that a new atmosphere of negotiation was being created but the same housing department officers did the negotiating and the Plan had not been totally abandoned. Eventually the Street Group agreed, very reluctantly, to the south side of Villa Road being vacated, with all occupants being rehoused in property with at least 18 months life. Demolition was to begin on 24 July 1978 and the fourth annual Villa Road carnival was made spectacular by one of the vacated houses on the south side being burnt down as a defiant gesture of protest. All the houses accepted for rehousing were in the borough, though some were in Norwood, several miles away.

The Street Group, left to its own devices, requested details of the Council's plans for the rehabilitation of Villa Road north side. It's main aim was to keep the north side houses. Inspired by the growth of housing co-ops in other areas (p 90-1), the Street Group decided to propose a co-op for Villa Road. In January 1979 an 'outline proposal' was sent to the housing directorate suggesting four possible types of co-op but with an expressed preference for a management co-op. In this type of co-op, the Council continues to own the property whilst handing over responsibilities for rent collection, maintenance and management to the co-op. Rehabilitation is financed either by local or

central government. It was felt that other types of co-op involving the sale of council housing stock were politically unacceptable.

The co-op proposals were presented to the housing committee in April 1979 and formal approval was given for the chairman to continue negotiations with the Street Group for setting up a co-op. The climate had certainly changed and although squatting was still regarded as a 'problem', the Council now negotiated rather than evicted, at least with large groups. Lambeth officers were reluctant to embark on this scheme which was entirely new to the borough and instead suggested a joint management/ownership co-op. Houses in Villa Road would form the management wing, and the ownership branch would be in a nearby Housing Action Area. This was to ensure that four or five houses in Villa Road could be used to accommodate large families from Lambeth's waiting list. It seemed ironic that Lambeth was now short of large houses when the previous administration had operated a policy of systematic demolition of such houses. The planning machine had done a complete U-turn.

The Street Group now had to change its tactics. Instead of militant campaigns with barricades and regular occupations of council offices, it had to get down to the nitty gritty of filling in forms to register as a friendly society and as a co-op, finding a development agent (Solon Housing Association was eventually selected) and working out detailed costings for the rehabilitation. It was no longer a matter of just saving the houses, it was a question of getting the long-term best deal for Street Group members and Lambeth's homeless.

After Solon had submitted detailed costings in January 1980 (it worked out at about £7,000 per bed space), the housing committee agreed, the following month, to support Villa Road's application to the Housing Corporation (a quango through which government money is channelled to housing associations and co-ops) for funding to rehabilitate the houses. Lambeth would grant Villa Road a 40 year lease. The recommendations were not passed without dissent. Some of the old anti-squatting brigade were still on the committee, intent on eviction without rehousing for Villa Road squatters. But Street Group members now no longer had to live day to day under threat of eviction – they could dream of still living in Villa Road and collecting their pensions.

Not everything was different. Two houses on the corner of Villa Road, Nos 64 and 66 Wiltshire



Union Place Collective

Lambeth town hall occupied, 1977.

Road were demolished in April 1980. They had been squatted in October 1976 following an unsuccessful wrecking attempt by the Council. They had provided housing for some 20 people for three and a half years and were now being pulled down to make way for the Angell Park play centre scheduled to start in June 1980. Yet three months later, not a brick had been laid. At least now Lambeth offered all the occupants short-life or permanent rehousing.

The first scheme was rejected by the Housing Corporation but a different plan was submitted in July 1980 involving the conversion of the houses to accommodate 12 or 13 people each, rather more than the number already living there. Conversion costs were appreciably lower (under £4,500 per bed space) and the scheme had, in the words of the manager of the housing advice centre, 'top priority' from the Council with support from both council officers and councillors.

### Victory Villa?

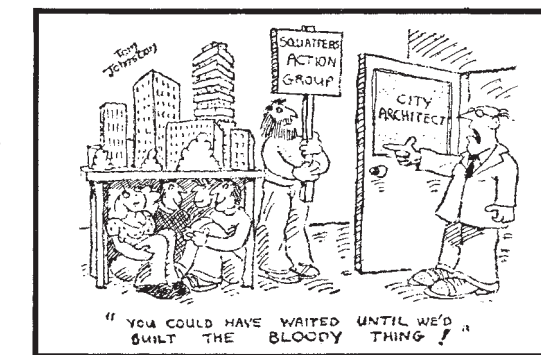
The change in relationship between Villa Road, a squatted street in Lambeth, and the local council between 1974 and 1980 from a harsh anti-squatting policy to negotiations for a housing co-op could not have been more dramatic. But what else has been achieved by six years of squatting in Villa Road? The squatters arrived late in Angell Town and it would be nice to imagine that had they arrived earlier, they would have posed an even greater challenge to the lunacies of the planners. But, in the event the achievements of the squatters have been significant, both for themselves and for the immediate community:

- Homes have been provided for the equivalent of 1,000 people for a year in houses which would otherwise have been gutted or demolished.

- About 25 people have obtained two year licences and 15 have obtained council tenancies from Lambeth.
- About 160 people are in the process of obtaining permanent housing as a co-op, remaining together as a community. Working with Solon's architects, they will be able to have a considerable measure of control over the rehabilitation of the houses, retaining many of the collective arrangements and physical adaptations which have developed over the years (p 175).
- Twenty elegant 19th century houses have been saved from demolition and a useful street prevented from being closed.
- Control of Lambeth Council has significantly shifted partly thanks to the Villa Road squatters.
- And, less tangibly, although few people stayed in Villa Road for all the six years of struggle, a cohesive street community was created which many people enjoyed living in.

Squatters in Villa Road, like those in other streets in Lambeth which won concessions from the Council (St Agnes Place, Heath Road, Rectory Gardens, and St Alphonsus Road) challenged the complacency and smugness of the bureaucrats and won. That was the real victory in Villa Road.

What happened in Villa Road could have happened just as easily in other blighted streets in Lambeth or elsewhere. The squatters organisation, their use of direct action and their insistence that planning and housing are two sides of the same coin challenged the complacency and smugness of the bureaucrats. Villa Road's real victory was to prove that plans are not inviolable, and that people can affect and be directly involved in planning processes that determine their living conditions. Considering what Villa Road was up against, that is no small achievement. •



Union Place Collective

Top: Squatters about to be ejected from a Council meeting, 1974.  
Bottom: DOE inspector visits Villa Road, 1976.



# Is there life after squatting?

by Tristan Wood

Winning a permanent home by forming a co-op in central London – Seymour Buildings



Sebotee

## Chapter 13

1975	<b>January</b>	Seymour buildings squatted.
	<b>February</b>	Residents Group forms and begins negotiations with Westminster Council for a short-term licence.
	<b>March</b>	Association enters negotiations on squatters' behalf.
	<b>November</b>	Electricity supply connected.
1976	<b>March</b>	Westminster and Christian Action Housing Association sign short-term licence agreement. Squatters form Co-operative Development Group.
	<b>April</b>	Westminster announces its plans to re-develop Seymour Buildings for offices and housing.
	<b>June</b>	Seymour Housing Co-operative is registered with the Registrar of Friendly Societies. Co-operative Development Group produces its response – a proposal to rehabilitate some of the buildings for single persons' accommodation within a co-operative management structure – and begins negotiations with Westminster, the Housing Corporation and the Department of the Environment.
	<b>July</b>	Co-operative starts lobbying Westminster councillors and strengthens its original proposal.
1977	<b>March</b>	Department of the Environment rejects Westminster's plans. Seymour Housing Co-operative is registered with the Housing Corporation.
	<b>April</b>	Housing Corporation includes Co-operative in its '77/'78 programme. 35-year leasehold purchase is agreed.
	<b>May</b>	Westminster scraps its own re-development plans.
	<b>June</b>	Westminster agrees to offer 35-year leasehold on East and West blocks of Seymour Buildings to Seymour Housing Co-operative.
1978	<b>September</b>	Leasehold agreement is signed. Squatters now effectively own Seymour Buildings.

The Seymour Buildings squat is different from many of the squats described in the book. Here the squatters obtained for themselves *permanent, high-standard accommodation, in the property they squatted*. Their fight both to retain the buildings and to keep housing management control is an example of the single-mindedness, flexibility and organisational strength now necessary in the face of the Criminal Law Act.

### Somewhere to live

Seymour Buildings are five blocks of Victorian tenement flats in Seymour Place, off the Edgware Road, in central London. The original owners, the Artisans and General Workers Property Company, hit financial troubles in the sixties and the site was taken over by Westminster City Council. The Council rehoused the occupants from the sub-standard dwellings and for eight years the blocks stood empty. During this time, the Council's plan for the blocks vacillated between five options: renovation; demolition and rebuilding; selling; handing them over to a housing association; and leasing the site to a developer.

Westminster's indecision was challenged in January 1975, when 40 of us squatted the site. A scouting trip had failed to reveal the poor state of the buildings. The Central Block was uninhabitable, riddled with both wet and dry rot as a result of vandalism. None of the blocks had electricity, and the water supply to the West Block (where most of us had based ourselves) seemed unrepairable. Bearing in mind the short life of most squats, it seemed hardly worth embarking on the huge repair job and almost all the occupants decided to leave in the cold light of the first morning.

The remnants of the initial party concentrated on survival. Paranoia ruled. Everyone moved to the East Block where work on restoring services promised to be easier. Plumbing and sewage systems were rapidly renovated in the belief that inadequate public health provision would give Westminster a suitable excuse for quick eviction. It was felt that the more squatters there were, the stronger would be the occupation's bargaining position. So adverts were placed on college noticeboards, friends were contacted and *Time Out* 'Flats Wanted' advertisers were telephoned. Within three weeks, all 48 habitable flats were taken. With at least 75 per cent of the occupants being

newcomers to squatting, initial organisation was largely undertaken by two or three people with previous squatting experience. Unbeknown to the majority of residents, these people operated their own vetting procedure because they felt the occupation needed energetic people with long-term commitment. Callers who appeared unlikely to have this commitment were given pessimistic views on the squat's future and were never seen again.

### Demanding a licence

At the end of the first fortnight, a meeting of current and future occupants established the Seymour Buildings Residents Group and elected a Central Committee. The Committee's brief was to obtain a licence for short-term occupation from Westminster City Council. However, as it was known that Westminster was uncertain about its plans for the site, there was already serious talk of trying to obtain the building permanently. A short-term licence was seen as the first step towards this. The meeting also agreed that the Residents Group should have a written constitution (partly to impress Westminster and partly to provide community guidelines) and that each occupant should pay a 'membership levy' of £1 a week to the Group for plumbing and electrical work.

The decision to form a residents' group rather than a squatters' group was indicative of our cautious approach. The last major squat in the Borough, at Canal Flats, had ended in being bulldozed by Westminster at short notice (p 134). Cornwall Terrace was, at the time, keeping the media happy with a continuous scream of 'squatter scandal' stories (p 60), so Seymour Buildings was able to develop away from the spotlight of publicity. There was already an encouraging amount of support from neighbours and local tradespeople, glad to see Seymour Buildings in use again and providing increased local custom. A 'play it by ear' negotiations policy towards the Council was evolved, with an initial aim of impressing officers with our organisation and 'reasonable' approach.

By the time formal negotiations for a licence began, approximately 60 people were in occupation. This included two families with children which worried the Council as it had no wish to take on any rehousing liability. Because the build-

ings with their stone stairways and small two and three room flats were obviously unsuited to family use, the Residents Group was prepared to assure the Council that no more families would be admitted to the squat. But we also implied that should the Council decide to evict rather than negotiate, more families could easily be moved in. The negotiating team was similarly able to exploit Council fantasies about squatters by implying that Seymour Buildings could be passed on to less reasonable people should a licence deal fall through. The Council expressed a willingness to negotiate for a licence, but stressed it would not negotiate with an *ad hoc* body like the Residents Group.

Within a fortnight, Christian Action Housing Association was brought in to negotiate on the Group's behalf. The Association had lain dormant for several years but was being revived with the aim of providing housing for single homeless people not in need of social work support. The Association was impressed with our organisation at Seymour Buildings and agreed to take the scheme on as a pilot project.

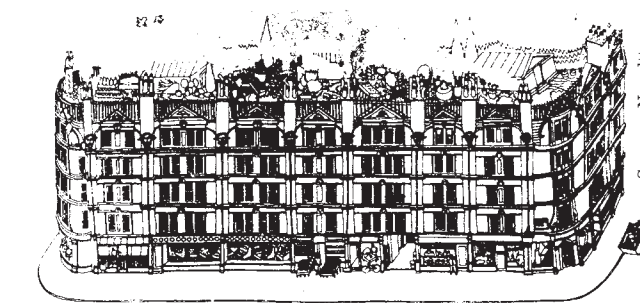
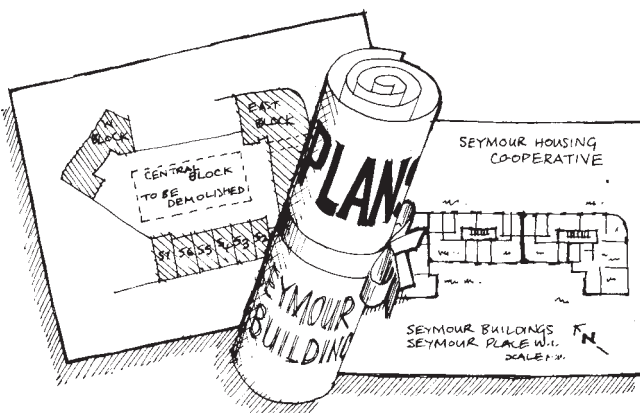
Negotiations between the Association and Westminster began in March 1975, and dragged on for a year. There were two major problems during this period, one psychological and the other practical: first to keep up residents' morale amidst a vacuum of insecurity and occasional pessimistic rumours, and second, to try to connect an electricity supply in the flats. It was discovered that the existing system was inadequate and unsafe, and that it would cost about £3,000 to install and connect a replacement. Membership levies were increased to an average of £3 per flat, jumble sales were held, and a loan was obtained on the Residents Group's bank account. After nine months without electricity, the first flats were connected: the junction box had been designed by a resident architecture student and a system of cables installed by teams of residents.

At the end of the squat's first year, practically all the flats had electricity and had been made into comfortable homes. In March 1976, Westminster finally granted a licence for an unspecified period to Christian Action Housing Association. The internal structure at Seymour Buildings had become quite settled. The Central Committee ran the community with three block treasurers collecting and banking levies. Once the licence was signed, a Management Committee (comprising a





Mike Goldwater



Seymour Newsletter

Planning a future

local chairperson, three housing association and three Residents Group members) was set up to ensure the licence terms were adhered to, and to sort out any legal problems which might arise. The Residents Group still handled the levies, channelling £450 a year to Christian Action Housing Association, which then passed on £350 to Westminster to cover the licence fee and insurance. The rest (roughly £7,000) was used by the Residents Group for improvements, and maintenance.

### Digging in

By the end of 1975, some residents' thoughts had become focused on securing Seymour Buildings permanently while retaining community self-management. A newspaper article on the beginnings of a housing co-operative formed by squatters at Summer House in East London (p 90) caught our imagination and a few of us began to find out about housing co-ops.

The basic co-operative structure was established in Britain in 1844 by the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society. Many other countries – notably Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, Canada and the USA – have since applied the Rochdale co-operative principles to housing but in this country similar moves were for a long time hampered by unfavourable legislation. In 1974, however, Reg Freeson the Minister for Housing and Construction set up a government working party to look into ways of encouraging and assisting co-operative housing initiatives, and several of its recommendations were incorporated into the Housing Rents and Subsidies Act 1975. This Act enables groups to form themselves into co-ops (at a cost of £1 per member, plus the £80 or so it took to become a registered friendly society) and then, like housing associations, they can seek public funding for housing schemes from local authorities or from the Housing Corporation. Once a scheme is built, registered rents are passed on to the funding authority after deduction of allowances to the co-op for management and maintenance work. The Department of the Environment (DOE) subsidises the balance of the mortgage repayments.

The advantage of co-ops is that they run themselves democratically (one member – one vote) and control both development and management of their property. Active participation by mem-

bers can bring about savings on the management and maintenance allowances, and the co-operative can then decide either to increase facilities or to allow some 'rent-free' weeks. If, on the other hand, co-ops run into financial difficulties not of their own making, they can be assisted with further funding from local authorities or with Revenue Deficit Grants from the Housing Corporation.

A week after the signing of the licence, a member of the Summer House Co-op addressed a meeting of the Residents Group, which decided to approve the formation of a co-op. The meeting set up a Development Group with the aim of establishing a long-term housing co-operative at Seymour Buildings, or, failing this, to seek out alternative property in which the whole community could be re-housed within a co-operative structure.

### Reeling and dealing

At about the same time (April 1976), Westminster announced plans for demolition and redevelopment of the site to provide offices and accommodation for families and the elderly. The scheme was to cost £13/4m and was planned to start in November 1976. The Development Group reacted by rushing out a statement of intent to the Council and promising to deliver a follow-up proposal for the site at the end of two months.

Our scheme – developed by resident architectural students – took into account three points: the chronic need for suitable accommodation in central London for young single people; the fact that the existing flats at Seymour Buildings were particularly suited for conversion into such accommodation; and the fact that a community of 65 young single people was already living there.

Both Development Group and Council architects agreed that the Central Block should be demolished. We therefore proposed rehabilitation of the East and West Blocks to provide accommodation for 90 single people (the two families could have been incorporated into the scheme, but both had left by then). This would cost £1/2m. The community would function as a housing co-op and the local authority would have the right to nominate single people from its waiting list to fill a percentage of vacancies. Solon (North London) Housing Association was brought in to check the technical details of the proposal and the Department of the Environment was informed of our

plans.

There were two main authorities which had to be won over for the scheme to succeed – Westminster City Council which owned the property, and the Housing Corporation which had the funds to finance the project. We immediately scored two successes. In June 1976, Seymour Housing Co-operative Limited was registered with the Registrar of Friendly Societies. We were now a legal entity and could negotiate direct with the parties concerned. At the same time, our architectural proposal sufficiently impressed Westminster Council for its Residential Property Committee to decide to hold back on its redevelopment scheme. We were thus granted some breathing space over the summer recess to polish up our proposal.

The Co-op's initial progress had to be backed up by wider negotiations. Over the summer, contact was made with a number of Westminster councillors and introductory visits to Seymour Buildings arranged. We concentrated on winning over the immense Conservative majority. Our confidence helped us to establish credibility and the councillors appeared to be genuinely interested in finding out about co-ops. After being persuaded that the need for single person housing outweighed accusations of squatters jumping the waiting list, the Labour Group also agreed to support us in a low-profile way. Council officials were made to realise that our plans were for a permanent future at Seymour Buildings and that we were not interested in any short-term arrangements.

We had to go through a similar process with the Housing Corporation. It took several frustrating months – and much prompting from both ourselves and the new government-backed Co-operative Housing Agency – before the Corporation finally agreed to state its support in principle for the scheme.

The Development Group was also conscious of the need for an education programme on co-ops within Seymour Buildings: Harold Campbell, Chairperson of the government working party on the subject, was invited to speak at a meeting of residents, and handouts, papers and reading-lists were produced, giving information both on the plans at Seymour and on housing co-ops generally. Soon, over half of the residents had become members of the Co-op. A sub-committee set up to examine the existing management structure recommended a transitional structure which could

be adapted easily once the Co-op acquired control of the property.

Meanwhile, the Residents Group continued to oversee the day-to-day running while the Development Group was concerned with the future of the community and also dealt with flat allocation (to get a flat in Seymour Buildings you now had to be a Co-op member). A proportion of the levies paid by Co-op members to the Residents Group financed the Development Group's activities. On a more eneral level, decision-making was devolved away from a Central Committee down to Block Committees, giving everyone more opportunity to be involved. The Development Group initiated a number of sub-groups to deal with negotiations, tenancy selection, alternative accommodation (in case plans for Seymour Buildings fell through) and publicity. These sub-groups met informally and were open to all members.

The September meeting of Westminster's Residential Property Committee decided to go ahead in seeking Department of the Environment approval for its redevelopment of the site but it also agreed to conduct a feasibility study on what could be done with the rest of the site if the Co-op's proposal was taken up. The Council was leaving its options open.

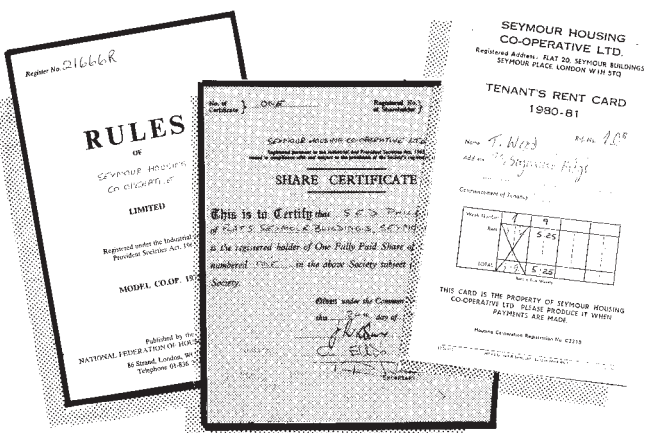
The Council considered the scheme mainly on its financial implications. Our proposal would bring £1/2m of Housing Corporation funds into the borough allowing the Council to divert its funds to other housing priorities. In all our leaflets and discussions with councillors, we emphasised the financial benefits to Westminster. We also tried to show that the Council's redevelopment plan would provide expensive hard-to-let shop and office units, whilst in our proposals there were no offices and existing shop units could be retained by Westminster for rehabilitation and letting at a reasonable price.

### Council plans demolished

During the early months of 1977, morale was low as Westminster kept postponing any decision. Its Architects Department was delaying its report on Seymour Buildings as it was desperately trying to come up with an alternative as attractive as our proposal. The rivalry between the Architects Department and the Co-op was heightened by the fact that the Co-op's proposal had been drawn up with the help of Council plans provided by an



Tristian Wood



Mike Goldwater

Forming a co-op





Mike Goldwater



Tristan Wood



Mike Goldwater



Mike Goldwater



employee in the Department, who, at the time, was confident that amateurs like us stood no chance of producing a scheme superior to his. When we did, two years of his work were wasted.

During this lull, a lot of effort was put into practical work to improve living conditions. Plumber and electrician teams were set up; the food co-operative which had operated the previous year was revived; and work was begun on a roof garden and on designing a temporary hot water system (we had been two years without hot water).

There was also activity on the wider co-operative front. Solon (North London) Housing Association decided to become a secondary co-operative service agency, and Seymour became one of the founder-members of Solon Co-operative Housing Services Limited. The management of this new organisation consisted of primary housing co-ops which determined Solon's policies, priorities and workload. Any profits made by the organisation could be channelled back into co-operative housing rather than into the pockets of a non-accountable architects firm.

News that the DOE had refused to sanction the Council's plans because of its high site density heralded victory in our fight for Seymour Buildings. In March, 1977, Seymour Housing Co-operative was registered with the Housing Corporation and became eligible for government funding. The following month, notice was received that the Co-op had been included in the Corporation's allocation programme for 1977/78. Meanwhile the District and City Valuers agreed on a leasehold purchase price of £140,000; well within the relevant acquisition cost limits. Further negotiations with Westminster settled on the Council exercising a 50 per cent nominations agreement to the Co-op once rehabilitation was completed. It was also suggested that the Co-op would have a say in landscaping the courtyard area following demolition of the Central Block.

Such discussions indicated that it was only a matter of time before the Co-op gained legal control of Seymour Buildings. And consequently, in May, the Residential Property Committee at last grew impatient with the Council architects and recommended in favour of the Co-op's proposal. In June, the full Council decided to offer the Co-op a 35 year lease on Seymour Buildings.

*Life inside Seymour Buildings. Centre bottom: The squatters' electrics.*

### Is there life after squatting?

Although the restrained, drawn-out negotiations and the consequent low-profile policy meant a sacrifice of the drama and excitement traditionally associated with squatting, Seymour's occupants have continued to see themselves as squatters. Our strength has undoubtedly been our organisation and some people found this too much and left for more 'laid-back' squats. But the aim at Seymour Buildings has always been to achieve more than being a temporary nuisance to the housing department and this meant working hard on decision-making structures, on the buildings themselves and on contacts with relevant authorities.

Looking back, the main problem appears to have been the need for speed. Whilst squatters, we were insecure; we had to move quickly to retain a chance of staying at Seymour Buildings. After a short-lived education programme, know-how and information became restricted to a small core of people within the Development Group. Negotiations took precedence and the mass of residents were left behind. This, in turn, created dependence on a handful of people. Towards the end of 1977, those most closely involved either cut back on their activities or withdrew from the Development Group completely. Consequently, a number of largely inexperienced and uninformed people were left to steer the Co-op through the final stages of the leasehold agreement. Some had difficulty in grasping the fact that the Co-op had achieved a powerful position for itself in negotiating with other bodies and a rift developed. Some residents accepted Seymour Buildings as a success simply in terms of a squat having obtained long-life accommodation for itself. Others regarded that attitude as preventing the community using its power and talents to fully explore co-operative living and to become a strong voice on local issues, particularly housing. Nevertheless, the leasehold agreement between the Co-operative and Westminster was completed and signed in September 1978.

Involvement in the London squatting 'movement' has been sporadic. Seymour Buildings squatters played a part in the 'anti-press lies' campaign in the summer of 1975, but with the formation of a representative-based Squatters Action Council later that year (p 71), our involvement waned as we could not see how one person could represent the diverse views of those living at Seymour Buildings. It was also difficult for us to stomach the prevalent prejudice against licensed squatters

and the tendency towards confrontation tactics whilst we were finding a licence and friendly negotiations essential steps towards a long-term solution.

Our evolution into a housing co-operative seemed a natural process. At a workshop on housing co-operatives in June 1976, we presented a paper provocatively entitled: 'We refuse to accept the squatters' traditional role of continually shifting from one set of short-life slum property to another . . .' Unfortunately, few other squatters attended the workshop.

Ten months later, however, a workshop on cooperatives (and short-life schemes) was one of the most popular events of the London Squatters' Conference, undoubtedly due to the threat posed by the Criminal Law Bill. The GLC 'Squatters Amnesty' the following autumn caused a large wave of interest in co-ops from squatters throughout London (p 90).

The Tory GLC's sponsorship of co-ops is a welcome input to the emerging housing co-op movement but has increased suspicion of co-ops from certain leftist factions including some squatting groups. It is easy, they argue, to see authorities setting up co-ops simply to farm off their housing responsibilities. The result, they forecast, will be the creation of a housing elite divorced from the tenants movement as a whole. It does not have to be that way. Squatting has already shown that carrying out one's own management and maintenance tasks can be fun and is often less wasteful both in terms of finance and materials. The experience of Seymour Buildings shows that co-ops can offer a suitable long-term solution for many squats. As recognised co-operative groups, squatters can add their strength to tenants' demands for reasonable rents, greater housing investment, increased rights and decent housing for all.

At the same time, adopting a co-operative approach calls for a more organised approach to squatting. Occupations of buildings must be seen as important gains in the housing struggle, to be kept and developed rather than squandered as temporary crash pads. •



campaign against a criminal trespass law  
**CALLING ALL SQUATTERS**  
**ALL OUT MARCH 19** *This SAT!*  
 Assemble Cardington St. side of Euston Station 1.45 MOVE OFF AT 2.15  
 March to Highbury Fields via the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Hospital occupation.  
 Rally with speakers at Highbury Fields.

**PUBLIC MEETING**  
**FRIDAY 13<sup>th</sup> FEB 8.00 PM.**  
**WATERLOO ACTION CENTRE**  
**14 BAYLIS ROSE.**  
 SPEAKERS  
**ERNIE ROBERTS** ASST ANIM  
**PETE GILLARD** MUS EXEC  
**CHARLIE FOREMAN** LAMARTH SELF HELP  
**CACTUS 6 BONDEN STREET**  
 289 2877  
**STOP! THE CRIMINAL TRESPASS LAW**  
**DEMONSTRATE FEB 26<sup>th</sup>**

**I'M SQUATTING BECAUSE....**  
*I've done 10 London to Paris 10. The trouble with it is that it's not a place to make a home.*  
*I was living in a room and couldn't get the council to rehouse me.*  
*My 2-woman and I don't get a hall a week so I can afford that.*

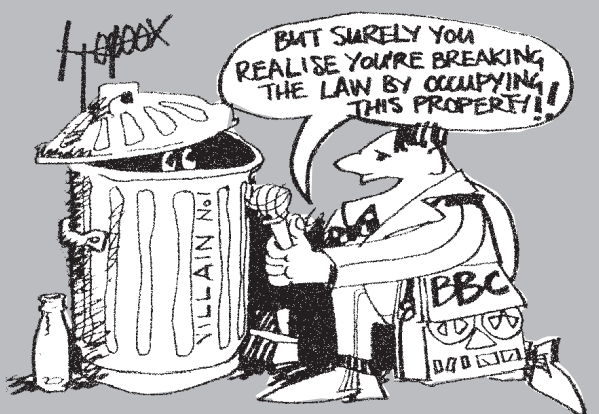
Homelessness has doubled in ten years to 100,000  
 200,000 Building Workers are on the dole  
 800,000 Houses are kept empty  
 The Government's Answer?  
 Housing Cuts and a Criminal Trespass Law  
**DON'T SCAPEGOAT SQUATTERS**  
**DEMONSTRATE MARCH 19th**  
 Squatters are not the cause of homelessness  
 Squatters are not the cause of homelessness  
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**WHO GAINS FROM A CRIMINAL TRESPASS LAW?**  
**WORKERS CAN SAVE THEIR JOBS BY OCCUPYING**  
**A CRIMINAL TRESPASS LAW WOULD PUT THEM IN JAIL!**  
**STOP THE CRIMINAL TRESPASS LAW**

# The law

The effect of the law on squatters

**14 The erosion of squatters rights**  
 How judges and politicians have gradually





# The erosion of squatters rights

by David Watkinson

How judges and politicians have gradually tightened the law on squatting

*‘What is a squatter? He is one who, without any colour of right enters on an unoccupied house or land, intending to stay there as long as he can. He may seek to justify or excuse his conduct. He may say that he was homeless and that this house or land was standing empty, doing nothing. But this plea is of no avail in Law.’ (Lord Denning MR, McPhail v Persons Unknown, 1973 WLR71)*

Squatters have always had a close relationship with the law. Many squatters have regarded the law as a source of protection, but the law has only fulfilled this role sporadically and to a diminishing extent. However, were it not for certain ‘squatters’ rights’, squatting would undoubtedly not have established itself as it has done. The adroit use of the law by squatters has frequently delayed evictions and provided time for organisation and negotiation. The period from 1969 to 1977 was the high point for such opportunity. The law hardened against squatters during that time and so did the attitudes of judges who administer it. This chapter looks at the way the law has reacted to the growth of squatting and how this reaction relates to the law’s essential functions.

## Unlawful but not illegal

English law has never regarded squatting by itself as a criminal offence. In law a squatter is a trespasser. He is on property which someone else owns (or to which someone else is entitled to possession) without their permission. Trespass has never been the concern of criminal law (with minor exceptions, such as trespass on the railways) as it is not regarded as a matter between the individual and the state. Instead it is regarded as a civil matter; a dispute between individuals over the possession of property, which the owner must sort out with the trespasser in civil courts where disputes between individuals are tried. *Provided court procedure is followed correctly, an owner – or the person legally entitled to possession – will always succeed in a claim for a ‘possession order’.* The owner is then entitled to the services of the court

bailiffs in evicting a trespasser who remains in occupation.

In England, therefore, squatting is unlawful (ie an action which is wrongful by virtue of the civil law) but not illegal (ie an action which is wrongful by virtue of the criminal law). The old farmers’ favourite, ‘Trespassers will be prosecuted’ is thus a con.

The position is different in Scotland. By the Trespass (Scotland) Act 1865, it is a criminal offence to ‘lodge in any premises or encamp on any land which is private property without the consent or permission of the owner or legal occupier’. The maximum penalty is a fine and imprisonment up to 21 days.

Despite trespass not being a criminal offence in England, one of the law’s prime functions is the protection of property. Owners have a legal right to the possession of their property. There are a few restraints such as planning and compulsory purchase legislation but their limited number confirms the sanctity of private property in a capitalist society. The law is not an independent arbiter enforcing fairness and morality. This may appear to be stating the obvious but there is a myth fostered by the state and by judges that the law is in some sense abstracted from the society in which it operates: the myth of impartiality and of doing ‘justice’. But that justice means that each person is entitled to only those rights the rules of capitalist society allow them – and one of those rules is that trespassers have no right to possession of land they trespass upon, regardless of their need or the reason the owner wants them off. If an owner wishes to keep a house empty and unused for many years at a time of housing shortage,

the law will protect that right.

It is perhaps surprising that squatters have occasionally had considerable success in contesting possession orders. For example

- In November 1974, Elgin Avenue squatters won a case on appeal (p 136).
- In March 1977, Villa Road squatters earned a delay of four months through arguing a licence in the High Court. They had already gained a year through winning in the county court.
- In April 1978, Huntley Street squatters in ‘central London had the case against them dismissed through claiming a licence (p 94).

In all these cases, the squatters won extra time in which to organise politically. However, these successes need to be put in an overall context. They were all gained through the owner making mistakes in using court procedure because of the way in which the rules are formed. But where the rules have shown themselves to hinder the essential function of guaranteeing possession to the owner, they have, over time, been altered.

It must be remembered too, that most squatters do not have any knowledge of the law. Because of their ignorance, squatters have not been able to put forward defences that were open to them in court cases or have been pressured into leaving squats when there was no legal necessity to do so.

In response to the need for legal advice, both the Advisory Service for Squatters and Release developed considerable expertise in helping squatters to fight cases and through their advice many court cases were won and many squatters successfully resisted attempts by police to con them out of their homes.

## The Forcible Entry Acts

Squatting in 1969 commenced by taking advantage of the long established principle that trespass is not a crime. Consequently immediate eviction by police was not possible. Moreover squatters could rely on the criminal law for some vital protection from forcible eviction by owners. For years every squatter invoked the Forcible Entry Act of 1381 to counter threats of forcible eviction without a court order. Enacted to establish order in land disputes, it forbade forcible entry on any land for any purpose – or so it appeared. Halsbury’s ‘Laws of England’ states: ‘A person commits an offence both at common law and by statute who enters forcibly upon any lands or tenements without due warrant of law. The offence is punishable with imprisonment and fine. The offence may be committed without any person being assaulted. If persons take possession of either house or land, and there is any kind of violence in the manner of entry . . . that is sufficient.

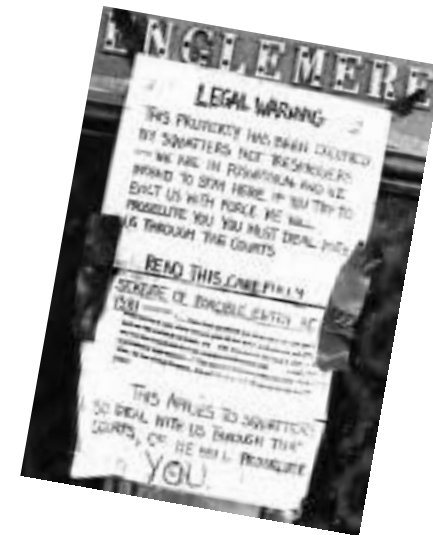
A mere trespass will not support an indictment for forcible entry; there must be evidence of such force ... as is calculated to prevent any resistance. If a person enters peaceably into a house but turns the occupant out of possession by force, this may, it seems, be a forcible entry. It is not a forcible entry where entry is obtained through an unclosed window or by opening a door with a key.’<sup>1</sup>

In other words, even a squatter who was on land when there was a forcible entry could prosecute for forcible entry and no squatter could be convicted of forcible entry provided no force was used to enter unoccupied property. This was simple enough. Most empty houses had open windows, doors or other means of access. If squatters secured the property (for example by putting a lock of their own on the door thus making it impossible for the owner to enter except by force), then the owner could not enter and carry out an eviction without breaking the criminal law which few owners were prepared to do. The squatters were normally secure until the owner obtained a possession order from the civil courts. When

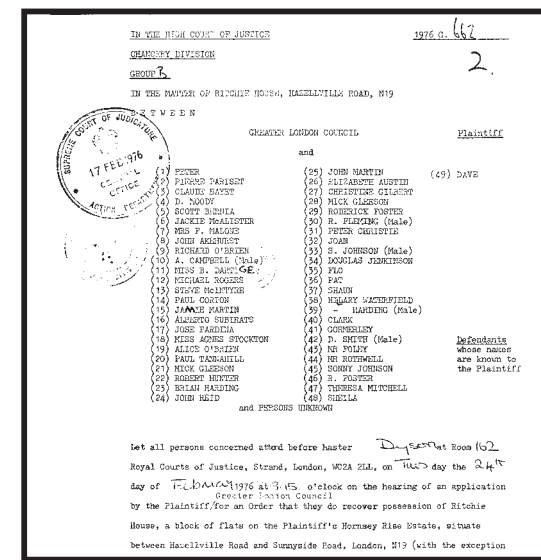
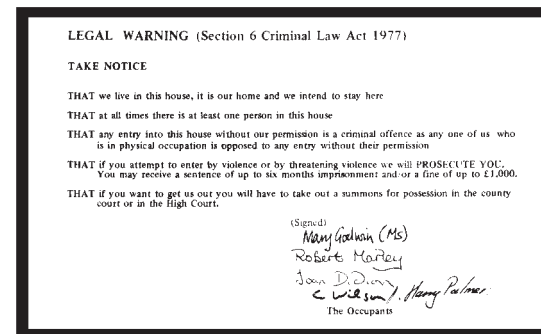
*Top: A legal warning notice pinned on a squatter’s front door to deter the owner from attempting to evict without a court order. Pre 1977 Criminal law Act.*

*Middle: Sample warning notice after the Act.*

*Bottom: A summons against squatters in a block of flats.*



Reading Evening Post



Redbridge council used hired thugs to evict squatters in 1969 (p 19), it brought public sympathy for for squatters and convictions for the bailiffs.

## Speeding up court procedure

In 1970 it was quite difficult for owners to evict squatters. As we have seen, they could not use force and furthermore there was a major stumbling block in using the court procedures; owners had to find out the names of the squatters before they could seek possession. Possession orders could not be made against unnamed people and even when possession orders were obtained, they could be executed only against the people named on them. This allowed squatters to swap houses before the bailiffs came to prevent eviction.

Obviously this state of affairs could not be allowed to continue. In 1970, new procedures were devised to allow an owner to obtain a possession order against unnamed trespassers after seven days of service of the summons. The owner was given the choice of taking the matter to the High Court or to the county court (if the rateable value of the property was less than £1,000), where proceedings are cheaper. The new procedures were called Order 113 of the Rules of the Supreme Court and Order 26 of the County Court Rules.

Overturning precedent, the new rules also allowed owners to recover possession against ‘persons unknown’ who were in occupation provided they could show to the court that they had taken ‘reasonable steps’ to discover the names. This normally meant describing visits by the owner to the squatted property for the purpose of asking the names of people there. Often up to a dozen visits would be made at different times of the day. For a time the courts applied these rules with a certain amount of care. Judges spoke of a ‘very special procedure’ which must be ‘strictly’ complied with.<sup>2</sup> Moreover during the early seventies when the property boom was approaching its peak the public was hostile towards property speculators and relatively sympathetic to the homeless who were forced to squat. Many judges were affected by these feelings and took them into account.

When applying the law to the facts of a particular case, judges generally have a choice as to how to exercise their power. To hold that the rules must be strictly complied with, as judges did initially, was favourable to squatters, since, if an



Possession orders granted and refused, 1973 to 1977

	Applications filed	Possession orders granted	Possession orders refused
1973	776	605	14
1974	1,620	1,328	37
1975	3,689	3,096	49
1976	4,756	4,186	80
1977	4,454	3,838	66

*This table shows the effectiveness of 0.26 for securing possession orders and indicates the rapid increase of squatting, particularly between 1973 and 1975. Each entry refers to a household, not an individual.*

*No similar statistics are available from the High Court relating to the use of Order 113. However, the statistical section of the Lord Chancellors office estimates the number of orders gained in 1977 to be 1,200 and it is probable that the rate of refusals is similarly low. (Source: Judicial Statistics. There are no separate statistics for Order 26 applications prior to 1973. There are also no statistics showing the breakdown between squatting and non-squatting cases under Order 26 and Order 113. However, the vast majority of such cases involve squatters.)*

owner made a mistake in the procedure, the judge would often dismiss the case or adjourn it. If a possession order was granted – as it was in the vast majority of cases – judges frequently gave squatters time to find alternative housing by exercising their power to suspend the execution of possession orders for a few weeks.

Judges did not always make these concessions simply out of sympathy. On numerous occasions court cases have been fought backed by press and political campaigning by squatters, with pickets, banners and placards outside the court on the day of the hearing. Public galleries have been packed with squatters and their supporters and children have crawled up to the judge’s bench. When the Villa Road cases (p 147) were heard in the High Court, a picket outside played the ‘Lambeth Walk’ on a piano. Squatters have movingly described in

court what it is like to be homeless and presented evidence of the housing crisis. All this activity helped to influence court decisions although no judge would ever admit it.

**The law tightens its grip**

*‘The courts must for the sake of law and order take a firm stand. They must refuse to admit the plea of necessity to the hungry and homeless and trust that their distress will be relieved by the charitable and the good.’*<sup>3</sup>

During the early seventies, squatting increased, particularly in London, and in 1972 the Law Commission started its considerations on whether the criminal law should be tightened up in relation to trespass (p 57 ). It was not only squatting that galvanised the government into action for this was also the time of the Clydeside ship-builders’ work-in, the occupation of the Fisher Bendix factory in Kirkby and many other similar actions by workers and students.

But the time lag in framing legislation meant that it was the civil courts which started the legal backlash against squatters. The Court of Appeal under Lord Denning (Master of the Rolls) played the leading role. First, in 1971, it rejected arguments that it was a defence to Order 113 that the local authority seeking to use it against squatters was in breach of its statutory duty to provide temporary accommodation for the homeless under the National Assistance Act 1948.<sup>3</sup> It also rejected the argument that the defence of ‘necessity’ was available to squatters, ie that the wrongful act (trespass) was justified by a real and imminent danger (homelessness) that could not otherwise be averted. This was hardly surprising, but it closed up one possible line of defence.

By the law of precedent, any decision like this on a point of law made by a high-ranking court, such as the House of Lords or the Court of Appeal, is binding on all lower courts. Decisions of High Court judges are normally followed by other High Court judges. Thus each specific case mentioned in this section affects the law relating to squatting.

In 1973 Denning was again presiding in the court which decided that in squatting cases, the judge did not have the power to delay the eviction once the possession order was granted. This was the famous *McPhail*<sup>4</sup> decision and it meant that squatters could be evicted while on their way

home from court. It was the remainder of the same judgement that showed that any tolerance of squatters by the law was coming to an end. Denning held that the Forcible Entry Act did not apply to squatters at all. His judgement swept away the basic premise on which the squatting movement had begun and six hundred years of legal rights with it. He said:

‘The owner is not obliged to go to the courts to obtain possession. He is entitled if he so desires to take the remedy into his own hands. He can go in himself and turn them out without the aid of the courts of justice. This is not a course to be recommended because of the disturbance which might follow. But the legality of it is beyond question . . . Even though the owner himself should use force, then so long as he uses no more force than is reasonably necessary, he is not himself liable either criminally or civilly.’

Legal commentators have not on the whole supported Denning’s judgement as being correct in law. The Law Commission described it as ‘over-simplified’ when it finally reported on this area of the law.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, fortunately there was so much uncertainty over it that landlords rarely used it as a justification for forcible eviction and continued to apply for possession orders through the courts.

Denning continued to whittle away at the limited protection given to squatters by the court process. In 1975, Order 113 was used against students in occupation at Warwick University. The trial judge found that the university had failed to take ‘reasonable steps’ to discover the names of all the occupiers. Denning overturned this judgement on appeal. It was enough, he said, to name the ringleaders and cover the rest with ‘persons unknown’. Ominously, in his judgement he said: ‘Irregularities no longer nullify the proceedings. People who defy the law cannot be allowed to avoid it by putting up technical objections.’<sup>6</sup>

This last comment indicated that he felt that the requirement to take ‘reasonable steps’ to identify occupiers was superfluous. The Warwick University case was soon followed by *Burston Finance Limited v Wilkins*<sup>7</sup> a case which further weakened the ‘reasonable steps’ defence. The judge found that the landlord had clearly failed to take ‘reasonable steps’ but the squatters all knew of the proceedings anyway. This enabled the judge to release the landlord from the obligation to take ‘reasonable steps’. Landlords thus had

their task made easier by a deletion of part of the judges rule book. This process was officially concluded in July 1977 when new rules for both High Court and county court proceedings were issued. They cut the seven day advance warning period to five and removed altogether the requirement to take ‘reasonable steps’.

Landlords thus had their already easy task made much easier by a judicial deletion of part of the judges’ rule book. This process concluded in July 1977 when new rules came into force cutting the seven day period of the summons to five, and removing altogether the need to take reasonable steps, simply substituting a requirement that the landlord state in his affidavit that he does not know the names of any of the occupiers.

Apparently the senior lawyers who drafted the rules no longer regarded it as desirable that owners should make any effort to discover information on the squatters. Consequently squatters no longer knew that possession proceedings were being taken until the summons was actually served on the property. They no longer had the advance warning that visits from owners or their agents making enquiries once represented. Worse still, since only two copies of the summons had to be served when proceedings were against ‘persons unknown’ only, not all occupiers necessarily received notice of the hearing. They were given even less time to prepare a defence or to find alternative housing. (The ease and speed of the new rules were a gift to unscrupulous landlords who could try to use them to evict protected tenants who were unaware of their rights, a practice which had already grown up since the creation of Order 113 and Order 26.)

The legal position of squatters was undermined in other ways. For example, the loophole whereby squatters could swop houses was closed up in 1975 by a case<sup>8</sup> at the Divisional Court of the Queens Bench Division of the High Court. The court decided that it was the duty of bailiffs executing a possession order to evict everyone on the premises whether named in the order or not. The possession order related to the premises, not the people on it. This decision affected many people who weren’t squatters, particularly sub-tenants.

**Into the criminal arena**

During this gradual erosion of the legal position of squatters in the civil courts, the Law Commission had been at work framing the legislation that

was eventually to become Part Two of the Criminal Law Act 1977.<sup>9</sup> The Law Commission’s brief, given to it by Lord Hailsham in 1972, was ‘to examine the statutes of forcible entry 1381 to 1623 and relevant common law defences and to consider in what circumstances entering or remaining upon property should constitute a criminal offence or offences and in what form any such offence or offences should be cast’<sup>10</sup>

The Law Commission is a body selected from the legal profession to examine areas of the law that the government of the day considers to be in need of reform. Its proposals for new legislation are generally enacted.

Lord Hailsham soon showed where his inclinations lay. Sitting in the House of Lords, he gave judgement in 1973 in a case<sup>11</sup> involving a number of students who had occupied the Sierra Leone High Commission in London. They had been charged with conspiracy to trespass, a strange charge in view of the fact that trespass is not a crime. Hailsham astonishingly decided that since trespass was a tort (a legal term meaning a wrongful act or omission which, if damage or injury results, can be sued for in the civil courts), it was a criminal offence to conspire to commit it. Single-handedly he presented prosecuting authorities with a charge that theoretically could be used against squatters or anyone taking part in any kind of occupation (e.g. workers or student sit-ins). In fact, because of the legal dubiousness of this decision, the offence, with one exception, was only used in relation to embassy occupations and it was abolished by the Criminal Law Act.

The Law Commission’s first report<sup>10</sup> on the question of trespass was devastatingly simple. It recommended that the Forcible Entry Acts should be repealed and ‘conspiracy to trespass’ should be abolished. In their place it proposed two new offences the effect of which would have been to make all forms of trespass a criminal offence if the trespasser ‘failed to leave as soon as reasonably practicable after being ordered to do so by a person entitled to occupation.’

The Law Commission received a barrage of opposition to this proposal from trade unions, the TUC, students unions, the NUS, and housing, squatting and community groups many of whom had been alerted by the newly-formed Campaign Against a Criminal Trespass Law (p 87). Even some local authorities (including the GLC) and the Association of Chief Police Officers opposed it

and the Law Commission modified its proposals in its final report published in March 19769. *This still represented an extension of the criminal law into the area of trespass.* Five more carefully defined offences were now proposed. With some further modifications and extensions these offences became law as part of the Criminal Law Act 1977 in December of that year.

**The new offences**

Conspiracy to trespass was abolished by the Criminal Law Act. However, agreements by two or more persons to commit any of the five new offences created in the same Act would be punishable as conspiracies.

The five new offences which came into force in December 1977 are:

- Using or threatening violence to secure entry knowing there is someone present opposed to the entry (Section 6)
- Being on premises as a trespasser and failing to leave after having been required to do so by a displaced residential occupier or a protected intending occupier (Section 7)
- Trespassing with a weapon of offence (Section 8)
- Trespassing on embassy or consular property (Section 9)
- Resisting or obstructing a bailiff or sheriff executing a possession order under Order 113 or 26 (Section 10)

It was a clever compromise between the original suggestions and those of their critics. The combined effect was to make squatting more difficult but not impossible. By repealing the Forcible Entry Acts and replacing them with Section 6, it becomes possible for landlords to evict squatters whilst they are all out, for clearly, if there are people on the premises who make their presence known, then it is an offence to try to evict them. Section 6 thus leaves squatters with a degree of protection greater than if the *McPhail* decision had been allowed to stand but less than implied in the old Forcible Entry Acts. Many landlords and local authorities are reluctant to try to enter property knowing it to be squatted in case the occupants react violently, so even after the Act came into force, most evictions continued to be through the courts. Squatters themselves do not commit an offence under Section 6 when initially moving into empty property since there is no one already on the



premises. They must take care not to be caught breaking anything as they can then be prosecuted for criminal damage.

The other offences are designed to hinder squatters in specific circumstances but not to make trespass generally into a criminal offence. Section 7 creates the legal concepts of 'displaced residential occupiers' and 'protected intending occupiers' who are protected from squatters. The first is merely a person who is living in a house and who has been displaced by squatters. This refers to the myth of people coming back from holiday to find squatters ensconced in their bedroom. The 'protected intending occupier' refers to certain categories of people (e.g. council tenants and some purchasers of newly bought houses) who are prevented from moving into their new homes by squatters. Both these concepts are open to abuse by unscrupulous owners but the underlying intention is to secure rapid repossession rather than criminal convictions against the unlucky squatters.

Section 8 is a wide-ranging offence that technically could be used against any squatter who carries a pen knife. It represents a theoretical rather than an actual threat against squatters as no instances of successful convictions had been recorded in the first two years of it being in force. Section 9 is largely aimed at the type of embassy occupation that resulted in the *Kamara* decision and interestingly was not applied against the squatters who took over the Cambodian embassy left empty as a result of the change of regime in that country (p 196).

The intention behind Section 10 is fairly unequivocal. It is aimed at squatters who are prepared to put up any resistance against eviction. It presents the greatest threat of prosecution for squatters as barricades and attempts to ward off bailiffs have been an integral part of many squatting struggles. Not surprisingly, alone out of these offences, it resulted in several successful prosecutions in the first two years of the Act both against squatters and against students involved in 'sit-ins'. Not all prosecutions under this section have been successful. For example, out of 14 squatters charged with 'resisting a sheriff at Huntley Street, 12 were acquitted because the sheriff could not prove that any of them had participated in the construction of the barricades although they were behind them at the time of the eviction.

All five of these offences are punishable by a prison sentence and therefore their potential as a

deterrent to squatting should not be underestimated. *However, they do not make trespass or squatting illegal* except in very limited circumstances and on embassy property. As they stand, they represent one more turn in the law's screw against squatters but they do not spell the end of squatting.

#### And it's not only squatters

Changes in the law originally made to deal with squatters later often extend their scope to cover other situations – including those in which the occupiers did not enter as trespassers. Although Order 113 was introduced to speed up the eviction of squatters, it is now used regularly to evict students and workers in occupations.<sup>12</sup> Every alteration of the rules so far as squatters are concerned applies to such occupations as well. In the eyes of the law, students and workers in occupation are trespassers from the outset since they do not have the permission of the owner to occupy.

Withdrawal of permission by the owner can also make licensees into trespassers. Licensees are occupiers who have permission to occupy from the owner but do not have the status of tenants. Licensees can be lodgers, flat-sharers, people in bed-and-breakfasts or hostels and so on. Owners can terminate their right to occupy by giving reasonable notice and once the notice is up, the occupier becomes a trespasser. In that case, Order 113 or Order 26 can be used to evict. This was decided by the Court of Appeal in a case concerning Student Community Housing, a short-life housing association.<sup>13</sup>

The result of these decisions is that many people who do not regard themselves as squatters find themselves being evicted by the 'squatters procedures', with all the consequences that entails, i.e. the speed with which they come before the court and the absence of time to leave after the possession order has been granted.

In some cases, landlords have even used Order 113 and Order 26 to seek possession orders against tenants, relying on the speed of the proceedings and the tenants' inexperience to see them through to their rapidly-executed possession order. It is this kind of behaviour that makes even more serious the consequences of simplifying procedures.

The full scope of the new criminal offences has yet to be tested in the courts but the pattern so far has been that legislation introduced to deal with squatting has also been used against other

activities perceived by the judiciary as being undesirable or having little claim to the protection of the law. There is no reason to suppose it will be different with the Criminal Law Act.

#### Services threatened

Squatters were initially able to take advantage of legislation relating to the supply of services (water, gas, electricity) to obtain them legally and without difficulty. The Electric Lighting (Clauses) Act 1899, Gas Act 1972 and Water Act 1945 lay a duty on the appropriate authority to supply the owner *or occupier* of any premises on request. The legislation contains no definition of the word 'occupier', so for several years squatters were able to argue that the authorities were obliged by statute to provide services, and that if they refused to do so the authority could be prosecuted.

The authorities seldom refused absolutely to supply squats, though there often needed to be discussion and argument about it, and on occasion squatters took direct action by occupying showrooms (p 134). On other occasions, large deposits were demanded.

A decision early in 1975 was arguably more important and potentially disastrous for squatters as it threatened their supplies of these services. Squatters in Bristol sued the Electricity Board which had cut off their supply for an injunction to have it put back on.<sup>14</sup> They pointed to the duty to supply the 'occupier' on demand in the Electric Lighting (Clauses) Act 1899. The judge, however, referred to Denning's decision in the *McPhail* case in which he said:

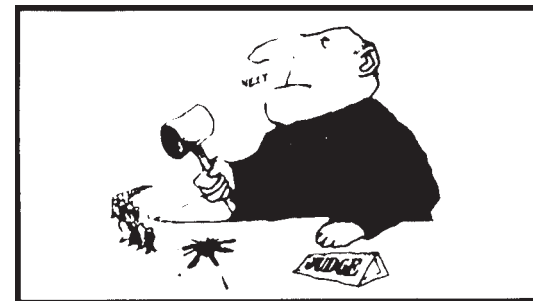
"The squatters were themselves guilty of the offence of forcible entry contrary to the Statute of 1381. When they broke in, they entered "with strong hand" which the statute forbids. [There was in fact no evidence in the case that the squatters *had* broken in to the house.]

They were not only guilty of a civil wrong. They were trespassers so long as they remained there. The owner never acquiesced in their presence there. So the trespassers never gained possession."<sup>14</sup>

The judge in the Bristol case was thus able to infer that the squatters' occupation was unlawful and by a judicial sleight of hand he added in the word 'lawful' into the Act, thereby giving only lawful occupiers the right to an electricity supply. And as the same wording occurs in the laws relating to

the supply of gas and water, a similar interpretation can be made in respect of their supply. Squatters were thus no longer able to compel authorities to supply services.

The judge based his interpretation on the discredited principles of Denning in *McPhail*. He also ignored the 'public health' nature of the statutes relating to the supply of services, as occupied houses without service supplies are a danger to health whether their occupants are owners, tenants or squatters. The term 'occupier' is used in the legislation concerning the obligation to pay rates and indeed it has been decided that occupiers who are trespassers are bound to pay rates.<sup>15</sup> The duplicity of the law is well illustrated by this state of affairs: where it is advantageous for squatters to be defined as occupiers, judges refuse to do so; on the other hand, when it means that squatters incur liabilities, judges have no hesitation in defining them as occupiers.



Increasingly squatters have had difficulty in persuading electricity boards to connect supplies. The London Electricity Board even disconnected one block of flats, Trentishoe Mansions, in central London, in 1977 after it had agreed to supply the squatters and had even taken a deposit. Many squatters have been forced to live without electricity and others have abandoned their homes because of the lack of service supplies. After the Bristol case, certain local authorities quickly became notorious at arranging with the boards to prevent squatters obtaining supplies whilst in other areas squatters did not have any problems. Worse still, some squatters have been prosecuted for stealing electricity after they were refused a legal supply and had connected the supply themselves. Even where boards have been cooperative, they have tended to ask for larger deposits from squatters than from other consumers.

#### Conclusion

Occasionally judges have expressed sympathy for squatters and their disapproval of owners leaving property empty. For instance, in a well publicised case in December 1974, Justice Templeman castigated the Crown Estate Commissioners for their handling of property near Regents Park:

"It seems to me a positive scandal that the property has been vacant since March 1970. No explanation is given in the affidavit. Counsel, struggling to do his best, tells me that there were negotiations with somebody for a year; and since then the Commissioners have been wrapped up in planning law and redevelopment. He also informed me, rather loftily, that as a matter of policy the Crown Estate Commissioners do not deal with Squatters Associations or people of that kind ... In my judgement ... it is profoundly unsatisfactory ... that nobody has enjoyed this property since 1970, in a part of the world where the housing needs are widely known to be extreme."<sup>16</sup>

While unable to avoid granting possession orders, sympathetic judges could delay proceedings by applying court procedures rigorously, and could soften the blow by, for example, using their authority with owners to persuade them to allow squatters time to make alternative arrangements.

However, when the interests of owners are set against those of squatters on a point of law, it has always been the interests of owners that have ultimately prevailed. This has been especially true in decisions from 'higher courts' and in particular the important Court of Appeal, headed by Lord Denning. The owner's right to possession is paramount in the eyes of the judiciary. If threatened, even by the technicalities of the law itself as used by squatters, then that right must be protected.

The law has not treated squatters as a class of person deserving any rights in law but rather as a problem against which measures must be taken. The limited amount of toleration allowed them by the law has been removed piece by piece. New criminal offences have been created to put further pressure on them. Although trespass is still not a criminal offence, steps have been taken in that direction. Squatters are being moved from the position of individuals in dispute with landlords over possession of property to that of criminals liable to have the penal machinery of the state used against them. •





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# Using the space

by Andrew Ingham

Creating homes out of abandoned buildings

*I Peter Manzoni, restorer, of 29 Winchester Road, NW3, in the London Borough of Camden, do hereby make oath and say as follows: "On or about the 30th June 1973, Mr Alan Shortland, Mr Nigel Palmer-Jones and myself, the first three named defendants, having noticed that the premises known as 29 Winchester Road were open, unoccupied and in an advanced stage of decay, entered thereon with the express intention of creating a home.*

One aspect of squatting that has escaped the relentless probing of our national and local media is the way that derelict buildings can be turned into homes by freeloaders, bums, drug addicts and lefties. Some people might suppose that empty, derelict buildings simply become *occupied* derelict buildings – and in a few cases this might be true. The more cynical might imagine that squatters select their new residences with great care, so as not to inconvenience themselves with the bother of renovation or redecoration – and this too, can sometimes be true.

But for the majority who squat the reality is very different. They must transform condemned, derelict, abandoned and often deliberately gutted buildings into habitable homes with little resources or expertise, and at a fraction of the 'normal' cost.

Behind all the generated hysteria of the media and the political posturing, and beyond the social, legal and philosophical arguments, there is the reality of people housing themselves in difficult circumstances. Anyone who moves into a derelict house, perhaps in the middle of winter, often with kids, possibly without electricity, gas or water, and faced with major repairs and the ever present threat of eviction, is not having it easy. Nor are

they freeloaders or spongers. In a sane world they'd receive the Queens Award for Industry. Instead, their efforts are ignored and they are discouraged and hindered in every possible way.

Most people come to squatting out of desperation. It is an interim, emergency solution, even a necessary 'phase' to qualify for a proper (council) house. They squat begrudgingly, feel the social stigma and can't wait to get out. But there are a few who squat out of frustration with official options, official deceptions and official solutions. It is not that they *have* to squat, but that it is their best alternative. They find squatting an opportunity, not a misfortune, and find in it a means of coming closer to the way in which they would like to live. They find that the uniformity of lifestyle that society demands exists much less within squats and squatting communities. For these people, squatting, despite its disadvantages, *works*.

There are many examples of how it works. Houses have been extensively altered, some more adventurously and imaginatively than others, but each showing an individual search for identity with the home. Houses have been tailored to fit the occupants, rather than the occupants simply fitting themselves into the houses. Occasionally people have added to their environment those touches of fantasy, romance, eccentricity, imagination and joy that grow out of people's enjoyment of what they do. In one house, for instance, a room was entered through a cupboard on a half landing. It was in fact a room of the house next door but the dividing wall had been knocked through because two lovers lived on either side. In another house a squatter pitched a tent in his room, painted the walls and ceiling blue and carpeted the floor with that expensive imitation grass of the type favoured by greengrocers.

## Chapter 15

*Top: Fire damaged house converted for community use, Villa Road, Lambeth 1979 (see p 175).*

*Middle: Winchester Road, Camden, 1978.*

*Bottom: Split-level living, Winchester Road, Camden, 1978.*

*Far right: Converted loft space, Thicket Road, Bromley, 1976.*

Occasionally creative alterations may have negative side effects like for one squatter who gradually removed from his room all unnecessary decoration, the architraves, the skirting boards, the picture rails and eventually even the plaster and lath from the ceiling – at which point he discovered its excellent sound proofing qualities. Another squatter sawed square the ends of several large cable drums, packing them together to make a raised floor, leaving a gap in the centre of the room to form a sunken bed. It proved immensely impractical. All the debris of the room ended up in his bed, the door needed severe surgery and the guy downstairs required scaffolding to hold the ceiling up!

But these realised fantasies come later. First, there are the basic repairs.

Before squatting a house it's useful to undertake a little investigation – checking the physical condition, the availability of services (gas, water, electricity) and the damage to the various installations. A working sink or toilet are lucky finds. The London Electricity Board (LEB) kindly indicates if the supply has been cut off at the mains by writing 'LEB OFF' on the door. Just before I moved into a squat, a friend living nearby noticed a hole being dug outside the front door by an LEB workman. Luckily it takes different workmen to dig and to cut, so before the latter arrived, the hole was filled in and 'LEB OFF' appeared on the door.

While such efforts are worthwhile, many squatters have been surprised to find that life can exist without these 'essential services'. Though not everybody wants to live in this way, water *can* be carried from nearby taps and cookers *can* be fired with Calor gas, coal or wood. Many people have discovered the delights of gas and paraffin lamps, and open fires. Alternatively electricity and water supplies can be connected from nearby



Dave Walking  
Mike Goldwater



Ray



Ray







Prince of Wales Crescent, Camden, 1973 – Aden Kelly



Villa Road, Lambeth – Union Place Collective



Aden Kelly

Opening up the roof



Andrew Ingham

A greenhouse in the loft



Nick Wates

Wind generator



Farmbridge Road, Bromley, 1979 – Dave Walking



Bow Triangle, Tower Hamlets – Mike Goldwater



Aden Kelly

New floors out of scaffolding  
A pub bar makes a good kitchen work surface



Roger Sapsford/ Ismail Asmal

Bottle lamp



Roger Sapsford/ Ismail Asmal

A kitchen out of floorboards



Nick Wates

Ice skate handle



Andrew Ingham

Exterior work



Roger Sapsford/ Ismail Asmal



Roger Sapsford/ Ismail Asmal



Nick Wates

Space and shelving instead of a wall  
A bath in the living room





Frestonia, West London – Tony Sleep



West Norwood, South London – Dave Walking



Prince of Wales Crescent, Camden, 1973 – Aden Kelly



Silverdale, Sydenham, 1975 – Dave Walking



Jar storage and cat flap



Priory Grove, Lambeth – Roger Sapsford/ Asmail Asmal

Brondesbury, London, 1979 – Tony Sleep



Union Square, Lambeth, 1977 – Adam Harvey



Beckenham, Kent, 1979 – Dave Walking



Tolmers Square, London, 1978 – Nick Wates



Villa Road, Lambeth, 1979 – Union Place Collective



Frestonia, West London, 1979 – Tony Sleep



Beaumont Rise, Islington, 1979 – Adam Harvey



BEFORE



AFTER



Priory Grove, Lambeth



Freston Road, West London



Priory Grove, Lambeth

Richard & Sally Greenhill/Time Out

Richard & Sally Greenhill/Time Out

Tony Sleep 1977

Tony Sleep 1978

houses by means of flexible piping and trailing leads. Although not illegal, this solution can involve complex cover-up jobs in the event of inspection from officials if the supplier is not to be cut off too.

Restoring water, gas and electricity supplies, mending drains, roofs, windows and floors, plastering and decorating are tasks undertaken by most squatters. To the inexperienced they might seem impossible. If professional tradesmen were called in they would cost a fortune. But most repairs are common sense and can be done cheaply with very few tools. It's ideal if there is someone to demonstrate how to do them, but, if not, there are books (pp 236-7), pamphlets, evening classes and over the counter advice.

The most consistent argument raised against people doing their own repairs is the danger. There is of course danger in making alterations and installing services. But there is also danger in being ignorant of them. No-one I know has been seriously hurt by doing their own repairs.

No-one would claim that squatters' repairs are carried out to the same standard as a professional job – they simply don't need to be. That they work, last a few years and can be patched up again is enough. Using labour-intensive methods, salvaged materials and fittings (often from skips) sharing knowledge and generally 'making do' enables squatters to do what officialdom with its regulations dare not attempt. In practice squatting repairs are a strange mixture. There are elements of pragmatism like the use of polythene pipe for cold water plumbing which enables a house to be plumbed easily and cheaply; ingenuity like the people who used a gang plank for a missing flight of stairs; baroque fantasy like the leaky pipe whose drips were caught in an upturned truncated Fairy Liquid bottle and redirected via a hose pipe and bent wire coat hanger into the lavatory pan; and desperate 'cunning' like the burst cold water pipe to a bath tap that sent the squatters onto the street in panic, only for a passer-by to hammer the pipe flat, which meant that for ever more cold water had to be piped via a hose from the basin tap.

Learning to do these repairs, no matter how badly, can liberate people from the mystery and tyranny of the workings of a house and, eventually, from dependence on expensive professional services. Some squatters have gone on to start small

building firms after doing an 'apprenticeship' on their own home. Once learnt, these skills are never forgotten. One may lose a squat, but one need never lose the experience necessary to squat again and again. The experience and ability become in themselves a security.

Many people are appalled by – what they see as – squalor in squats and by surroundings which bear no resemblance to the Sunday colour supplement image of an ideal home. But they forget that the squatters may wish or need to live in their own way, that they may have entirely different priorities and may, of necessity, be 'making do'. They cannot easily know what conditions existed initially, nor under what circumstances improvements are made or planned, for most squats are never 'finished'. Nor do these critics understand that having the freedom to make these changes is what gives the squatters the chance to identify with them. The power to shape one's environment can be more important than the end result and squatters are forced to recognise the process – the 'doing' – over the product.

The relationship between a squatter and his or her house is unique. Tenants who rent privately are living in another person's house with that person's tastes and restrictions. They pay through the nose for conditions that can be no better than a squat.

Council tenants can only relate to their dwelling in a restricted and prescribed way. There is no opportunity for personal whim or expression and little incentive to repair, maintain or improve – nor any possibility of anything but 'normal' social arrangements: whoever heard of a commune being started on a council estate?

And owner occupiers (particularly the majority who have to rely on mortgages) must always restrict themselves to changes and additions which retain or improve the resale value of the property. They must abide by the rules, regulations and opinions of officialdom. Social arrangements are restricted by the nature of the houses that are mortgageable and by the standards and whims of those who lend money. Try getting a mortgage as a homosexual couple!

Apart from the ultimate sanction of eviction squatters alone are free of most petty bureaucratic controls, of property values and of landlords. This allows them to do things that would be difficult or impossible in other types of accommodation: to practise rock and roll till 5 am in the morning or

Aden Kelly 1973



Catching the drips: Prince of Wales Crescent (above)



and Freston Road

Tony Sleep 1980

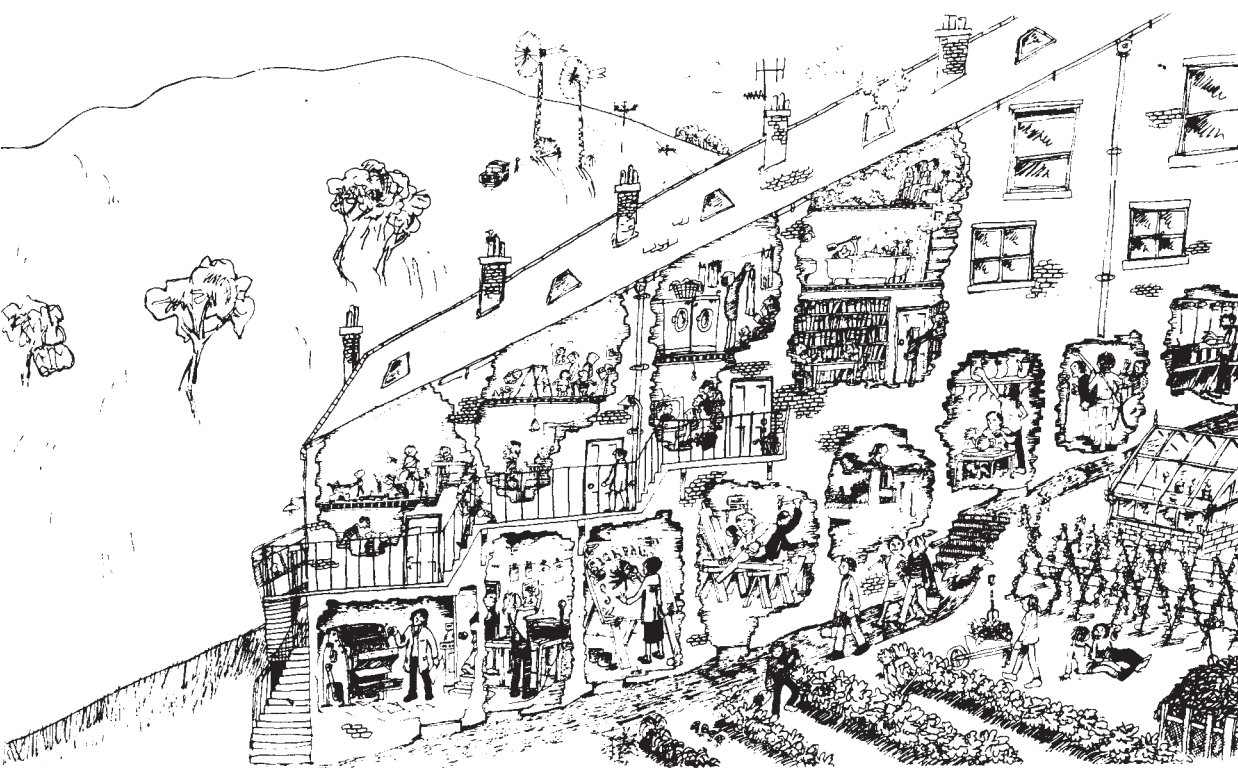


Improvised drainpipes: Freston Road and Fieldgate Mansions

Tony Sleep 1979

Dave Hoffman 1980





Proposal by squatters in Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire, for the long term conversion of their hillside terrace (p 46), 1976. It envisaged;

- Workshops for printing, sign-writing, weaving and making clothes.
- Two children's houses: one each for the under-fives and the older children. These would incorporate play and sleeping space, a creche and education facilities.
- A house for common activities with two bathrooms, a sauna, TV rooms, music room, quiet room/library and laundry.
- Sixteen self-contained flats.
- Wind generator and organic garden.

The squatters offered to do most of the building work themselves but Calderdale Council rejected the proposal in favour of an expensive conversion into standard nuclear family units.

to be able to work and live in the same house perhaps by setting up workshops and small businesses. For some it's an opportunity not to care, to live in neglect and squalor, or to have a constant stream of deadbeats and acid casualties dossing down on every available inch of floor space. It can be a chance to live alone, Buddha-like, or to live with many others, sharing cooking, repairs, childcare, the garden and each other. Where many squatters have moved into a whole area, communality can extend beyond the boundaries of each house turning the whole street into an intimate living place. Community shops, restaurants, bulk buying, creches, workshops and small businesses have all had a chance to exist in squatting communities. (p42)

While buildings can never make a community, it helps a community if it can adapt its buildings to its growing and changing needs. So after basic repairs come alterations which make interaction easier – tearing down partitions, garden walls, enlarging rooms and connecting houses.

It is ironic that in many areas awaiting demolition, squatters, using only their initiative and their meagre resources have installed for the *first time* bathrooms, inside toilets and hot running

water. It is ironic too that they have frequently gone on to establish flourishing, dynamic self-supporting communities which planners, architects and bureaucrats have found so hard to create despite the resources available to them.

Squatting is a very human activity, full of contradiction, inconsistency, wonder and desperation. It contrasts so sharply with our society's general approach to problems that it is seen as a problem. The great tragedy of the post war rebuilding programme is its failure to have allowed ordinary people to contribute positively to their own environment. Instead it was left to a few experts – idealistic, enthusiastic, but wrong-headed – to arrange it all for everyone else.

The outcome is all around us – mediocre, mean and inadequate modern council housing. Slums have been cleared and replaced with buildings that have bathrooms, but are of little better quality. The cost has been huge, both financial and in terms of the destruction of communities and the waste represented by unoccupied land and houses. In the street where I live, one resident was told 35 years ago not to do any improvements or repairs as it would all be coming down soon. There is still no sign of the development.

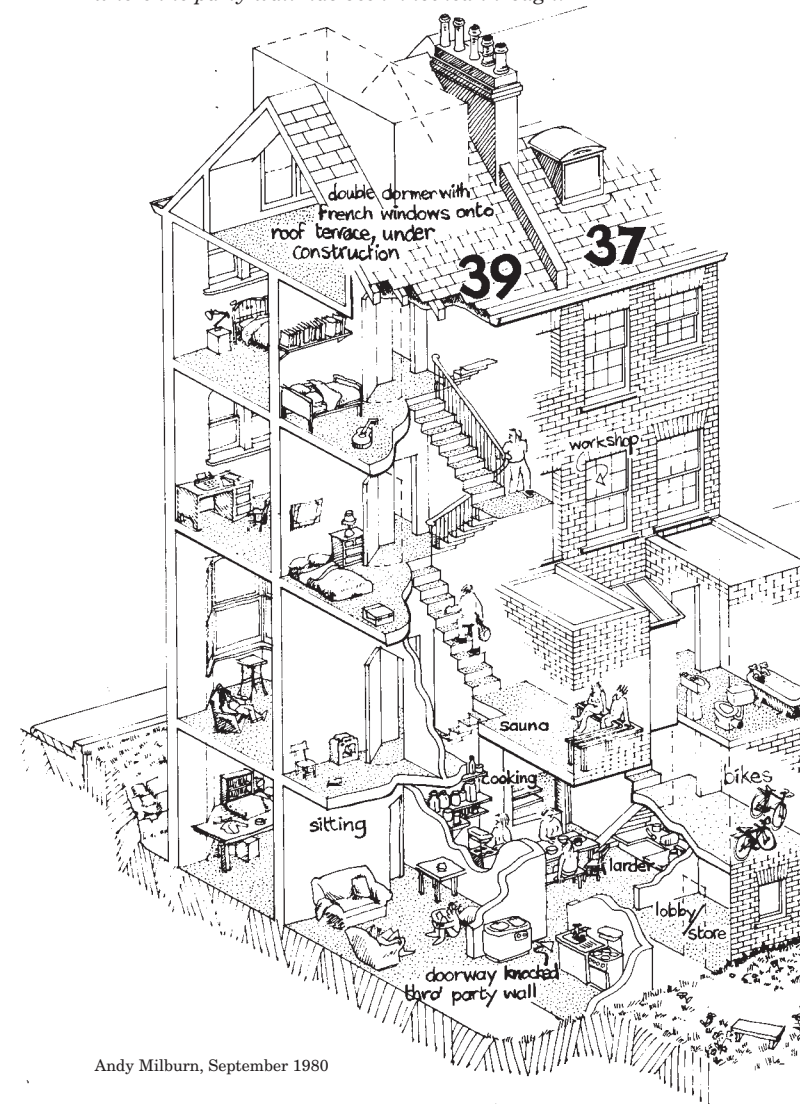
Providing everyone with a bathroom has proved both impossible and undesirable. There is an obsession to rationalise, and to adopt universal standards for everything. In 1961 the Parker Morris Report described a house in terms of the activities it must contain – watching TV, taking a bath and getting a wardrobe up the stairs. It was considered a great breakthrough. But its minimums rapidly became maximums, and in any case, on whose activities was it based? Not mine.

To illustrate the insanity of taking these things to extremes is *The Bathroom*, a 300 page book published by Penguin based on a seven year research project to describe the activities and facilities of the bathroom, from piss trajectories to 'expectorating', and from cleaning of the bathroom to inserting contact lenses.

Working and living, learning and dying are all ruthlessly separated in the name of environmental improvement. But the result is always to make things poorer, more obvious, predictable and boring. The environment has been dehumanised. Houses are more than just machines for living in and the cities more than a few aesthetically-placed tower blocks amongst areas of grass.

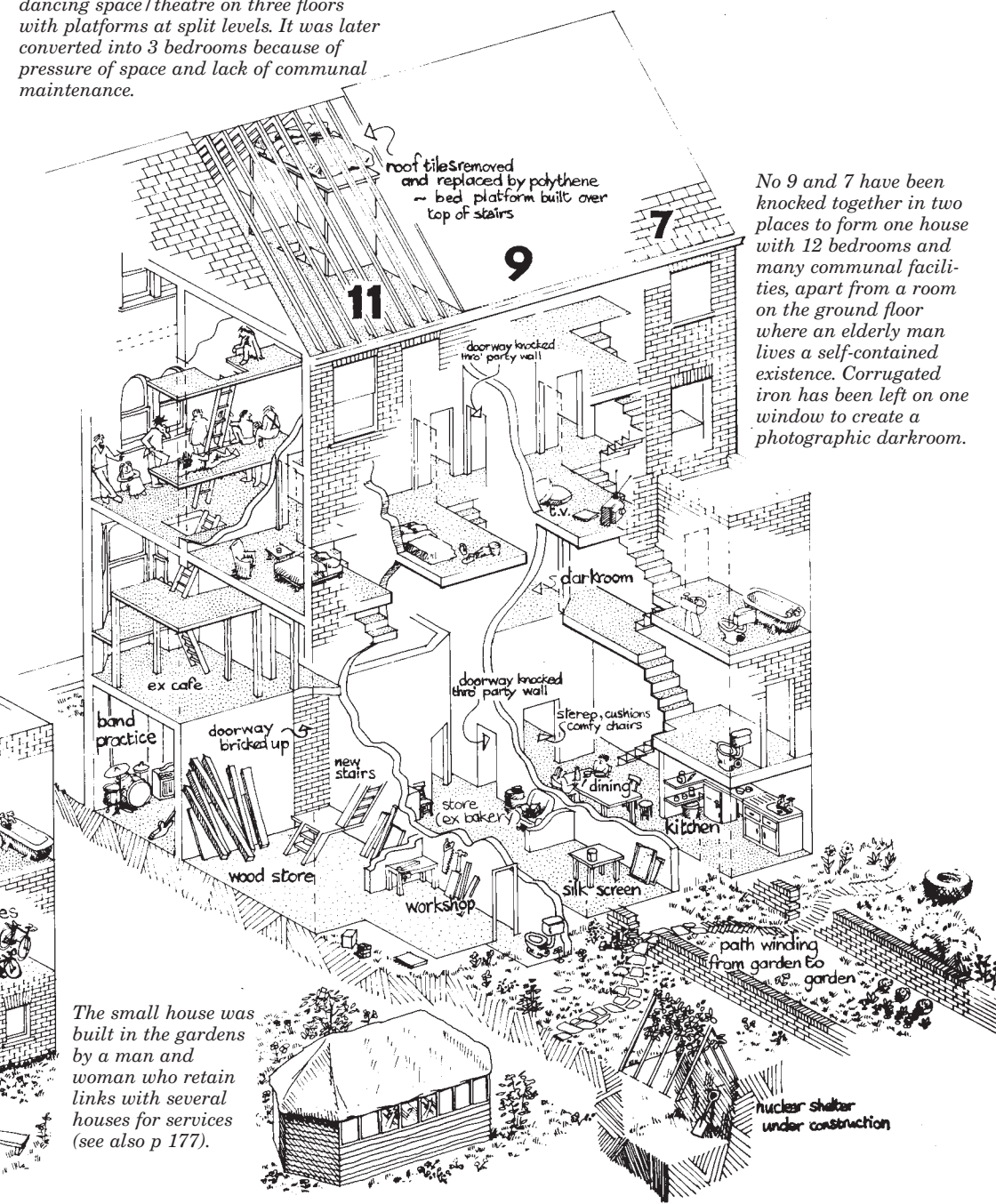
How squatters adapted terraced Victorian houses in Villa Road, Lambeth, to suit their needs. Following a protracted battle with the Council, the squatters may well be allowed to stay permanently (see Chapter 12).

Nos 37 and 39 operate as one household with 14 bedrooms and a large communal living, eating and cooking area in the rear basements where the party wall has been knocked through.



Andy Milburn, September 1980

Practically gutted by fire, No 11 was converted into a cafe/meeting room/dancing space/theatre on three floors with platforms at split levels. It was later converted into 3 bedrooms because of pressure of space and lack of communal maintenance.



The small house was built in the gardens by a man and woman who retain links with several houses for services (see also p 177).





*Squatters build*

*Left: A roof extension made from salvaged timber and slates, Priory Grove, Lambeth, 1975.*

*Below: A glass fibre and timber home built by squatters on the ruins of a house from which they had been evicted, Grosvenor Road, Twickenham, 1976.*

*Right: A house under construction and (far right) a (different) small house built in the back gardens of a squatted street, Villa Road, Lambeth 1978-80.*



Caroline Lwin



Adam Harvey



Adam Harvey



Syndication International



Union Place Collective



Union Place Collective



Liz Millen



Liz Millen

Rationalisation is an attempt to make an essentially amorphous, open ended human experience definable and quantifiable. Architects and planners in particular rely on numerous 'design guides' so that a 'guide to user needs with a check list' has come to replace real people!

As more and more is defined, rationalised and controlled, less and less is left to chance personal choice, or individual responsibility. Everyone from the architect to the labourer becomes increasingly dissociated from what he or she is doing. One only need look at the results to see the boredom and indifference in every brick. The only return for the day's work is the wage packet, which in turn buys the relief to the day's boredom.

Whenever the government is faced with ensuring a precise standard for safety or whatever, it is always in the same way. It removes all responsibility from the public and invests it in the professional institution. All professions rely on an elaborate system of deferred responsibility to consultants, regulations, by-laws, legal definitions, official reports and guides and ultimately to heavy insurance.

People are increasingly *encouraged* to be ignorant about more and more things. In our 12 or 15 years of schooling, what are we taught about our own personal or communal survival, about building or growing food or about health care and diet? Little of any practical value. People have no choice but to rely on 'experts' so those unable to afford them go without any advice.

In the past people could build their own homes but gradually laws were passed, often with the best intentions, which made professionals responsible for this aspect of our lives. Today anyone trying to provide for themselves is discouraged or prevented. They are considered deviants and the monopolistic status of professionals has been created.

It is my hope that in squatting there are the seeds of real humane alternatives to this institutionalism of life. Through squatting thousands of people have housed themselves for next to nothing and had the opportunity to live in ways that could never be imagined in the reams of studies, researches and reports of the experts. To those who care to look properly, squatting is a positive creative force in the dying urban environment. •



*I Peter Manzoni, restorer, of No 29 Winchester Road NW3 in the London Borough of Camden, do hereby make oath and say as follows:*

*On, or about, 30th of June 1973, Mr Allan Shortland, Mr Nigel Palmer-Jones and myself having noticed that the premises known as No 29 Winchester Road were open, unoccupied and in an advanced stage of decay, entered thereon with the express intention of creating a home. Desiring to communicate this to those having a legal interest in the property, the said three defendants went, within a few days, to Student Community Housing and asked whether they still had any interest in the property. They said they had none, which confirmed reports that the building was generally deemed to be beyond repair and would probably be demolished.*

*The entrance hall of the house had been used as a place to dispose of unwanted building timber. A difficult climb over this led to the shop premises. The shop front had been termed a 'dangerous structure' by the District Surveyor on account of its frontal timber beams being rotten.*

*The basement and back yard had been used as an engineering works. No waste had left the basement in many years. The industrial waste had been loaded into the cellars first, then, as they filled up it had been dumped into the least used passageways and finally the back and lower back yards and what had been a scullery in much earlier times. These were now a scene of commercial waste, rotting refuse, rubble and vermin. I chased a rat, in the yard.*

*A flow of people making very short-term use of the property had left their traces there in many bizarre forms. The house was strewn all over with abandoned objects, all of which were disused, defunct or broken.*

*The three upper flats had several windows missing and were by now inhabited by many nesting birds. The floors at the back of the top two flats were unsafe to walk on and warnings had been painted on the doors to this effect. The bathroom floors were near collapse as were also the following: the ceilings in the top flat, part of the interior wall adjacent to the stairs between the first and second floors; the front ends of the two main roof beams which form the valley; the lintels above many windows on the first and second floors; all the ceilings on the main staircase, entrance hall and back lobby; the basement stairs; the scullery ceiling; the door to the lower back yard, with*

*surrounding frame and lintel: the floor of the back lobby and part of the shop floor, through which I fell. The basement floor was unusable as much of it was by now merely earth.*

*The flats had suffered severely from the unimpeded entry of rainwater through the roof and missing windows. This had evidently been going on for several years and had led to an unchecked outbreak of dry rot, a fungus which is greatly promoted by water. The main exterior wall at the back of the house had been seriously weakened by an ill-executed addition of bathrooms to the flats, built up on the outside with doorways crudely cut through the brickwork. Dry rot had ravaged the brickwork here and loosened all the plaster inside the bathrooms. The remains of the plumbing and gas installations hung in disuse ready to fall through the floors.*

*Given the condition and contents of the premises it soon became obvious that the kind of repairs the house needed, involving a great deal of excavation, replacement of structural timbers, and rebricking of the exterior wall, could not be carried out on a short-term basis. Either the house should be abandoned and allowed to collapse or it should be given an entirely new lease of life. It was decided by Mr Palmer-Jones and myself to make the building viable for another century. The premises were thoroughly excavated as the restoration got under way. All affected structural timbers were duly replaced and no doubtful timbers were allowed to stay.*

*Camden's District Surveyor came to inspect the dangerous beam above the shop front in the summer of 1973 and condoned the standard to which the rest of the house was being repaired. He came up to the top of the house and inspected the front lintels replaced by us. In my presence he said to a person with him that this sort of initiative would have to be encouraged 'given the present housing situation'. He offered his further advice to us, should we wish to consult him at any time in the future. I felt that our work was acceptable to the Council and this incident encouraged me in my work and the belief that the plaintiffs had accepted our constructive presence where vandalism had been before.*

*I have paid rates since January 1974.*

*Since many of the walls and ceilings, particularly on the top floor where rain had penetrated most, were beyond redemption it seemed most economic to remove them altogether and encourage*



Ray



Nick Wates



Nick Wates

*No 29 Winchester Road, Camden, a derelict house rehabilitated by squatters (see also p 167 for first floor). Far left: Ground floor workshop with stained glass window. Second from left: An original place for the bath. There is a shower and wash-basin under the bath platform. Below and bottom right: All internal walls and ceiling removed to create a large dining/living room on the top floor. Right: Bed platform. Below right: New fire-place.*

*In 1979 Camden Council evicted the squatters and spent £100,000 converting the house into three flats housing a total of seven people.*



Nick Wates



Nick Wates



Nick Wates



Nick Wates

*an open area which might be shared by all.*

*The house has evolved into a shared structure with much open space inside. Facilities are shared on the top floor, in the newly-built bathroom and shower and in the basement. There are two businesses on the ground floor. These comprise my own workshop for restoration work on, off and to the premises; and Mr Shortland's workshop for handmade furniture, which also related to his additional work as an evening craft instructor. Both of these workshops have been fitted out to the requirements of the defendants' trades, and needed extensive work doing to them before that.*

*All of this work has had to be done in stages whilst the defendants have lived amid the demolition work, earning their livelihoods to finance it and spending much of their free time building the home, except where it has been possible to work full-time on the house. At last, during the past six months, no more, has the house come to feel clean and sound enough to be a home.*

*The defendants knew of the plaintiffs' intention to redevelop the site, but since so many schemes for the site have been put forward and abandoned, not only during the time that the defendants have lived there, but during the several years in which the property stood empty and was vandalised, that it has become impossible to believe that the plaintiffs have any cogent or durable idea as to what sort of development they wish to bring about.*

*No 29 Winchester Road is an example of an approach to housing which is becoming current. It is an extended family made up of single parents, couples, individuals and children who live and work together sharing facilities. By removing the psychological barriers which cause people to live in self-contained units it is possible to pool resources and so withstand economic inflation.*

*If the proposed eviction were to take place several of these people would become a burden on the state and part of a widespread experiment in human relations would have been terminated. The discouragement of this approach to housing in London will lead to further waste, and the recycling of waste is now one of the next frontiers of economic growth. Any initiative such as has been shown in this case is surely worthy of encouragement, especially where a traditional terrace has been saved.'*

*(Affidavit filed by Peter Manzoni in the High Court when opposing a possession order by Camden Council 1977 [editors' emphasis]).*



# Learning to learn

by Pat Moan

## CONFESSIONS... Chapter 16 of a lay-about, hippie, anarchist, woman squatter

Moving into 29 Harecourt Road was like coming home.

I guess what it is with squatting is community – a textbook word, till you try it. A place where strange exotic tribes of natives live.

Now I live in Finsbury Park, Islington. A community. And boy, is it strange. Here there is life.

People don't just sleep here. They live here – work, play, sit on the front porch talking and singing, drinking beer.

Graffiti. Posters of past campaigns. Dossers loons, artists. Dogs, a goose.

There is conflict of course. We all know about that. But its the co-operation that really knocks me over.

I'm sick of reading and hearing all the time about squatting that it is a problem, a drag something interim till we 'solve' the problem

### No More Crummy Jobs!

Squatting is the most fun I've ever had. No rent. Whoopee! No rent means you can give up full-time employment firstly due to needing less money and secondly due to having more fun not working.

Most jobs in our society either don't need

doing or could be done vastly more efficiently, that is, with less waste of time and resources.

And most people doing most of these jobs know it. Deep down, or maybe not even very deep, they know that they are wasting their lives – somehow this crummy job is not Life.

For example, factory workers spend most of their time engaged in the production of junk that is designed to fall apart. Besides which quite often the people making the stuff couldn't ever afford to buy it.

### Wasted Lives

So vast numbers of factory workers, money collectors, bureaucrats, teachers, students, etc, are exhausted dulled, and demoralized by the meaningless way they spend their lives.

They become escapist. They learn to substitute consumption for action. They become Good Citizens. Buying cars, buying clothes, buying houses, buying . . .

Sometimes people try to fall 'in love' and/or get married and/or have babies in order to feel more useful and relieve the boredom. When it doesn't work, they may add 'guilty' and 'bitter' to the other bad things they feel.



Eva Newnham



### Taking Care of Me

As a squatter, I find my need for the glittering world of status possessions becoming less and less. Buying less and enjoying it more.

Because we spend less time at jobs we can spend more time taking care of our own needs which in turn saves a great deal of money. You couldn't work a 40-hour week and scrounge, mend motorcycles, build, paint, make your own music, clothes, jam, etc.

In fact, you're lucky if you can do more than collapse.

My daily life has been totally transformed. When you are no longer impaled on a 40-hour work week trying to pay the rent and indulging in expensive week-end, escapist diversion, what you are left with is time.

Time to do things, time to make things, time for yourself, time for others.

We have time to get down to the business of living.

By really living together in a group the monetary value that is placed on certain functions by a consumer society is replaced by our own values which

are based on *REAL* needs and *REAL* pleasures . . .

A tasty meal is one of the great pleasures of life and is recognised as such.

The ability to prepare it is appreciated as much as the ability to fix the radio.

The competitive and comparative approach is replaced by a co-operative one.

### Learning to Learn

In this climate, skills are easily and joyously passed along. For one thing, if you don't share your skills



Pat Moan

Pat Moan

Street party in Athelstane Road, June 1976  
Above: The street 'spirit'.  
Left and right: Street swimming pool.





*'The Squatters Show' by the Persons Unknown street theatre group*

it means you get stuck doing this one thing more than you want.

It feels good to be showing someone how to do something.

It does not feel so good to be doing something for someone who could be doing it themselves.

While a bit of plumbing for yourself is satisfying doing it as a job, as a hireling, it is a bore.

Squatters have given and taken free crash courses in plumbing and electricity as well as just showing friends how to do things . . . like juggling, music, printing, photography and mechanics.

This style of learning and teaching is fundamentally a desire to learn or pass on information and skills as opposed to a desire to either get or keep a job.

It is leading to the breakdown of mystique and obfuscation, which can no longer appear in the guise of real communication.

### Death to Sex Roles

People in this situation do not feel threatened by other people's competence. And somewhere at the core of all this lies the dying phenomenon of sexual role-playing. Hallelujah!

*We're not going away!*  
 Tuesday 20th June, 1976  
 This morning there were 5 houses in Charteris Road. We lived there. Then came ten bailiffs and two hundred policemen. They had decided to evict us. Actually they had decided to evict us months ago and had told us they would boot us out on March 26th. But they didn't do it then because we had too many people with us that day. It took them three months to work themselves up to it, but finally they came. You ought to see our homes now. What a mess! Roofs, walls, water heater heaters, windows smashed; cookers, toilets, sinks, water ceiling a ripped out. Rubble, waste, destruction. Islington Council calls it "Rehabilitation".

Seventeen of us were arrested on more or less trumped up charges. They accuse us of "threatening behaviour", "insulting language", "likely to cause a breach of the peace". But this is what they were doing. Some of us were dragged off for "obstructing a public highway" despite the fact that the police had cordoned off this highway.

Yes, they even accused us of causing a housing shortage too. This is what you pay them to do: to manipulate, to lie, to create shortages and surpluses to keep their power over you. Don't smile, you are not immune. Anytime they don't want you, they're going to give you a hard time. Maybe you know this already: maybe you're old, sick or "unemployed" and have found that the "rights" they allow you just aren't enough to live on.

Anyway, we're all right. We're going to laugh our way through this farce and then go and open some more houses. We have already proved to anyone who will simply use their eyes that we use houses better than the council does. They have at least a thousand empty, rotting houses about the borough which they haven't enough money, sense to use. Isn't it obvious? The more you do for yourself, instead of getting tied up with corrupt, incompetent, power hungry bureaucrats, the better the housing scene, and every other scene will get. It's the only solution.

YOU CAN DO IT BETTER THAN THEY CAN: HELP YOURSELF!

Penne David



Maureen O'Connor

Differences become interesting instead of scary as men and women become friends. Ditto men and men and women and women.

We share a vision which involves a recognition of other people as fellow beings, each with a story to tell.

People ask questions as opposed to pretending they know something which they don't.

People answer questions straight without patronising or sneering at the questioner.

Last year, B S (before squatting) I felt isolated, wanting something, not knowing what – just what NOT. I wanted a community of peers, support,

like-minded people so as not to be always defending myself and my outlook.

I was ripe for squatting. When one is ripe, one creates opportunities.

The quality of my everyday life has never been better.

This is the revolution. It is on now. Not only is it bloodless and leaderless, it is fun.

(Written by Pat Moan and first published in *The Squatter* (see p. 185), Islington, London, 1976.)

Above: Athelstane Road after eviction.

Below: Fighting eviction in Charteris Road.



### Five years on

My horizon no longer shimmers with the promise of free-housing revolution. I really believed, then, that squatting was such a good idea that obviously, very soon, everyone would do it. I feel slightly foolish now, even though I *still* think squatting is a good idea and everyone should do it.

I miss the thrill of ripping off corrugated iron, the satisfaction of talking the gas man out of cutting off my supply, the fluidity between houses the general inventiveness and satisfaction of getting something for nothing. The effects still ripple through my life and are part of me now. The world was at my feet and for the first time in my life I really got into doing what I wanted to do, instead of what I was supposed to do. I think men generally have a broader range of opportunities so I doubt if they experience this freedom as intensely as women.

Squatting has been a tremendous influence on the lives of many women. And vice-versa. Free Space in which grew, and still grow, women's houses, women's communities, refuges for battered women and women's centres. Not having to pay rent freed women to start up presses, art places, bookshops – none of which would have happened if we'd had to pay rent. A wave of women plumbers, electricians, carpenters, mechanics, activists, musicians and artists came out of the squatting boom.

Since 1975 I have been amazed over and over by the dynamic women of the squatting movement: intimidating bailiffs, shaming police and embarrassing politicians in a direct and forceful way which most men are incapable of because they are so emotionally contained. One day in Finsbury Park the bailiffs evicted a woman and her six children. A group of us rallied in the street and an Irish woman neighbour gave those cops such a talking-to that half an hour later they were helping to move the furniture back into the house from which it had just been taken.

We had a lot of little victories like that which made up for the fear and insecurity. Things that made us mad, spurred us on, got us high. As women, we really started to feel our power, individually as well as collectively. There was a general challenging stance in the whole atmosphere. It was illegal (I thought). Stealing houses (they said). It was taking a risk, breaking the law and once you'd done it and started thinking about why houses were empty, it made you think about a lot

of things. You'd crossed a line, you'd hit the bottom and it wasn't so bad. In fact it was very liberating leading on to the next question: what about all these other stupid laws, conventions and attitudes which people hold sacred?

Brenda: *'Since the neighbours were all gossiping about us anyway I felt I could do what I wanted. I just cared less what people thought.'*

We kept finding out that we weren't powerless and they weren't omnipotent. Possibilities bloomed before my eyes. The whole area of skill-sharing opened up a wealth of possibilities to women. I felt very encouraged by things going wrong for men, like when Pete's lovingly constructed flower boxes, finished and varnished, sprang apart in the first rain. It's more encouraging, when you're learning, to see people try and fail rather than simply succeed. You feel there's hope for you.

Pat: *'I never used to saw until I started squatting. I'm sure I'd never picked one up.'*

Christine: *'No, I never either. I used to just fight with a saw. Now I'm quite a good saw-er. No, I am, I'm really good.'*

Pat: *'I saw Mo sawing and thought if she can do it, I can do it. She showed me how to start it off. I think up to that point I'd just felt you were born knowing or not knowing. I realised someone could actually teach you something like that. I remember Pete, on the other hand, coming along while I was sawing and saying, "You're not doing it straight. shall I do it for you?" by which time he was actually trying to take the saw out of my hand. I fought him for it. I felt he was showing off under the pretext of being helpful.'*

Christine: *'Oh yeah, he really fancies himself quite a saw-er.'* (Laughter)

It became apparent too, that a lot of times men really didn't want you to know how to do something that they did. As I was having really positive experiences of women sharing knowledge with me I was able to see, for the first time, that just because a man agreed to show you how to do something it didn't mean he would necessarily show you in a way that would be helpful. For example, instead of showing you how to play a simple chord on the guitar like E, he shows you



a difficult one like F barre. All of which meant that if I didn't get the hang of something straight away I no longer thought, 'Oh I'm useless and can't do anything right', but began to think more critically about who was showing me and what their trip was.

For us women, the more skilled and confident we became, the angrier we got about being ignored, particularly by certain men fancying themselves as Leaders, Experts or Lady Killers. While I was working on the first and last issue of *The Squatter*, which was largely produced by me and Al Rees, a friend of his from the left rolled up to help out at the end. He only talked to Al, he only looked at Al and he only asked Al questions. It was like I was invisible. And I thought well that's really IT. If you work with a man on anything, then it is always seen that he did it and you helped him.

So then I started living with women. I really needed to know that we could get it all together and be recognised that we could get it all together. If there were men around most of them just had this way of not letting you get around to anything. Like when Penny was going to put the toilet in, she went on a squatters plumbing course and while she was still thinking about it, Michael whipped it in. Of course, we were glad to have the toilet



Mike Goldwater 1979



Union Place Collective

done and Penny felt she couldn't complain. But it didn't do much for her confidence.

There was a lot of shame involved in not knowing. I mean if you believed in being competent – but weren't, and felt embarrassed or awkward about asking. If you didn't know how to change a fuse a man would take it as further evidence of your general ineptitude whereas a woman would show you how. And when you began to succeed instead of fail, asking became easier so it was a kind of habit you developed. As a child I remember that whenever I asked my father what was some tool or other, his stock reply was 'It's to make little girls ask questions.'

It became more important as time went on, not only for myself but for 'myself-as-a-woman' that I put in the slog and kept at things until I could do them. I had to break a habit of giving up easily. I wanted to be able to learn from women. I wanted never to feel ashamed of not knowing. I am prepared to learn from men but I'm not prepared to be squashed and I do know the difference.

Christine: *'It was a whole sort of reawakening. A sense of freedom like I had when I was a kid. Suddenly I had it all there again. There was anything you could do and it was all right! It was just amazing. Ever since then when I've moved out of squatting communities I've found the people really stodgy and boring. They just haven't gone through all that shedding of values that goes on when you squat. And the whole energy current was great.'*

Kathy: *'The houses were. things to do in themselves and it was really creative, too.'*

Christine: *'Oh yeah, it was really DO-power,*

*instead of just sitting around talking.'*  
Brenda: *'I'd been on the fringe of squatting for a long time before I squatted. I experienced it as being a place for freaks to crash and screw ... disorganised and I certainly didn't want to do it... sleeping in dirty sleeping bags on the floor ... being really dirty and untogether. But those places weren't households, they were very transient.'*

Even the cosy squats tended to be pretty messy, and were a lot of work and a guaranteed cure to being fastidious. Most of them needed major work. So it was *big dirty* work we went in for, knocking down walls and building platform beds rather than worrying about clean floors and sparkling glasses. The whole lowering of standards on the housekeeping front was a big release for women. And because the houses were actually being thrown away by society, we had a lot of freedom to practice, to bodge and to play with paints and colours.



Pat Moan

Some squatted houses were more of a *no-man's* land than others, like around Broadway Market in Hackney where the majority were all-women houses and the women ran the Broadway Market Squatters Association.



Tony Sleep 1980

Ponk: *'The women helped me get into a house. My brother and male friend didn't turn up until it was all over – a typical pattern in Broadway Market, I was to discover.'*

Pat: *'What? Women doing the breaking in?'*

Ponk: *'Yeah. Wasn't it like that all over?'*

Pat: *'Oh no. It must have been like that because you were all women there and talked to the women who turned up, not the men.'*

Ponk: *'Yes. I suppose we just ignored them. I never really thought about that. Meeting those women really changed my life. For me, it's really all been about women.'*

Kathy: *'If I hadn't discovered squatting and, more important, squatting with women I would never have had the opportunity to take on things that had, at one time, seemed impossible. It started out with practical things and became a whole attitude of mind.'*

For me too, squatting has been about women, about power, about independence and breaking a deadening pattern of passivity. •

*Squatters' paper published in Islington, London, 1976.*





# Outpost of a new culture

## Chapter 17

Squatting communities as a different way of life

by Tom Osborn



I want to write about squatting as part of a larger movement towards a new culture. Squatters are a kind of urban pioneer. They settle the desert wastes of our cities, and as with all pioneers, they bring a new culture.

Most of the pioneers we know about were propagating civilisation. They civilised the open spaces and the 'savages' that lived there – and their civilisation too often ended up destroying both the natural environment and the culture of the people who were part of it. Squatters, however, are engaged in a de-civilising process – that is if we define civilisation as our existing technological, bureaucratic, exploitative and alienating culture. Their aim is an alternative society, a better life no less.

When people make the choice to squat, they

do not say to themselves: 'I am doing this to make a better society'. Their choice is the product of the pressures encountered in "life before squatting". In many cases they may be actually on the streets, or more likely, living in temporary accommodation, unable to find work, without savings, and lacking skills and qualifications. I sometimes call this the working-class choice to squat. Alternatively, people may be refusing to continue in the vicious circle of earning in order to live in a way that enables them to earn that much. They may be well-educated or in the process of becoming so, but they won't use their training within the existing culture. This is what you could call the middle-class choice to squat.

In becoming squatters, people begin to change

the nature of their relationships with one another. They take some steps out of their old class position not merely into another but towards a classless society. And in becoming squatters people also change the nature of their relationship with the physical environment. The urban pioneers, opening up houses in the desert spaces left by the existing culture are working towards a new technological independence. They begin to make a new culture.

The characteristics of this new culture are demonstrated in the way people relate to each other, to the physical environment and to existing society. In this chapter I am trying to show how I have experienced these characteristics as a squatter in St Agnes Place, Lambeth.



Defying the wreckers from the rooftops

Union Place Collective

### St Agnes Place

It would be hard to think of a more compelling road to involvement than defending one's dwelling place against wasteful destruction in the face of a desperate need for housing! My commitment to the street's struggle (pp 82-85), and my love for the people I lived with grew each time a house was wrecked and each time we worked out ways to try to prevent it. The external threats and our resistance to them certainly brought us together. Yet, in another way, they were an interference with the actual life of the street.

To start with, people live communally, rather than as isolated individuals or family units. I live in a house with five other people. We buy food,



Nick Waites



Street breakfast, Jubilee Day, 1977

Anna Kolpy

we use the world together?" This is what the sharing of property is about, jointly owning what is available. It is also what the sharing of power is about, jointly managing what is jointly owned. It changes the meaning of both ownership and management.

The street meeting has been particularly interesting. It has met regularly every week for three years. It is open to everyone. On one or two occasions when greater than average stress caused heightened emotions at large meetings, we decided to have a chairperson. But most meetings have no chairperson, yet we get through the business with anything from 12 to 60 people present. We do not have a permanent 'secretary'. Yet someone at the meeting takes responsibility for minutes and they



Frisbee in the ruins

Anna Kolpy

nearly always get written, duplicated and distributed to every house. We do not have a treasurer, but money is regularly collected by each house for a central fund and we have a bank account. The fund is for house repairs and its allocation is decided on by the meeting. (In May 1978, the 'rent' was £1 per person per week or 50p for claimants.)

There are task groups for particular jobs but no permanent central committee. So the street meeting itself has 'management' authority for all decisions. It is thus a true assembly: every person who lives in the street has a voice and joint responsibility for what happens. Sometimes people bring difficulties and disputes within houses to the street meeting to help resolve them as a kind of



Dancing in the street



court of appeal.

For several weeks, one area of dispute was to do with that old chestnut, the tension between organisation and spontaneity. Some people wanted to lay down that the street meeting had certain definite powers – such as deciding which people moved into the street, for example. They were scared that chaos might arise if every house or even every individual simply made their own decisions. Others insisted that the street meeting neither should, nor could, have any actual power. They were scared of the authoritarian bureaucracy that could arise if we gave too much power to the meeting. There was a great deal of argument and discussion and it helped understanding when people saw the issue in terms of their fears of both bureaucracy and chaos and accepted that we needed both organisation and spontaneity.

There has never been any articulated resolution, nor any formal powers worked out for the street meeting. But somehow it does exert pressure: most people do, on the whole, pay their ‘rent’; newcomers have been dissuaded from occupying empty houses already designated for use; disapproval of ‘anti-social’ behaviour has got home and reconciliations have somehow resulted. It has been a very *ad hoc*, pragmatic form of organisation without authority.

St Agnes Place has always been towards the anarchist end of the political spectrum, with a climate of tolerance. Even at the time of wreckings and confrontations, when we desperately needed the presence of as many people as possible, no one was censured when they did not turn out. There seemed to be a conscious effort to allow each person to make his or her own decision.

In practice, crucial ‘decisions’ were made not at meetings but actually on the spot by weight of spontaneous opinion. An example is the occupation of No 85 on the day when the tenant moved out and the Council wreckers moved in.

The tenancy was in the lower half of the house, the upper half being empty. So, technically, we could have squatted the upper half if we could have got in. But the tenant was a crotchety old lady who was paranoid (understandably, considering the turmoil she had suffered in that blighted street) about both the Council and the squatters and she would not allow us through her flat. We also knew the wreckers would really go to town on this house. In the last one, they had sawn through joists and broken through the roof, as well

as tearing out the services. The previous wrecking had been a half-hearted job; squatters had moved in within a week and had quickly repaired much of the damage. So the score stood at ‘one all’.

The question of how and when to move into the top half of No 85 was crucial. Various plans were suggested at street meetings including ideas which needed preparation before the day. A decision was even taken to carry some of them out but not implemented. On the day itself, a crowd of us gathered in the house next door facing the dilemma: move in too early and the police would kick us out; move in too late and the wreckers would be in possession. In the event, we chose exactly the right moment. Until that moment, nobody could have said what would happen. The arrival of police was ignored as was that of the Council’s Construction (*sic*) Department van (the wreckers team!). The moment came – something to do with the approach of the Council official who would let in the wreckers – when suddenly there was no doubt and everyone surged forward. Downstairs, the wreckers destroyed services, ripped out floors, smashed windows and frames, and even removed the stairs up to the landing window but no further because the police fortunately conceded that legally we had to have access! We saved the top flat and, most important, the roof. The whole house was repaired by squatters and is lived in again.

This decision-making process was an eye-opener to me. I had always believed in making joint decisions and being committed to them. This was another process – joint decision-making in action.

There has always been a conscious effort not to have ‘key people’ or fixed roles. People do a task for a time while their energy for it lasts and then another takes over. It means that things do not always get done. But on the whole the important things *are* done, and with more pleasure and less sense of burden than usual.

Fixed and traditional sex roles too are changed, sometimes just naturally, sometimes with conscious thought through women’s and men’s groups. Women can be seen repairing bicycles and cars, mending roofs and window panes. Men can be seen giving children baths and hanging out washing. Women and men together write posters and negotiate with councillors. It is taken for granted that cooking and housework are shared.

There are other things I have learned during

my time in St Agnes Place. One of them is how to tolerate dirt and disorder, and things being out of place or unfinished. Keeping things ‘neat and tidy’ is one of the props of the existing culture. It is a standard description of ‘well-behaved’ patients in mental hospitals. We just have to get it out of our system – and out of *the* system. There are the difficulties of sharing too, like not having one’s tools returned and learning how to *return* tools and to be tidy when it is important: doing things because people want to or because they are needed, rather than because there are rules to follow. When, and by whom, the washing up gets done is no triviality but a symbol of freedom and organisation. Learning both what we, and other people, need; facing one’s fear in a confrontation with the Council or the police; getting on with it when you want to do something and finding out for yourself what can be done, practically or in terms of other people’s sensitivities (the true meaning of self-help); accepting other people’s differences, and having your own accepted, dealing with someone’s freak-out or your own: all these are a part of living in a community like St Agnes Place.

This ‘therapeutic’ aspect of squatting is inseparable from the growth of new ownership or decision-making structures. It is an integral part of the healing process of escaping the old culture and the formative process of building a new one.

### The Physical Environment

The attitude of squatters to the physical environment expresses itself most strongly in the way houses are used and repairs undertaken. First, practical tasks are carried out as far as possible by squatters themselves. People learn how to do their own wiring, plumbing, glazing and guttering. Expertise is not rejected but demystified and no longer used as an instrument of control and bureaucracy. And second, existing materials are employed wherever possible. The myth that it is quicker, simpler, safer, economical and more efficient to scrap and replace the old with the new is challenged.

The power of the ‘expert’ and the drive to use new products are connected as both are manifestations of our existing culture. The squatter’s relationship with the physical environment is not just to do with mending one’s own living space but is a central part of the urban pioneer’s confrontation with the existing culture. For instance, in

our street, two houses were so badly gutted by the Council to prevent squatting that the District Surveyor put ‘dangerous structure’ notices on them. Most of the joists had been cut out and the walls were therefore in danger of collapse. The Council had been ordered to put scaffolding around the houses to support them. At this time the Council’s decision on whether or not to keep the street standing depended on Housing Corporation grants for rehabilitation and for a time these were withheld on the ground that it would be too expensive.

It was in this context that we decided to repair the two gutted houses. They were not among the houses even considered for rehabilitation by the Council as they were so badly damaged. One objective was to demonstrate how much can be done for very little financial outlay. The total cost was £900 compared with the Council’s estimates of £3,500–£5,000, although of course we had no labour costs.

Once we start to look closely at the squatter’s relationship with the physical environment, we perceive more and more how this connects with the way the new culture relates to outside society. In other words, we have to talk about politics.

### Lambeth Self-Help

There is the politics of personal relationships, of the use of possessions, of the way meetings are conducted, decisions made and actions planned; there is too, the politics of doing your own practical work, of learning skills, using old materials and mending buildings. But it is in its relationship to conventional society that the characteristics of the new culture become most clearly political.

In July 1977, the Council agreed to hand over a number of houses in the street to Lambeth Self-Help Housing Association for short-term use. But a number of obstacles came up such as the question of allocation. The Council was pushing for control over the allocation of all places even when individual rooms became empty in communal houses. There was also the question of the status of St Agnes Place. The Council attempted to refuse to deal directly with us as a collective and to go through Lambeth Self-Help. Under the terms of the rehabilitation proposal we were all to become members of Lambeth Self-Help Housing Association. On the other hand, we were already a community and Lambeth Self-Help did not want

to interfere with our autonomy.

Lambeth Self-Help is worth describing in detail. It started in 1971 as a family squatting group and later was given short-life licences on houses which it renovated. In 1977 it was housing 250 adults (mostly families) in 110 houses belonging to Lambeth Council and the GLC. All the people in its houses are members who are jointly responsible for running the Association. Members paid £1 per week per single person or £4 per week for families which is used to repair other houses and run the organisation. This was its only source of revenue until 1975 when it was given an annual grant from the Council and ‘mini-HAG’ grants from central government for the rehabilitation of short-life properties.

The allocation of houses by Lambeth Self-Help is fairly remarkable. Every Wednesday night there is a meeting for people who have applied for housing. It is their own meeting and they decide who will get the next tenancy. Apart from the applicants, it will be attended only by one or two existing members and a paid officer of Lambeth Self-Help to provide information. Everybody has to explain their needs and listen to those of other people. They also visit each other’s existing accommodation. Since people are likely to have been attending for a long time before they get their own house, there will be a mutual understanding of problems and a sensible judgement can be made. It is a truly democratic process. It means that neither the Council, to its chagrin, nor Lambeth Self-Help can make direct nominations. The decision is made by the people who are most affected.

The Council does, in fact, indirectly influence allocation since 75 per cent of people who contact Lambeth Self-Help are sent by its Housing Advice Centre and its Social Services Department. But it is the Lambeth Self-Help ‘New Members Meeting’ that allocates places. It is easy to see that such a democratic organisation is threatening to the hierarchical controlling set-up that prevails in our society; and that the education in collectivity which it provides is an example to uphold.

### The outpost in the existing culture

This issue of control comes into every reaction of society to the new culture. It is the same with the efforts to negate the collective organism of St Agnes Place. The Council has tried to avoid giving

the rehabilitation of our houses to Lambeth Self-Help, in the belief that another association would be more authoritarian and easier for it to deal with. Attempts by Council officials, police, and journalists, to deal with ‘leaders’ has become a well-known joke in St Agnes.

‘Who is your leader?’ they say.

And we say ‘We are all leaders’, ‘We don’t have leaders’ or ‘Talk to us all’.

When we carefully designate ‘spokespeople’, they are immediately considered leaders.

The concept of a non-hierarchical group is a threat to the established culture’s structure of control. That is why outposts of the new culture cannot be tolerated. Planning and health regulations and allocation systems are all structures of control. The idea that people can actually control themselves seems to be quite terrifying. Any real encroachment on the system of private property, or the control that needs to be wielded to maintain it, is gradually squashed. The whittling away of ‘squatters’ rights’ by the courts and the enactment of the Criminal Law Act (Chapter 14) are both parts of this process.

How do squatting, the new culture and the reaction to it fit into a formal analysis which helps us to understand our existing culture as a *system* and to change it? Squatting is not, after all, at the traditional point of primary struggle, ie production. So squatters are a sort of second-class revolutionary. Many squatters are in any case suspicious of hardline revolutionary positions, finding them difficult to apply to their own experience.

According to traditional Marxist orthodoxy, it is the working-class who will change things and it is politically ‘correct’ to relate everything to the working-class. People tend to be self-conscious and even somewhat shameful of what may be related to the middle-class. Yet when one looks at a small changed society such as St Agnes Place this does not seem to be quite right as it is a largely ‘middle-class’ squat in two ways. First, two-thirds of the people there come from middle-class backgrounds or work at middle-class occupations. Second, one part of the campaign by the street in its struggle with the Council is a middle-class campaign. Thus, we have used contacts with the liberal press which has focused on the planning and conservation aspects of the issue that are those most likely to appeal to a middle-class readership; and we have made use of the law in the form of an injunction restraining the Council from demolishing the





Squatter community life.

Left: Covent Garden and Bloomsbury Squatters tug of war team, 1979.  
 Bottom Left: Street party in Longfellow Road, East London, 1977.  
 Below: Communal breakfast at 7.30 am, Freston Road, 1977.  
 Bottom: Bonfire night party in Drummond Street, Camden, 1974.  
 Right: Children's events, Villa Road, 1979.  
 Below right: Picnic in the communal garden, Freston Road, 1978.  
 Bottom right: Benefit concert for a woman who lost her baby and needed a holiday, Freston Road, West London, 1976.

Tony Sleep



Mike Wigg



Caroline Lwin



Klaus Kalde



Dave Walking



Tony Sleep



Tony Sleep

houses in the street.

This does not mean that St Agnes Place has no political value. The definition of 'middle class' is difficult. To speak about a middle-class background is complex enough but when we refer to middle-class jobs or a middle-class campaign, there is an important distinction to make: *we have not* been furthering middle-class interests but *we have* made use of our middle-class skills.

A parallel distinction can be made for working-class skills – between using them in a situation where they are making a profit for a privileged owner and where people own what they produce. I now know how to put new sash-cords in a window; I shall never again have to pay someone to do it for me. One day I asked someone in the street 'Have you seen the agenda?'; she replied 'What is an agenda?'; I explained and she can now be that much less powerless at meetings.

What I think is happening in St Agnes Place is that both middle-class and working-class people are moving out of the class positions determined by the existing culture. In their changed relationships with each other and with the physical environment, they have formed a small classless society or at least the outpost of one. This is close to the impulse that inspired the libertarian left of the 'sixties, to the political analysis of Big Flame and to the concept of struggle on a 'reproductive' as well as a productive front.

Squatting has a number of strengths as a force for change towards a new culture. First, it combines a point of action – finding a house – with a continuing process of living. Second, it brings together middle-class and working-class responses to aspects of the existing society which have become intolerable. Third, although it is not a struggle in a place of production, it is right in the middle of a reproductive struggle: a struggle with the existing culture's way of reproducing the right sort of people for feeding into the existing productive system. (The new culture needs to become independent in production as squatters support the existing consumer society too much by scavenging on it). And finally, it is a place where traditional working-class and middle-class skills can join to complement each other.

What the new culture is about is not so much fighting the system as building something new, showing it can work and saying 'Come and join us'. Squatters are pioneers in the city who can show what is possible and how good it is. •



Tony Sleep



Adam Harvey

Dave Walking

Negative aspects of squatter communities.

Above: A thief makes his getaway from a squat after sexually assaulting a woman and stealing her purse, Freston Road 1979.

Below: Trying to cope with people who abuse the relaxed atmosphere of squatting – Trinity Road, Wandsworth, 1978 (left), Villa Road, Lambeth, 1979 (right).



# The squatters estate agency

by Heathcote Williams

## Chapter 18



The inside story of Ruff Tuff Creem Puff, the only estate agency for squatters

The Ruff Tuff Creem Puff Estate Agency was founded in 1974 by 'Mad Dog, Fluke and Flame', Gods' Groupies, stimulated by their squatting of the 'Meat Roxy', a former Bingo Hall in Lancaster Road, North Kensington, where every Saturday three or four hundred people gathered for a free ball. Electricity was re-routed from a squatted house at the back, a large double bed put in the middle of the auditorium for people to accompany the music in their lubricious fashion, and above the stage in letters four feet high there was written: CIVILISATION HATH TURNED HER BACK ON THEE. REJOICE, SHE HATH AN UGLY FACE.

At the end of the day, half the people seduced into coming had nowhere to go. It being winter, and our social consciences being intricately plucked, the Meat Roxy was established as a place to live as well, but gradually, perhaps through the loudness of the music, the roof fell in. Other accommodation had to be found for these errant space gypsies, Tuinal freaks, luses and werewolves clamouring for shelter from the wind and the rain and the cold in the Ladbroke Archipelago.

A set of house-breaking equipment was purchased, and a small survey of the neighbourhood carried out. Empty properties sprang up like mushrooms and were cropped. The first bulletin

advertising their availability was Gestetnered and published in an almost unreadable edition of 150 copies, and the Ruff Tuff Creem Puff Estate Agency (named after a Robert Crumb cartoon character) was registered as a working charity (Astral registration number 666).

Since then 23 bulletins have been published, ranging from one foolscap side to eight, and listing empty properties available in England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Holland, Italy and Yugoslavia.' A nucleus of seven or so people worked under the umbrella of the agency: whoever lived in our house became involved. The house was often watched and the possibility of prosecution for incitement or conspiracy to trespass frequently lurked on the back-burner. Office hours were round the clock.

People were sent to us from almost anywhere: social services departments, highly funded pressure groups such as Shelter or the Campaign for the Homeless and Rootless, occasionally Harrow Road Police Station, and BIT, the hip Vatican and self-help centre down the road. It was a house rule that anyone could stay for a night in the house until we found them somewhere permanent. On average, 15 to 20 people came round looking for somewhere to live each day.

We opened up places for people but often found that many of them regarded us as the landlord. They would come back half a dozen times complaining about roofs, drains and windows and

it was a long time before it occurred to them that they could do anything about the place themselves. Fluke often fell back sardonically in these circumstances on the ancient Arab saying: 'If you rescue a man from drowning, you have to look after him for the rest of your life.' In most cases we told people where the house was, what its history was as far as we knew, explained the score in law and lent them any available equipment.

The surface problem was homelessness, and in many cases when that was solved everything was cool. We'd see the person we'd fixed up and find that their days were glowing again, and they would promise to keep us fed with any empty places that they had noticed. But in many other cases homelessness had created far worse problems. People who had no house built houses inside their heads; people who'd been chronically rejected over a long period lived in a shell and sat in the office without being able to speak. Getting fixed up with a place got transmuted into getting a fix. Being warm had changed into a whiskey-sodden rush.

One man sat in the dilapidated chair in the corner of the kitchen-cum-office for two days without saying a word and then suddenly leapt up and stuck a knife into Fluke. The knife fortunately was fairly blunt and came out without any brown rice on the end. Gently asked for some explanation, it transpired that he'd had nowhere to live for two years save a mausoleum in Highgate Cemetery. The spirits had apparently

commanded this act: 'Fluke is a good man being bad but I caught him when he was a bad man being good.' And then there followed an indecipherable word salad based on his connections with the spirit world. It made us feel that handing out houses to people for nothing was all right but that it often wasn't enough.

Another man, who'd just come out of Parkhurst where he'd been serving nine years for armed robbery involving £30,000 worth of platinum, crashed through the door in a feverish state and said: 'You're social workers, aren't you?' in an almost accusing manner.

The accusation was denied. 'Hang on, hang on, look how 'bout I get a wee bottle of something. What you drink? Wine? I'll get some.'

He reappeared with six bottles of Mateus and a two foot square box of chocolates 'fur the kiddie'. He said: 'You wondering why I'm doing all this aren't you? Well, I'll tell you. I need your help. You have drugs here don't you? You people have drugs?'

'Only the look in our eyes, that's all.' 'No, seriously, you have drugs here? You're hippies aren't you? Hippies always have drugs. I'll pay you for it . . .'

Not to let the chance of a deal go begging, Cocke Lorrell who'd just done a run of three weights, pulled out his scales and said: 'How much do you want?' fondling a large polythene bag filled with the stinking soul-smoke.

'What's that?' 'Best Buddha Grass.'

He was mystified. The theft of those nine years of his life had meant that he'd missed Weed Power.

'Dope,' said Cocke Lorrell, 'it's grass. Dope for ever, for ever loaded.'

'Oh, no. I don't want that. I want some cyanide.'

There was a deathly hush. It transpired that he couldn't stand being outside. He just didn't know

where to put himself. He tried to 'buy a few friends', as he put it, but 'no one wants to know'.

He went on raving about the cyanide, convinced that if the coast was cleared with a large backhander we'd supply it: 'I'll pay you for it. I'll make it worth your while, believe me,' and he spilt a wad of £20 notes onto the table.

Cocke took him to the window (which was on the third floor) and said: 'Look you can have this window cheap.'

'What you mean?'

'You can throw yourself out of this window for 10p' and gave him a giant cuddle. His face began to crease into a smile.

Cocke hugged him so hard and rubbed him and insulted him: 'Your life's not yours to take, dummy', and then settled him down to his wine, told him the cream of his police jokes and then got him so stoned that he was wandering around the house all night in his knickers reciting Gaelic sagas. His life was a little safer than before.

One visitor called Julia came looking for a place to live, scanned the bulletins along with a large map of London that had colour-coded pins stuck into it:

- Red: 'Squatted, but might be room'
- Green: 'Ripe for plucking'
- Blue: 'Empty but needs a lot of love'

Julia said: 'I think I'll try Freston Road it's near where I work.'

'Where is that?' said Fluke, passing the time of day.

'Oh, Hammersmith Town Hall in the Housing Department.'

Fluke looked slightly stunned: 'How would your colleagues feel about your squatting?'

'Oh, I don't think they'd mind. Except for the ones who're members of the National Front.'

And despite the existence of five members of the National Front working in the Housing Department of a *soi-disant* socialist council, Julia was able to half-inch lists of empty properties from the council files. She became the Mata Hari of

Ruff Tuff, forcing the size of the bulletins up from four pages to eight. Other useful informants included a telephone engineer, a postman and a Gas Board official.

Freston Road in fact, became almost entirely squatted through Ruff Tuff activity and was turned into an almost ideal version of Squat City, much beloved of gutter cartoonists (pp 91-4).

The walled-in gardens were joined together into one large communal garden which almost fed the entire street. A squatted shop opened, selling wholefoods at knock-down prices, and there was a kind of synergy present where people bopped in and out of each other's houses, doors left open to the street. If any problem arose, the load was immediately spread around.

On rare and extreme occasions the Cosmic Joker evicts the Social Worker in the tactics of the Agency. A German once entered the office, dressed in a gold lame suit, and followed by his family all in fresh sheepskins from Afghanistan, lavishly embroidered: 'I would like please a place with bath, and garden for the *kinder*, and *mit telefon*. I am from Endless Music. We are biggest Rock and Roll band in Germany and we have many contracts with Island Records. You give a place to us now *bitte*?'

Mad Dog stood up and surveyed the little scene. 'Well,' he said, pretending to consult the latest bulletin, 'Yeah, I think we got just the place.'

'*Ja? gut, gut.*'

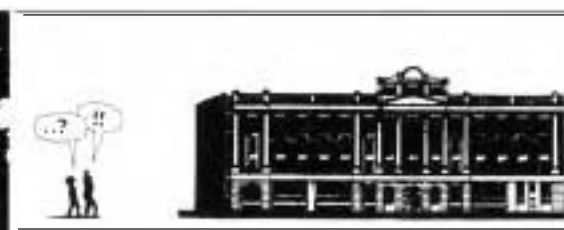
'Yeah, you take the tube to Green Park. Turn right out of the entrance.'

'*Ja, ja.*'

'And you'll find a huge building on the right hand side. We'll let them know you're coming.'

'How will I find it again please?' (scribbling greedily).

'It's right on Piccadilly, near St James' Street. It's just been squatted. There's a man from Ruff Tuff on the door, dressed in a huge black frock coat, with gold braid, just like your suit, and for





# TOWN

## North London

289, BELLARS LANE, NORTH FINCHLEY, correctly abandoned Tony Parry...  
 There's a Church warty, slightly battered but well furnished on the corner of Selwyn Road, and Hill Lane, N.4.

## West 9.

There are several shops and flats near Central tube.  
 In MIDDELL HILL ROAD, there's a Council of garden back and front. Quiet. Neighbourhood is excellent.

There are 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 527, 528, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547, 548, 549, 550, 551, 552, 553, 554, 555, 556, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 571, 572, 573, 574, 575, 576, 577, 578, 579, 580, 581, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 594, 595, 596, 597, 598, 599, 600, 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 615, 616, 617, 618, 619, 620, 621, 622, 623, 624, 625, 626, 627, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634, 635, 636, 637, 638, 639, 640, 641, 642, 643, 644, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 658, 659, 660, 661, 662, 663, 664, 665, 666, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 672, 673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 688, 689, 690, 691, 692, 693, 694, 695, 696, 697, 698, 699, 700, 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 716, 717, 718, 719, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 735, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 751, 752, 753, 754, 755, 756, 757, 758, 759, 760, 761, 762, 763, 764, 765, 766, 767, 768, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 779, 780, 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 796, 797, 798, 799, 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818, 819, 820, 821, 822, 823, 824, 825, 826, 827, 828, 829, 830, 831, 832, 833, 834, 835, 836, 837, 838, 839, 840, 841, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847, 848, 849, 850, 851, 852, 853, 854, 855, 856, 857, 858, 859, 860, 861, 862, 863, 864, 865, 866, 867, 868, 869, 870, 871, 872, 873, 874, 875, 876, 877, 878, 879, 880, 881, 882, 883, 884, 885, 886, 887, 888, 889, 890, 891, 892, 893, 894, 895, 896, 897, 898, 899, 900, 901, 902, 903, 904, 905, 906, 907, 908, 909, 910, 911, 912, 913, 914, 915, 916, 917, 918, 919, 920, 921, 922, 923, 924, 925, 926, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 932, 933, 934, 935, 936, 937, 938, 939, 940, 941, 942, 943, 944, 945, 946, 947, 948, 949, 950, 951, 952, 953, 954, 955, 956, 957, 958, 959, 960, 961, 962, 963, 964, 965, 966, 967, 968, 969, 970, 971, 972, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 978, 979, 980, 981, 982, 983, 984, 985, 986, 987, 988, 989, 990, 991, 992, 993, 994, 995, 996, 997, 998, 999, 1000.

# COUNTRY

North Lane, Canterbury. Squatters have taken over the whole street and have compiled a list of 85 empty properties in the area. They have meetings at 7.30 on Sundays at the Sidney Centre in St. Peters Street. For further information contact Malcolm Lurie at 57, North Lane.

5, FORAGE YARD, EAST LAVANT, near CHICHESTER, SUSSEX is a cottage with three bedrooms, electricity on, and hot water. It "belongs" to the self-styled Earl of March, and is one of many tied to his estate. He also owns Goodwood race-track and is a director of several "charities."

There's a romantic Welsh chateau at HINSFORD near Gwent, which belongs to some man in Edinburgh who comes down once a year to look at it, never bothering to get out of the car. A lake attached, large fat towers.



## RUFF, TUFF, CREAM PUFF ESTATE AGENCY

*founded by Wat Tyler 1381*



**FREEHOLD SQUATS**  
 Leaving from a day to a lifetime  
 Price one penny, rock and lock-barrel, & two spots of gumption.

**Bulletin 22**  
 EAST

Just opposite the Tower of London: the retired Auschwitz of the East End, is a huge office block crowned with demented Empire sculptures. There must be room for at least three hundred people. Rumoured to be guarded by carnivorous frogs.

BERMONDSEY: 172, and more (410 and 408 for example) Evelyn Street, S.E.8., is all free, as is 10, Creek Road, S.E.8.

N. Stephenson Ltd., shop and warehouse at about 200 Jamaica Road, Bermondsey is free to the elements & elements, and there's plenty of space in nearby St. Marychurch Street and Paradise Gate.

POLYGATE STREET, E.1., off Bishopsgate. Whole block of flats empty. Police Station (air) Department.



St. Ervans Road LONDON W.10.



MOVING HOUSE?

Free to the Homeless (or to Anyone found in possession of House-Breaking Equipment).

## RUFF, TUFF, CREAM PUFF ESTATE AGENCY

*founded by Wat Tyler 1321*



A TIED COTTAGE IN WESTMINSTER PRESENT OCCUPANT HAS THREE OTHER HOMES IN HUYTON, HAMPSTEAD AND THE SCILLY ISLES. THE JOB GOES WITH THE HOUSE.

### Bulletin 20

The Thames Embankment  
 Mid Dog, Fluke and Flaw, God's Groupies, have just cracked a Thames-side Jewel: the PALM COURT HOTEL, just beside Richmond Bridge. A fifty roomed mansion, from which, legend has it, Max Jaffa and the Palm Court Orchestra made their sweet transmissions... (unusual equipment had to be specially ordered from Carpenters in the Portobello, and the assistance of the Bash Street Kids in keeping a look-out for Old Bill was invaluable. The place was carried up, and had thick wooden planks behind each window supported from within by flying-buttresses of Twofour nailed to the floor.. but an hour later, once inside, an Incredible Old Mansion was Made Manifest. It's been sadly tarted up in Festival of Britain style Brutalism, but there's room there for about two hundred people. It's quiet as the Grave, with a huge Rasbling Garden, and Balconies looking onto the TowPath, and across the river. Chiswick Women's Aid at the moment have first refusal, and have taken it! Nice one Erin and the gang. (P.S. can we have our jeans...)

## DESIRABLE RESIDENCES

# FOR FREE

## BUT ONLY IF YOU SQUAT!

JOIN IN THE FUN!  
 22,000 PEOPLE ARE SQUATTING IN LONDON ALONE!  
 YOU TOO  
 CAN ASSERT YOUR SUPERIORITY OVER THE PROPERTY MARKET!  
 YOU TOO  
 CAN HAVE MORE CONTROL OVER YOUR OWN LIVING SPACE  
 -NO RENT, NO LANDLORDS!  
 ALL YOU NEED  
 LOCK-BARREL, SCREWDRIVER, BOLT-CUTTERS, TORCH.  
**SQUAT NOW WHILE STOCKS LAST!**



GLOBE



the key to your future!  
**LOCKSMITH**  
 Estate Agency



THE LANCASTER, in LANCASTER ROAD, W.11., would suit the Ca...  
 for Real Ale, Laudamus Discillers, Potent Creators. A Fra...  
 quiet empty a year.  
 There are about five houses empty on the corner...  
 notably one called CROMWELL HOUSE.  
 The Corner House in Leinster Square...  
 fully barricaded against urban...  
 KENSINGTON PARK GARDENS...  
 high for at least 50...  
 a lawn. R & V...



a joke he's got a badge on his cap with the words "Ritz Hotel". Just tell him you've come from the Ruff Tuff Creem Puff Estate Agency and your rooms will be waiting for you.'

Through the good auspices of Patrick the postman, a partner in the agency, six houses were found and cracked for Chiswick Women's Aid who seemed to need a house per week. One windy night Tony from Rough Theatre bopped in with a van, scored Gareth, Mary Jane, Mad Dog, and Jonathan Marconi, and they all tooled off to Richmond where Tony claimed there was a derelict hotel once used by the BBC in the thirties and forties to transmit the tea-time concerts of Max Jaffa and the Palm Court Orchestra.

They found a strange haunted place by the river, strongly barricaded with two-by-four joists nailed down to the floor inside. It took about two hours to crack as they had to wait for traffic noise to cover each snap of the jemmy. The Palm Court Hotel had been a giant pigeon loft for three years and was recycled as a little palace for 30 battered wives and their offspring.

The bulletins listed anything from a novel to a palace and had a style of their own: '36 St Luke's Road. Empty two years. Entry through rear. No roof. Suit astronomer.' Some houses in Norfolk belonging to the Royal Family were squatted after featuring in the bulletins, Mick Jagger's unused country house found some occupants, and the Cambodian Embassy was squatted when abandoned after the overthrow of the Buddhist oligarchy of Prince Sihanouk. Two Mercedes cars were found in the garage of this weird house-cum-temple and the only way that the squatters could be evicted was if the Khmer Rouge had decided to move into the London Property Market. They were still in occupation at the beginning of 1980. Buckingham Palace with its 614 rooms often featured.

All the time while bulletins were being pumped out and houses being cracked, the gutter press kept up a shrill and hate-filled descent. Squatters are vermin, proclaimed the *Daily Express*. They have lice, shrilled the *Evening News* which employed a spy to insinuate himself with squatters and obtain free board and lodging only to trash them later in his paper for an enormous fee. The squatters are an 'Army of Vagabonds led by dangerous left-wing agitators', squawked the *Sunday People*; and it ran a three-part series on squatting, leaving the gentle reader with the impression that



they were all armed, dope-infested layabouts who should be garrotted.

One of the partners in Ruff Tuff was fried by the *Sunday People* on their front page: 'The old Etonian house grabber: he jemmies way in for squatters,' presenting him as a near psychopath who would prefer to crack his way through a block of houses on his way to the shops rather than walk round the corner. The reporter had subtly gained an interview in the Ruff Tuff office by pretending to be from Cardiff Friends of the Earth who were, he claimed, doing a survey on squatting. He was duly given an extensive rundown on the homelessness situation in London – 100,000 houses empty, 30,000 people squatting, etc – together with a brief but poetic soliloquy about Wat Tyler, Gerrard Winstanley ('The world is a common treasure house to all . . . there is no my thing, no your thing'), and Proudhon; all little gurus of this yuppie cabal.

Mad Dog saw the paper the next week and while everyone else was having apoplexy, muttered 'Revenge is a meal best eaten cold'. Four weeks later the reporter found that as a result of his own house being put on the bulletins and described therein as the *Sunday People* Rest Home

('anyone on a bad trip, tuinal freaks etc, especially welcome'), he was daily invaded by lone dementoes of every description. The real Cardiff Friends of the Earth delivered a lorry load of cement to his front garden cash-on-delivery and he was forced to change his accommodation. Whether he had to squat or not was never revealed. 'Teach the bitch to tamper with Aristocrats Lib,' was Mad Dog's comment.

The cosy liberal papers stayed fairly silent. *The Guardian* published a couple of moody pictures of a child in front of a corrugated iron fence. *The Times* reporter at the battle of Elgin Avenue disclosed that he'd been unable to file any of his stories about squatting for the last two weeks. 'It's editorial policy,' he told us. At the same time, *The Times* was quite gaily publishing some extraordinary letters in its correspondence columns, one of which suggested that all squatters should be evicted from third-storey windows (see p 59).

On another occasion the stencils for a new bulletin were hanging from a bulldog clip on the wall for all to survey the new mass of available houses before they went on to BIT'S Gestetner. A man came in claiming to be homeless and was left to study the stencils while people in the office went about their business in the next room.

When they came back, he'd disappeared with the stencils which he sold to the *Evening Standard*.

The *Evening Standard* tried to confirm the story on the phone the next day but got very short shrift from Fluke since it was then that we knew where the stencils had gone – stencils which represented seven people's careful research for about three weeks.

'This is the *Evening Standard*. I have to tell you that Bulletin 17 has come into our hands. I can't tell you how but we have a photo-copy of it and we think that it contains a great deal of highly contentious material . . .'

'Do you now? Well, listen, baby blue, if you're homeless I'll speak to you, if you're not you can rot off . . .'

'Before you put the phone down, I should tell you that we're going to publish this material.'

'Great! The wider circulation it gets, the better. Join the Legion of Joy. Freedom is a full-time career.'

'Well, you can put it like that if you like. But can I ask you this . . er . . I'm looking through it now. You recommend a certain kind of implement for breaking into houses with mortise locks on . . .

I think it's a bolster, or a raker, yes, here it is, a four-inch raker. What do you have to say about that?'

'Listen, there are about 10,000 people sleeping rough in London, in all weathers, and a lot of them are kitty-corner to you, Fat Cat, right on the Thames Embankment. That's what I have to say about that. You think every house was opened up by the wind? People need to know how to do it. They're not ghosts. They can't walk through walls. Goodbye. Sleep well in your Beaverbrook Bed.'

Next day the *Evening Standard* appeared with a front-page headline large enough to bruise your retina: 'SECRET SQUATTERS PLAN FOR A MASS TAKE-OVER IN LONDON'. The bulletin mysteriously returned later that night, rolled up in the front door handle and stained with whiskey. Conspiracy to trespass was mentioned in the article and the prospect of it began to cause some consternation.

'Conspiracy to trespass . . . We could all get five years . . .'

'Ah fuck it, what you keep muttering that for . . . Conspiracy to trespass, it's just some legal shibboleth. To conspire, you know what that means? "To breathe together". Con-spirare . . . I don't mind doing that, do you? And trespass, you know what the origin of that word is? To "pass through, to transcend". That's the dictionary meaning. Straight up.'

'They won't pay much attention to that in court. I think discretion is the better part of valour.'

'Sure.' The doorbell rings.

'There's someone at the door. Life goes on.'

Two slinky and silky gentlemen file in, one kvetching about his landlady having stolen his mattress because it had 'perverted liquids on it', vetting his phone calls and opening his mail, all for the princely sum of £52 per month. He looks through the new list, glancing at the antics of Windsor the black tom from time to time commenting 'Isn't she butch?', and then drapes our jemmy elegantly over his arm to go crack a recommended flat in nearby Powis Square.

A silent woman with a large scar on her head asks about some houses in Orsett Terrace, Paddington. She's escaping the violent vagaries of her husband by staying with a friend in a council flat where she has to creep in and out because the couple on the ground floor suspect her friend of sub-letting and are in constant contact with the

council's Complaints Department. She's never squatted before. She works as a night cleaner and seems desperate. 'Can you fix me up in that street?' she asks. 'They got lights in the window at night. They seem nice people.' She's fixed up with an introduction and a little later, her own place.

A junkie seeps in: 'I don't want any place where the postal district is an odd number. I don't want N19 or W1 for a start.'

'Paddington? W2?'

'No. God's told me Paddington's bad for me.' After similar objections to almost every place on the lists he starts metronomically rubbing the track-marks on his left arm. 'Why are you doing that?' says Cocke Lorrell.

'God has told me that my left arm is bad for me so I got to keep stabbing it . . . with stuff.'

He stays for several hours, alternately brutalising and then nursing his diabolic acupuncture points until he coincides with someone who's just had a cure. He is enveigled away to Cold Turkey Towers in Cornwall Terrace, having been convinced that NW1 is not really an odd number and that anyway, 'When you get really high on mathematics you realise that there's no such thing as one'; and for the first time, this gutter St Sebastian smiles.

A family phone up. They're paying £42 per week for bed and breakfast in St Albans. Mad Dog screams at them: 'In St Albans? Forty-two pounds? pounds? Where the fuck is St Albans anyway? . . . Just south of Greenland ain't it? Well put on your snow shoes and get your asses down here *toute vite*.' And then they come a few hours later, bedraggled and burnt out from rent slavery and score themselves a whole house in Richmond.

Letters also pour in demanding the bulletins:

'Dear Sir, Madam, Hippy or Freak. I am doing important mind work and need a quiet place . . .'

'Dear Rough Tough Creamers, please send bulletins of everywhere in the world, we are tired of somewhere . . .'

'Dear Agency, I am living in a furnished room with my two children and paying £10 a week. Please can you help me? Please answer soon.'

There have also been death threats on the phone. One was just a tape-loop endlessly repeating: 'Hello, hello, hello. You're a dead man. Don't laugh.' Well, to quote the *Illuminatus*, 'If it doesn't make you laugh, it isn't true.' It didn't make us

laugh and fortunately it wasn't. But who was it? Enraged property speculator? A hit-man hired by Megalopolis? The National Grunt? Ah well, forget it, paranoia is the gout of acid-anointed youth.

Sometimes it has been very boring, sometimes very exciting. People would say: 'How can you afford to do it? Is there any charge for these bulletins?' Nope. It's time for the Gospel of Free to lurch back to life. It's time the visionaries got it on and the realists dreamt. All we want is a Garden of Eden where none of the fruit is forbidden. Communism never started – it's private property that was the new idea.

In most cases we thought about as much of squatting a house as picking up a butt-end off the street. Why? Because, to wax philosophic for a moment, we live in square rooms and we're treated as products instead of Beings, in rows and rows of square rooms where we're all meant to be the same. In streets where there are 30,000 gas stoves, 30,000 TV sets, 30,000 baths, fridges and cars, when with a little co-operation (which Kropotkin showed in *Mutual Aid* was the strongest force in nature), maybe one or two of each would be enough.

Some squats have broken through – Freston Road, Bristol Gardens and Cornwall Terrace – with walls knocked down so that you could walk along the street inside the building. Imagine a huge refectory table on the ground floor of every street, and a huge refectory bed on the top floor. Whether you're a yipped-up hipped-up communalist or no, the reduction in fire hazard is strong in its favour.

Jesus was born a squatter though the Church Commissioners (one of London's largest slum owners and property speculators) would never acknowledge it. When squatters are presented as inhuman, someone's trying to feed into the tapes: 'You don't exist. You don't own anything, so who are you? How can we recognise you?'

When people are evicted someone is playing God and saying that their life in that place is worthless. When we were being evicted from one Ruff Tuff house we said to the landlord: 'You want your house back? Then come here and live with us.'

Squatting is acupuncture for the death culture. Freedom is not yet quite free but the squatting community can give you a good wholesale price. •



# From skippering to squatting

by Celia Brown

Squatting as an alternative to hostels and lodging houses

*‘Dear Sir/Madam,*

*We write to you as a group of men who use the Kingsway Day Centre and who have been discussing our circumstances. We want our voice to be heard.*

*Those of us who use Bruce House are disgusted at the conditions there. The toilets are not fit for human use, and nobody bothers to clear the pigeon mess from the tables where we eat. A lot of the problems of hostels are caused because, they are hostels. Why do we have to live in hostels, year-in year-out with our social security benefits geared to hostel rates? These hostels were intended for emergencies but are full of ‘regulars’ who book in week after week. But they are not designed for regular lodging, and we keep out others with emergency needs. What you have done is to turn us into hostel dwellers and forced us to adopt a way of life you disapprove of.*

*What we need is decent accommodation suitable for single persons to live in, with some independence and self-respect. Some of the Day Centre people have recently become tenants in a short-life house. The property has not been turned into a slum, nor wrecked, nor burnt down. But because of our present circumstances, people do not want us as neighbours, and do not want to give us lodgings. There are very few bed-sitters going, and landlords demand something like £60 deposit and £40 rent in advance. We do not have that kind of money, and even if we had we should still find it hard to get anywhere.’* (Letter to Westminster Council, 1976)

*‘I call in at the labour Exchange and see if there’s any jobs going but there isn’t and it’s been like this for months now, as the employment situation has been very bad. This job finding has always been a sore point with me, as I can’t seem able to stick at a job, but not only that, when I get money in my pocket I go wild and start drinking heavily and landing up in trouble, at the same time as losing the job.*

*On the other hand if I don’t work, I don’t drink and don’t miss it and I find myself doing things that I’ve always wanted to do, such as writing poetry short articles, and painting, so what’s the answer, not only for me but for thousands like me? We don’t want to destroy other people’s lives, we want to live, and live decent like everyone else. We are all so fed up with filthy, lousy doss-houses and spikes that are destroying decent men and women. Not only have you got to be drunk or drugged to live in these places, you also have to lose your pride and dignity, because one isn’t a man any more, or if he tries to be it’s impossible.’* (From a short story by Eddie Brinley)

## Hostels for the homeless

*Hostels for single homeless people are provided by both commercial and charitable organisations. The term applies to night shelters, common lodging houses, boarding houses, hotels, rehabilitation projects, community houses and so on.*

*A survey Hostels and Lodgings for Single People (HMSO 1976) found 31,253 beds in hostels and lodgings for single people which it covered, 2,872 of which were in dormitories for 20 or more people.*

*Standards of accommodation using basic Government minimum standards applying to lavatories, wash basins and baths per bed were appalling. 78 per cent of beds were in establishments below at least one of the basic standards, whilst 57 per cent were in establishments below all three basic standards. Furthermore, 85 per cent of hostels were in buildings built before 1914.*

## Chapter 19

### Skippering

The use of empty property by homeless people has a longer history and is more widespread than the public attention given to squatting in recent years might suggest. Homelessness is not a new problem particularly for older single people working for low pay or unemployed. Lacking rights to public housing, these people have traditionally been forced into degrading conditions in lodging houses or government reception centres (now called resettlement units). They get labelled by society as ‘down and outs’, ‘dossers’, ‘tramps’ or ‘derelicts’ and are accordingly discriminated against. As a relief from hostel life many have gone ‘skippering’; a term which embraces sleeping on park benches, in railway stations, under hedges, or in empty buildings. Buildings are usually used only for a few days but some people may use them for longer and talk of ‘having a skipper’.

‘Having a skipper’ differs from ‘having a squat’ because of the attitudes people have towards it. Legally there is no difference (except that skipperers don’t usually change the lock and thus don’t claim possession) but skipperers think they’ve no rights to the property and will be thrown out or prosecuted if they are discovered. Therefore they live in secret, trying to keep hidden from police and from neighbours who might report their presence. Corrugated iron is left over windows and a secret access may be devised. One man, for instance, used to climb a drainpipe and enter by upper floor windows.<sup>1</sup> In another case a group tunnelled through the party walls of a terrace of houses and lived in the house furthest from the secret back window entrance. This strategy contrasts with boldly changing the lock and being ready to defend a right to occupy in the typical squat.

Secrecy has many drawbacks. Services cannot be connected officially so that if they are not already laid on, people have to live without lighting or heating, and may resort to burning floorboards for warmth and cooking. Difficulty of access creates the risk of people being trapped when ill as happened to one of the group in the terrace mentioned above. When he finally made it through all the holes in the walls, an ambulanceman said he was just drunk and he died in the police station. Venturing outside demands physical exertion and risks discovery. So if there is no toilet, people may resort to using a room or corner, moving on when conditions become unbearable. As a result of

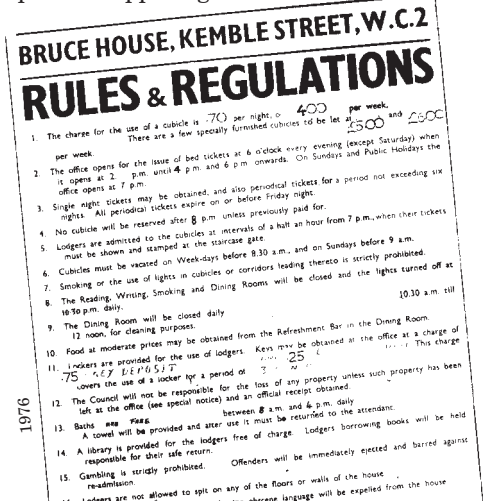
these difficulties, skippering is not approached with any great expectations. With no security of tenure, and no benefit to be gained from good public relations, skipperers seldom bother to care for houses and may cause damage with fires, and by taking copper or lead for sale.

Lack of a proper home affects many other aspects of life which the well-housed take for granted. For example, people who spend most nights in dormitories without safe storage cannot carry around anything but a few clothes. Skipperers, therefore, tend to lack possessions and this, coupled with poverty and insecurity, means that skippers are usually sparse and little energy is spent on maintaining them.

People without a permanent home also lack the practical and emotional support of a constant network of relationships. Friends are frequently parted by hospitalisation, death or arrest (under the vagrancy or drunkenness laws<sup>2</sup>). Alone, and vulnerable to theft and mugging, they are suspicious of others and may keep the location of their skipper secret, reducing potential solidarity still further. Skippers can also become chaotic because of heavy drinking and mental disturbance, caused partly by society’s failure to house discharged mental patients<sup>3</sup> and partly by the conditions they have experienced.

### Alternatives to skippering – charities or squatting

The upsurge of squatting during the seventies was paralleled by the growth of new-style charities for the single homeless offering ‘community houses’. Yet many of the homeless still prefer skippering.



Many charities treat skipperers as ‘inadequates’ who require supervised therapeutic accommodation. The charities may also suggest that some are submerged in a deviant life ‘outside’ society from which they must be enticed for their own good. Skippering is seen as evidence that skipperers are odd, rather than that the alternative offered by charities is unsatisfactory. But if the charities saw their ‘clients’ as full human beings, they would realise that many people prefer skippers for the same reason that most people prefer their homes to institutions, and that the charities’ community houses are still institutions. These people are seeking to control their home lives: to live with people of their choice, and to be able to do what they want to, when they want to, in the privacy which other people take for granted. As one man put it: ‘The trouble with going into a charity hostel is that you pass from being your own man to a kept man.’

The talk of ‘inadequacy’ and ‘deviancy’ encourages public belief that homelessness is the fault of its victims. Worse, in order to gain financial support, charity appeals refer to ‘down-and-outs’, ‘dossers’ or ‘vagrant alcoholics’ and show pictures of dirty dishevelled old men and women begging, or sleeping amidst a debris of bottles. These stereotypes pick on the most unusual-looking homeless people and use the visual effects of poverty and distress to make people seem strange and even frightening in an attempt to shock the public into giving money.

The net effect of the charity ‘industry’ is however unintentionally, to perpetuate the idea of alien and untouchable outcasts so continuing the rejection of homeless single people which traps them in the homelessness scene. When living in ‘community houses’, lodging houses (doss-houses) or skippers, the lack of a respectable address marks people as ‘homeless’. Prospective employers and landladies/lords turn them away. The state forces people into ‘doss houses’ through the policy of Social Security offices which give people without an address vouchers to hostels instead of rent.<sup>4</sup> In fact, many people do not claim social security because they are so badly treated at the special ‘No Fixed Abode’ offices. The state then threatens them with the vagrancy laws and a criminal record.

The charities have come to act as unreliable intermediaries between the homeless and the state which ought to be providing them with basic rights. Stigmatised homeless people often have to





Chris Schwarz/ CHAR

get the backing of a charity worker even to get admitted to hospital. So the 'client' and staff worker are trapped into presenting the 'deserving' homeless person as someone who is inadequate or has been converted from their 'deviant lifestyle'. For example, funds are on occasion given for housing alcoholics, so 'clients' have to be presented as such.

Resentment against the professional salaries paid to staff for their supervising role, and the demoralising effect of powerlessness and of being treated as inferior, lead residents to be uncooperative or to believe that they actually are peculiar. This in turn reinforces the prejudices of the staff. Their power over the 'client' makes it virtually impossible for truly equal and dignifying relationships to develop and makes a mockery of the word 'community'.<sup>6</sup>



Mike Wells

#### Squatting as a solution

In contrast, squatting has enabled many people to house themselves and to be in a position to put housing demands on the authorities which cannot be so easily ignored. Squatting harnesses people's energy and resources and does not make them wait years begging for houses. Individuals are then no longer trapped, because they can present themselves as normal to employers and others, since they have a postal address (unlike a skipper) which is not stigmatised (unlike a charity address).

Whereas nearly all charities confine their

*Trafalger Square rally by homeless people and hostel dwellers demanding proper housing instead of dirty hostels, 1980.*

'clients' to 'living with their own kind' (as defined by others), squatting has enabled a range of people to live together who in normal circumstances would have shunned each other. This has helped not only 'dossers' but also ex-prisoners, 'junkies' ex-mental patients and people with disabilities.

Squatting can give people practical proof of their own potential with which to counter the 'inadequacy' labels of agencies. One man, for instance, who had squatted, and then helped others to squat, was outraged when a charity worker suggested that 'street level' dossers would not be able to cope as tenants, unlike some ex-lodging house men who had successfully settled in hard-to-let flats. The man explained that he did not like the hostel regime and had therefore got himself a good squat. This went against all the preconceptions of the charity worker who preferred to pity him rather than admire his achievements.

Not all poor single people who experience a crisis become homeless. The people most likely to get trapped in homelessness are those who have no family or friends to fall back on; for example, people from institutions like childrens' homes, prisons and mental hospitals. Others lose contact by working in jobs which require long periods away from home such as the army and merchant navy. Squatting has often been remarkable in providing informal friendly support for such individuals by bringing together people from many backgrounds who share a housing need and a sense of common purpose and identity. People share responsibility for their living accommodation and are dependent on each other. Various types of social contact develop from practical and political activities: contacts within houses, between squats and between squatting communities.

People who live in lodging houses and skipper do bear more than an average load of personal problems, but their basic requirements in order to be able to deal with them are secure housing, dignity, a secure and adequate income, worthwhile ways of spending time, friends, and a purpose for living. Squatting can provide a basis from which people can work out their own solutions. Squatting communities have contained many examples of people who share a particular problem squatting together and providing support for each other, including groups of ex-mental patients, junkies and women. There could be squats of people with drink problems supporting each other; there already are heavy drinkers living successfully in squats.



Michael Abrahams

Squatting can also facilitate collective organisation for exerting political pressure to improve conditions. Squatting lacks the furtive secrecy involved in skippering and clearly has more potential as a political force.

Housing must be part of an overall improvement in the combination of circumstances which at present oppress people and squatting can make this possible.

#### Barriers to squatting

Many skipperers express interest in squatting but are put off by the media image of squatters as hippies or nasty political agitators. Since squatters have been publicly condemned, it is not obvious that squatting can be a step towards improved status. It may appear simply to be a risky and short-lived housing improvement and they may not understand exactly what squatting is.

Many people do not realise that they are dossers only as long as they think of themselves as such and allow themselves to be treated as dossers. To be a squatter all they need to do is to put a lock on the door.

Others may think they are squatting when they are actually still using the skippering strategy and experiencing its drawbacks. Skipperers need more contact with squatters to learn about the possibilities and how to squat effectively. Skipperers are also hindered from squatting by the attitude towards 'dossers' of the police, the authorities and even many squatters. The police for instance frequently attempt to distinguish between 'real'

squatters and 'dossers' as in this example of an illegal eviction reported in *SAC News* in February 1977: 'The police claimed that the occupiers were not squatters but that because they had very few possessions they were dossers'.

The experience of these attitudes can encourage people to believe that they *are* essentially different from squatters. Ex-skipperers, therefore, particularly need backing from squatters' organisations or other groups when they squat.

Unfortunately squatters are not always helpful. In 1977, I visited several squatting groups suggesting that skipperers should be offered support. Many squatters knew virtually nothing about skippering whilst others had the normal stereotyped image of 'dossers' formed from the media and from street encounters with people who appeared strange and awkward. Yet these squatters often had ex-skipperers living among them whom they did not identify as 'dossers' because they did not stand out as unusual and kept quiet about their stigmatised backgrounds. One of these ex-skipperers even spoke out against 'dossers' in a squatters' street meeting I addressed, and took a long time to admit his background in a later interview: 'This is like these so-called dossers that hang around . . . People reject them, they throw them aside, they're rejected from society. I mean, I've been rejected from society. I used to sleep in Green Park.



Mike Wells

Sadly, the unpleasant consequences of homelessness and the 'skippering strategy' have earned skipperers a bad name and obscured the common aspect of skipperers and squatters as users of empty





Nick Waters

### HARRY

When Harry was drafted into the army during the Second World War he left a wife and five kids in Manchester. When he returned his wife had been 'messing about with someone else', so he went back into the army until 1950 and then went to London, where he wheeled a barrow round the streets buying and selling odds and ends.

'I first stopped in Black friars Salvation Army but that was no good. My clothes got stolen and I hate them fuckin' lice. I thought, sod that, I'm not having that any more. So I went skippering. After that lodging house I said I'd never stay in another lodging house again. I've slept all over the fuckin' place: in railway wagons in the back of Euston, in Regents Park, under the arches at Charing Cross, under boats but the police turned me out, under the Brighton pier – coppers never came there because it was too low for their helmets. I slept in a boiler house in Paddington for two years. The inspector said "If you stay down there you'll be doing me a favour. Put a couple of shovels of coal on at four or five in the morning." I got breakfast in a convent – the down-and-outs used to queue up, and I used to queue up with them.

I had a lodging in Mornington Terrace for six years – 35 bob a week – but the house got bought out and I had to get out. I lodged in Islington for a while – the same thing happened there too. I couldn't find a bleedin' room, so I went skippering again. I had to. I used to skipper in Euston Street. The owner gave me a key and said "don't say nothing to nobody. I lived in the basement for two years. What put the hat on it was the winos putting dog ends on the mattresses and setting fire to them. Council came round and tinned them up. I told them "I'm a tenant, look

I've got a key". They said "You'll have to be out tomorrow or we'll have to throw you out". After that I slept in an old van in Whit field Street. Then I met Francis who had squatted in the houses in Euston Street which the Council had tinned up. She used to give me food and things. She gave me a room.'

Harry squatted with a group of students in a communal house for three years, taking an active part in the life of the local squatting community. When Camden Council wanted the house back in 1976, pressure from the squatting group got Harry – bronchitic and now aged 65 – a permanent council tenancy.

### CRIQUETTE

Criquette was a heroin addict. For several years she moved from one bed and breakfast hotel to another, leaving by the backstairs because she had no money to pay the bills. Her two children were in care. In 1974, with her boyfriend Pete – an addict – she squatted a derelict house in a well-established squatting community. Other squatters helped her to connect electricity and obtain furniture:

'At that time we were incapable of doing things for ourselves . . . I was overwhelmed by the amount of support; meeting people who actually cared and treated me as a human being instead of being below human life. It made me realise that not everyone in the world is shits. I made friends for the first time since coming to London. It's the only place where I found people who cared a damn. Professionals just said "pull yourself together" and sent me away.'

Having a relatively secure home and being in a supportive community, she developed the confidence to take a two year course to end her heroin

addiction and get her children out of care: 'This place rehabilitated me in so far as I could start a new life. If it hadn't been for the people here I would have rotted away. I'd have been dead if I hadn't found this place.'

### JOHN

John squatted in an organised street after skippering for many years.

'I've been on the streets many times, before I knew or understood anything about the meaning of squatting or to understand that you could squat with a communion of people. I didn't understand this at all, I only thought it was if you went and slept in an old house "Oh, I'll stay here tonight because if I'm here any longer the neighbours around will fetch the police and I'm going to get thrown out". It happened to me quite a few times and I got fed up of it you see. I had to keep moving on and moving on.

One time I was thrown out. There was no court order issued against me. I was at work at the time and my stuff was just thrown out on the street. The door was just nailed up and I had no chance of getting into it.'

John said that then he thought of himself as a dosser, but he changed over to seeing himself as a squatter when he realised that by doing so he could not be thrown out so easily. The difference between living in the squatting community after being on his own is very important to him.

'Living on your own is like being shut away, you know, shut off from the world, you know, you feel shut away, you feel not wanted, it's like being in prison, you're sort of shut away from that society and between you and society there's a great wall and the only people that are with you is the people you're in prison with sort of thing.'



Mike Wells

property who, despite the hardships involved, choose self-reliance and independence in preference to the poor, institutional accommodation available to homeless people.

In many areas skipperers used houses before others squatted them. Sometimes skipperers have been effectively evicted by squatters as they returned to find locks on the doors of the houses they had been using. On occasions, this has resulted in physical confrontation'. Mostly the skipperers have been pushed out, but at times they have been absorbed into squatting communities or have simply continued to live side by side. Yet when people have continued skippering in a destructive fashion it has endangered squatters' attempts to present themselves as 'responsible' users of empty property, thus providing an incentive to dissociate themselves from 'winos' or 'dossers'. Homeless people who are used to having to wangle their way into charities and obey staff whom they resent have approached squatting communities without realising that they are fundamentally different. This has made squatters suspicious of anyone who looks like a 'dosser'. For instance a squatter in St. Agnes Place, Lambeth, said:

'People's reaction now about old blokes coming round – it depends on if they're really sort of grasping and they're obviously lying and they're out for what they can get. There was one bloke like that who was really hard to take. He just let the house he was living in collapse. People ripped off the lead and he let the LEB in to cut off the electricity. So it's been really hard, because of that kind of history when someone does come round looking for a place to live who is asking you to do everything for them, which is what some of these people have done, then you're really wary because of previous experience.'

Dialogue is needed about why self-help is important. With squatting no one gets paid for social work. There is not the built-in inequality in relationships that one finds in institutions. Squatting is not an inferior form of state hand-out which deserves to be abused. Getting a house together is a step towards taking control over one's own life and circumstances rather than the strictly limited form of participation offered by institutions where the real control is with the social workers. When 'dossers' join squatting groups, these issues need to be discussed as otherwise squatters can be viewed as social workers trying to impose self-help.

### Organizing to end the 'dosser' problem

Despite these conflicts and prejudices on both 'sides', squatters who have made an effort to contact 'dossers' have been welcomed as 'one of us' in contrast to 'one of those social workers'. The achievements of the squatting movement are able to inspire the feeling that people can fight back and squatting can provide new hope for people who feel powerless and politically isolated.

In 1976, I helped to start a political organisation called PROD (Preservation of the Rights of Dossers). It was clear that many 'dossers' want to see political changes and an end to prejudice and discrimination. But homelessness makes political organisation difficult. The people are preoccupied with daily survival, hard to contact and afraid of being barred from lodging houses and day centres for their political activities. PROD saw squatting as a possible solution and felt that this would also be a step towards political consciousness. Putting one's own lock on the door declares a right to somewhere to live. Taking the boards down from the windows symbolizes a removal of the barrier between society and people 'outside' it.

PROD never really got off the ground. But whatever future organisation occurs, different

labels must not be allowed to disguise common interests and common humanity, nor to imply assumptions about the wide range of people who are lumped together by them. In order to unite all people with common interests we must reject the isolation of particular problem 'groups' from each other and be suspicious of categories devised for administrative convenience and social control. Squatters' groups, the Claimants Union, trade unions and residents associations could all provide a basis for political organisation relevant to 'dossers' problems.

Until recently, 'single homelessness' was characterised as being to do with 'dossers' and 'inadequacy'.<sup>8</sup> Thus squatting gained support if families were housed, but single people received scant consideration. This meant that the totally inadequate Housing (Homeless Persons) Act was passed in 1977 limiting statutory provision to priority groups of single people (the old and the sick) because the Government claimed that councils could not afford to house everyone in need. At the same time the Criminal Law Act was brought in to intimidate squatters whilst the vagrancy laws remain a permanent threat. •



Mike Wells 1980







# Everybody's doing it

by Mark Gimson

A look at some of the world's diverse squatting movements

This chapter presents some information about squatting around the world. It is not a comprehensive survey of worldwide squatting, but shows a range of different approaches and tactics which have been tried.

There are two types of squatting: on land and in empty buildings. The former is a much more extensive phenomenon than the latter, but it is only discussed briefly here because considerable literature already exists about it. The rest of the chapter covers squatting in buildings.

## Land Squatting

As much as one tenth of the global population is housed in urban squatting communities. Almost all major cities in Asia, Africa and South America have vast squatter settlements on the outskirts. These have many different names, e.g. shanty towns, *bidonvilles* in French (meaning 'tin towns'), *gourbevilles* in Tunisia, *favelas* in Brazil, *colonias paracaidistas* (parachutists) in Mexico and so on. In many cases a substantial proportion of inhabitants of a city are squatters: for example in the mid 1960s in Lima, Peru, 45 per cent of the population (more than a million) were squatters, in Djakarta, Indonesia, 25 per cent (750,000 people) and in Ankara, Turkey nearly 50 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

Migrants flood to the cities from the countryside in search of work and initially sleep outside or find somewhere with relatives or friends. The only way that they can get reasonably permanent roofs over their heads is by building shacks for themselves on unused land at the edge of the city. To achieve this they usually work in groups and take possession of land by building shacks overnight; sometimes there are small firms which specialise in this clandestine operation.

Some authoritarian governments, like South Africa, Chile and Indonesia, have completely



Monique Hervé  
Radio Times Hulton Picture Library



Nick Wates  
Paul Almassy/Camera Press



Hagar Shour/Camera Press



## Chapter 20

Self built homes on squatted land.

Top left: Paris, France.

Top centre: Malaya, 1950.

Top right: Salisbury, Zimbabwe.

Bottom left: Guatemala City, Guatemala, 1976.

Bottom centre: Bombay, India.

Bottom right: Tondo, Manila, Phillipines, 1976.

destroyed such settlements without providing any alternative. But in most countries the vast number of squatters and the lack of alternatives have compelled reluctant authorities to recognise squatter settlements and grudgingly to help provide water supplies, electricity and drains. Before this living conditions are often appalling, and the installation of services is a turning point in the battle for a reasonable place to live. The squatters then continue gradually to improve their houses and slowly the settlements become an established part of the city.

This process is mainly confined to the third world, although it also occurs on the peripheries of Southern European cities like Athens, Madrid Lisbon and Naples and in *bidonvilles* outside Paris.

With the extraordinarily rapid growth of third world cities we can see the property market developing very quickly. Within a few years of occupying land, squatters regard themselves as the owners, and sometimes sublet or sell their dwellings.

Although this 'third world squatting' is a different phenomenon from the squatting of empty buildings in Britain, there are important similarities in both cases squatting is unauthorised direct action by poorer members of the society and in both cases it is perceived as a threat by the property-owning class.

Squatting in empty houses has recently been taking place throughout Western Europe. The availability of empty property is obviously a prerequisite for this type of squatting, and homelessness or intolerable living conditions are the main stimulus. Often the authorities, backed up by repressive laws, have reacted more strongly than in Britain.

## West Germany

In Germany the law of *Hausfriedensbruch* (breaking the peace of a building or piece of land) is rather like the rejected criminal trespass proposals in Britain. Squatters can be arrested immediately on instructions from the owner. Similarly, owners can easily obtain eviction orders which can be executed with help from the police.

After eviction and arrest for *Hausfriedensbruch* squatters in Germany have frequently been charged with other offences: burglary, criminal damage and conspiracy. The legal position and the strength of the German police makes squatting a very clandestine activity. Buildings have to be carefully

selected and secretly taken over; either in the hope that the owners will not find out straightaway or with the prospect of an immediate violent confrontation. In either case squats can only survive if backed by an organised campaign which raises the political stakes so high that the authorities hold their fire.

Despite these adverse conditions, squatting has developed in Germany. Church and university authorities have on occasion acquiesced to the presence of squatters and on other occasions, violent defence campaigns have held off the police.

The first known squat since the war took place in September 1970 in Frankfurt's West End when 23 tenement buildings were occupied.

During 1973 and 1974 the Frankfurt authorities carried out a successful campaign to stamp out squatting, culminating in police using tear-gas in evictions. By 1976, they claimed there were only two squats left in the city. Many of the squatters (and rent strikers) were Turkish or Italian immigrants although it was difficult for them to be involved in direct action because of their precarious legal position under the 'guest worker' system which enables them to be deported or refused new work permits on the slightest pretext.

Other big German cities such as Munich and Hamburg have had only a handful of squats. The West German establishment has always been quick to describe all squatters as 'terrorists', thereby justifying the use of all available methods of repression.

With rapidly rising rents and a reduction of anti-terrorist tensions, there have been new squatting initiatives in 1979 and 1980. As in several other European countries, many of these have been more an expression of alienation from the atomised lifestyle imposed by the planning system than a reflection of absolute housing shortage. In the summer of 1979 there was a wave of squatting in West Berlin in the Kreuzberg district, an immigrant area, where many dilapidated flats were taken over and repaired. This activity is now called *Instand(be) setzung* (rehabilitation-occupation). Support for the squatters and the local political situation has prevented eviction. The former Nazi film studios were also taken over and in Spring 1980 the squatters were legitimised for three years and allowed to pay rent.

Around the same time, students squatted a disused eye hospital attached to the university in Gottmgen where there was an acute student





Keystone

The end of a squat in Hamburg, West Germany, after and attack by 400 police, 1973.

housing crisis. They mounted a large campaign eventually forcing the authorities to grant tenancies to many of them. In February 1980, a squatters conference was held in the hospital. It showed that squatting now existed in dozens of German towns where such activity had previously been unknown, and people from 26 towns attended the conference. By summer 1980 houses in ten streets were squatted in Cologne and groups were also established in Aachen, Braunschweig, Tübingen, Friburg, Frankfurt and Giessen.

Although this squatting movement generally involves fewer squatters than in Holland, Denmark or Britain, the legal and political situation means they must be highly organised and politically aware, and with a deepening housing crisis they are bound to make an important contribution to the German political scene.

### The Netherlands

In the Netherlands most squatting (*kraaken* in Dutch, meaning 'to crack') has been in Amsterdam, but it is extensive in every large Dutch city. Amsterdam, with a population of 700,000 has 5,000 people on the waiting list and it takes four years to get to the top of it. Squatting first emerged in the mid sixties and it has grown steadily ever since. In the spring of 1980 the authorities estimated that there were between 6,000 and 7,000 squatted houses in Amsterdam alone with a slightly smaller number in the rest of Holland. Squatters have had a strong influence on city planning issues by focus-

ing opposition to road building, hotel and office plans and by fighting to maintain low-income housing in the city centre.

One of the most dynamic and spectacular squatting groups was in the Nieuwmarkt area in the centre of Amsterdam. In the late 1960s the town council decided to build an underground line through the area, which, because of the swampy soil conditions, meant demolishing all the buildings on the proposed route, most of which provided low rent houses. Many people opposed the plans, not only because it meant the large-scale demolition of a historic part of the city, but also because they knew that the housing would be replaced by offices, banks and hotels, and that the residents would be decanted into gigantic housing estates outside the city.

About 300 squatters occupied houses on the route of the projected underground, and in 1975 the struggle came to a head when the town council tried to evict them. The squatters barricaded the buildings using welded sheet steel and anti-tear-gas curtains on all windows. A kind of drawbridge made of steel cables and decorated with cartoons was hung between two buildings and a brightly painted 'people's tank' attempted to confuse the police! A human barricade was formed round the building, police vehicles were overturned and sprayed with paint to make them look ridiculous. The police, heavily armed with tear-gas, water cannons and an armoured car, finally occupied the building which was then demolished within an hour. Several people were arrested (and subsequently jailed) and others suffered minor injuries. A 'funeral' was arranged the following day at which 3,000 people laid flowers on the rubble.

Although the squatters lost the immediate battle to save the buildings, the general population, now alerted to the threat to the city, was so shocked by the violent confrontations shown on television that the authorities were forced to scrap plans to build any more underground lines in the city.

Similar though less spectacular campaigns led to the authorities rejecting proposals for office developments and road schemes. In all the campaigns, squatters joined forces with other local people and provided the main impetus largely because they had the time and energy.

The Nieuwmarkt squatters developed highly efficient forms of organisation. A key feature was the communal fund. Each squatter was expected – though not compelled – to pay 10 guilders (£2)

per week, three-quarters of which was used to pay for building services, and one quarter to meet 'action costs' such as posters, leaflets and other campaign expenses. To avoid centralisation there was no single fund, but each house or block of houses kept the money. At one time, decisions about expenditure were made at central meetings but later people who needed money presented their project to each household, which then decided how much to allocate. As well as being an expression of solidarity, this fund enabled many projects to be carried out which would not otherwise have started; for instance, the occupation of offices and warehouses and their conversion into housing within a month or two. The group could also boast a cafe, a printshop, a bookshop and an illegal radio station. In 1977 when the squatters in Villa Road in London were mounting a campaign to avoid eviction, Amsterdam squatters sent £200 out of their funds in support. Few British squatting groups ever had as much money in their kitties.

The local action groups linked with other groups both in Amsterdam and elsewhere in Holland by means of representative meetings. By 1980 there were 15 information centres in Amsterdam with weekly consulting hours for prospective squatters, and an extensive monthly bulletin was published. Because many of the property speculators in Amsterdam are British, occasional trips have been made to Britain to attend property developers conferences and to attempt to obtain information about particular developers plans. Information networks are more highly developed than in British squatting groups, with information about developments constantly leaked from inside sources and computers used to trace changes in property ownership. A comprehensive file of building permits in Amsterdam was started in 1977 which enables squatters to know the owners of empty buildings and their plans. Speculators and politicians in Holland have tried but failed to stamp out squatting. Between 1977 and 1979 squatters in Holland organised a whole series of both local and national demonstrations and occupations against the Government's proposed anti-squatting laws. Under the slogan '*Kraak de anli-kraak wet*' (break the anti-squatting law), in January 1978 1,500 squatters from 30 different towns and cities marched through Amsterdam.

On September 21 1978, 150 Dutch squatters besieged the British Embassy at The Hague in



Blauwe Maandag



Tony Sleep



Tony Sleep



Tony Sleep



Tony Sleep



Tony Sleep



Tony Sleep

Squatters organise in Amsterdam.

Top left: A stencilled wall shows where a house used to be.

Top second from left: Tarring and feathering a British property speculator's offices.

Top second from right: Building street barricades from cobble stones.

Top right: Welding sheet steel barricades.

Above left: Collecting a levy helps pay for house repairs, pirate radio stations and much more.

Above right: Monitoring of police radio with computerised scanners is done 24 hours a day to get advance warning of police activity.

Left: The Golden Crowbar, one of several unlicensed bars run illegally by squatters to raise money. Staff are unpaid and drinks are cheap.

Right: Internal alarm intercom system in a fortified squat. Each floor can be sealed off separately.





Blauwe Maandag



Pieter Boersma

*Battles in Amsterdam.*  
*Above: Nieuwmarkt, 1975. Police use watercannon against a squat on the route of the Metro. The squatters throw paint on police cars. All windows have 'curtains' against teargas and an improvised bridge provides a means of escape.*  
*Centre, left and right: Vondelstraat, February/March 1980. Streets are barricaded in several places to protect a squat (shown in the left of the top two photos) which is threatened with eviction. A few nights later, a convoy of tanks arrives and the barricades are cleared despite resistance.*  
*Far right: Prins Hendrikkade, August 1980. 2,000 police and a remarkable array of special equipment (including converted skips full of armed police to be lowered onto the roof) is used to evict a single squat. In the event the authorities looked rather foolish since only one squatter and 10 journalists were in the building, the rest having slipped out.*

support of the Huntley Street 14 arrested under the Criminal Law Act (pp 94-6). The action was intended as a warning to the Dutch government against their own moves to bring in legislation. The squatters started to board up the embassy in the style of British speculators boarding up buildings in Holland and shoved toy bulldozers through the letter box as a reminder of Huntley Street. Fifty-seven people were arrested, held for four days, and later fined.

These actions are not spontaneous. Meetings of representatives from squatting groups decide when to take initiatives like this and funds are raised from the regular squatters contributions to their funds in different neighbourhoods and large sums are also made in cafes and bars run by squatters.

The size of the *Kraak de Anti-Kraak Wet* campaign and the strength of the squatting movement has made it impossible for the coalition government to pass the anti-squatting laws without itself cracking apart. At the end of 1979 the city-wide organisation of Amsterdam squatters reached new heights with the successful development and defence of the *Grotte Keyser* squatters organising centre on the Keyser Gracht (Keyser Canal) in central Amsterdam. This group of grand town houses was made into a fortress in December 1979 with steel, wood, barbed wire, exploding potato crackers (!) and paint bombs. The authorities gave up without trying to breach its defences and a squatters pirate radio was later established in the squat. The *Grotte Keyser*, still going in summer 1980, played an important role in struggles to come.

Dutch squatters hit the world headlines in March 1980 when tanks were sent in to clear a 'No-Go' area set up by squatters in Amsterdam. The squatters had created a 'No Go' area blocking roads and tramlines in the middle of the city in response to the eviction a week earlier of squats in *Vondelstraat* which the authorities didn't want to see becoming another *Grotte Keyser*. The squats were re-occupied on 29 February and the 'No Go' area was created to defend them. Although the barricades were pulled down on 3 March by police armed with water cannon and tanks armed with shovel scoops, the *Vondelstraat* squats were left alone. That evening 12,000 people demonstrated support for the squatters in a rally in Central Amsterdam. Squatters regained the attention of the world's media two months later when together with other anti-monarchists, they organised a massive demonstration to protest against the coronation



Amphoto/ Press Association



Associated Press



Amphoto/ Press Association

Amphoto/ Press Association





of Queen Beatrice under the slogan ‘No housing – no crowning’.

Despite massive confrontations with the authorities, the squatters have managed to stay in the key areas of Amsterdam. The authorities are reluctant to use all their might against the Dutch squatting movement as it has attracted so much support. It remains an inspiration for housing and planning struggles everywhere.

### France

It was in France that the recent era of direct action was ushered in with the near revolution of May 1968. Despite this, squatting has been restricted to a few determined activists. Owners have been quick to carry out evictions without going through the courts and a law which forbids evictions between December and March was, for a long time, said by the authorities not to apply to squatters. This law means that seasonal squatting and skippering is widespread. People who sleep rough in the summer take to ramshackle squats in the winter months but usually vacate them in the spring unless they have become more organised and conscious of their rights in the meantime.

It has only recently been established that police *do* need a court order to evict, and since 1976 there have been a few squats in Paris and other French cities – Tours, Lyon, Lille, Strasbourg, Grenoble, Caen and Toulouse. In 1978 there were many squatters in Paris, mostly to the south of Montparnasse in a decaying area, or in the east around Belleville.

Many Paris flats have been taken over in decaying blocks where tenants were in the process of being evicted.<sup>4</sup> Squatters also played a part in helping neighbourhood groups oppose and eventually defeat plans to build a new urban motorway from the south into the heart of Paris. In the south of France, six farms have been squatted and farmed for years as part of the massive non-violent campaign to save 42,000 acres of the Larzac plateau from being used as an army training camp.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere squatters have attacked redevelopment plans and property speculation. In 1979 most squats were evicted and the absence of any real squatters organisation or coherent strategy meant that by 1980 there were only a few left. However, the Paris community centre and workshop squat in Rue des Pyrenees and other related buildings had wide support and may be the centre of a new wave.



*Squatters demonstrate ‘for a living city’ in Stockholm, Sweden, 1977.*

### Sweden and Finland

In Sweden squatting has been erratic but nevertheless on a number of occasions spectacular squats have gained support for housing rights and had an impact on planning decisions.

About 60 people moved into a block of empty flats in *Krukmarkargatan*, Stockholm in October 1977 in an attempt to stop demolition. The squat, which was known as ‘The Mole Squat’ was initially heavily attacked by the Stockholm Tenants Union whose representative denounced the squatters as ‘housing thieves’ and made the usual attempt to split the badly housed against each other:

‘How did they get their flats in the inner city? Not by standing in the housing queue and waiting their turn. They by-passed all the loyal tenants who have waited for their worn-out flats to be replaced by modern ones. Clenched-fist politics on the housing front can never be accepted.’<sup>6</sup>

However the Mole squat fought back. It became a centre to help the homeless and drug addicts as well as a part of the struggle against wanton demolition. The ‘Mole’ squat was evicted in August 1978 in a typically Swedish liberal way. The police surrounded the building and gave the occupants two days to leave. They refused and the police eventually moved in amidst a massive demonstration of thousands of supporters.

In Finland squatting has been growing. In Helsinki the Lepakko hostel was squatted in the summer of 1979. Eventually the authorities agreed to the occupation and gave funds for repairs. Encouraged by this, other occupations have taken place, and some politicians now believe they miscalculated when they legitimised the Lepakko occupation.

### Ireland

There was a marked growth in squatting on both sides of the border in the late sixties and seventies. In Northern Ireland the large population movements of 1971-2 caused by the sectarian conflict led to widespread homelessness and many abandoned homes. Squatting has been a feature of every outbreak of sectarian violence and the current war (which has resulted in housing being almost entirely segregated on religious grounds) has spawned a massive outbreak of squatting. For instance, in January 1977, there were 6,168 squats in property belonging to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (the only public housing authority) according to official statistics. There was also some squatting in private property giving a total of at least 30,000 squatters. Since then numbers have declined somewhat.

In some areas during the mid-seventies, the Executive lost control over its housing as squatting was organised by para-military groups of both religious denominations. At times, it was easier to obtain housing from the Irish Republican Army or the Ulster Defence Association which even operate a points system for the allocation of housing, than from the Executive.<sup>8</sup>

Squatting has been most prevalent in Catholic areas, particularly in Belfast and, to a lesser extent Derry, as the shortage of housing is greater in Catholic areas. Squatters occupy all types of property both old and new. Their motive is often to stay in an area in which they feel safe rather than to avoid homelessness.

Recently the para-military groups have been less involved, and people squatting tend to do it on an individual unorganised basis. Recognising its inability to cope, the Executive has legalised many squatters by giving them licensee status and issuing them with ‘use and occupation’ rent books. Eviction of squatters in many areas is difficult because of fear of violence. Out of 3,781 Executive properties squatted in July 1980, court action had only been started against 315 and only 89 of these were awaiting eviction by the bailiffs.<sup>9</sup> Under current legislation, the Executive is obliged to rehouse most evicted squatters, a further deterrent to evicting them.

Technically, squatting is illegal in Northern Ireland under an act passed in 1946 in response to a wave of squatting initiated, as in England, by returning soldiers (see Chapter 9). It enables courts to give a maximum of three months

imprisonment and a small fine. However, in practice few squatters are prosecuted and even then they are merely given fines and evicted rather than imprisoned.

Squatting in the Republic is largely confined to tower blocks in Dublin. These were built hastily following a housing emergency in 1963-9 when it was discovered that many of Dublin’s tenement blocks were unsafe.

People moving out of the blocks started a wave of squatting. According to Dublin Corporation there were 840 squatted homes in 1976 and 500 in 1980. A relatively tolerant attitude towards squatters is forced on the Corporation by their readiness to resist eviction forcibly. Furthermore, as in the North, most people squatting qualify for rehousing. Many squatters have had their occupancy legalised by a licensee arrangement whereby they become ‘non-regularised’ tenants. As well as the tower blocks, a few of the Corporation’s derelict properties have been squatted by single people and there is a little squatting in the private sector. Squatters in the Republic appear not to be organised in any way, choosing instead to ‘lie low’ and are opposed by the powerful Irish tenants movement.

### Denmark

There were one or two isolated squats in Denmark in the mid-sixties. Then with the student uprisings at the end of the decade, groups of ‘slumstormers’ started occupying empty privately-owned buildings in Copenhagen in protest against property speculation. Later on the movement spread to other towns like Aalborg, Aarhus and Randers. There has never been much homelessness in Denmark, and squatting has been integrated into other environmental and housing campaigns.

In the spring of 1980 one such campaign reached a climax. For several years an adventure playground had been set up on a former car park in Noerrebro, a district of central Copenhagen. Several attempts to evict were resisted by thousands of local residents and sympathisers. Although the police were eventually successful, riots continued for several days; eight buses were used as barricades, and hundreds of people were arrested.

In Denmark, from 1966 onwards, various Acts of Parliament relaxed controls and removed other restrictions on landlords with the result that rents

rose drastically. A law which enables councils to requisition flats empty for more than four weeks seldom used, and even then only following local pressure but the law does deter property owners from leaving property empty for long.

Police in Denmark can evict squatters without resorting to the courts at the request of the owner therefore squatting has always been undertaken by organised groups which have often occupied the same building several times until the police tired of throwing them out. Technically squatters can be arrested and jailed, but after a few initial arrests, this has rarely happened because of campaigns by squatting groups using slogans like ‘if you are homeless, go to jail’.

After 1971, squatting groups increasingly developed links with neighbourhood action groups and, after 1977, with unions. The ‘slumstormer’ groups also worked closely with tenants’ associations. In the early seventies, most squatting was in old buildings but later on new flats were taken over in protest at high rents. Courts have more discretion than in Britain. In May 1978 at Denmark’s largest hospital in Aarhus, unemployed young people occupied more than 30 nurses’ flats, some of which had been empty for over two years. The hospital authorities took the case to court, but the court ruled that the squatters could remain until such time as the nurses wanted the flats.

Copenhagen is the scene of Christiania, Denmark’s most spectacular squat. It is in the centre of the city just a few minutes walk from the Stock Exchange and Danish government buildings. This 54 acre site used to be a naval barracks until it was abandoned in 1970 and soon taken over by squatters. There are about 175 buildings ranging from large barrack blocks and halls with space for hundreds of people down to small huts. The squatters have gradually expanded their territory to include both banks of a beautiful lake which used to be part of the defences.

Many of the buildings have been brightly painted and trees and grass have been planted where formerly there were concrete parade grounds. Most of the structures have been care-fully repaired using second-hand materials, and some new dwellings have been built. It is a haven for artists and musicians and many businesses have sprung up, e g furniture restorers, a blacksmith, a large theatre group, restaurants, a bakery and

numerous bars. The Free Town has also spawned its own post office, kindergarten, clinic and communal bath house. One of the few rules is that cars are not allowed in and most Christianites walk or ride bikes.

The permanent population of Christiania is about 1,000 although in summer there is probably twice that number. In January 1976, a Copenhagen magistrate tried to find out particulars if about the Christianites. Of the 562 inhabitants who gave details, about 200 were not Danes, about half of those being from other Scandinavian countries. There were about 90 one-parent families and 10 runaway children. Only about 50 people were in full time employment outside Christiania, but many others had an income within the Free Town.<sup>10</sup> The conventions of western society are confidently flaunted because Christiania is large enough to constitute a self-contained world.

The Christianites have no appointed leaders. There is a decentralised structure by which the settlement is divided into districts, each of which deals with any local problems or conflicts. Problems affecting the whole of Christiania go to an open meeting of the whole community, and decisions are only made by consensus. Various working groups exist to deal with particular aspects of community life like information, cleaning up, tree planting, fire protection, festival organisation and so on.

Christiania has become so well known in Denmark that at weekends coaches of tourists pull up outside and disgorge their occupants to ‘see how the hippies live’. The impression that many of them take away is quite misleading because the first people to greet visitors are usually drug dealers. As in many British squatting communities, the freedom and absence of controls attracts drug addicts, alcoholics and criminals and at times the problems created by them have been in danger of swamping the more creative aspects of the community. Various attempts were made to overcome these difficulties and in October 1979, 3,000 people turned up to Christiania’s Great Hall to launch a People’s Movement Against Hard Drugs. Dealers of hard drugs were banned and addicts told to go to special houses made available in the country for a period of at least six months. Those who objected were banished. The Movement subsequently spread to other parts of Denmark.

Public reaction to Christiania was initially



hostile, partly because it was hard to find out about what was *really* happening there. But support grew steadily. During 1976 for instance Danish television arranged for a trade unionist and his family to live for a week in Christiania. The resulting programme influenced many Danes to re-examine the previous hostile press which Christiania had received, because it showed the family gradually being won over to the qualities of the place. The traditional political left has tended to dismiss Christiania as 'escapist' and irrelevant to the class struggle, but has increasingly found it hard to ignore the Free Town.

The Danish authorities have been divided in their attitude to Christiania. For three years from 1973 to 1976, it was accepted by the government as a 'temporary social experiment' in recognition of the fact that many refugees from modern life and problems were finding a haven there. On 1 April, 1976, this agreement expired and Christiania was threatened with eviction. A 'rainbow army' was organised in defence, so called because of the use of colours to symbolise different activities which people could put their energies into, and 30,000 people demonstrated in the city centre.

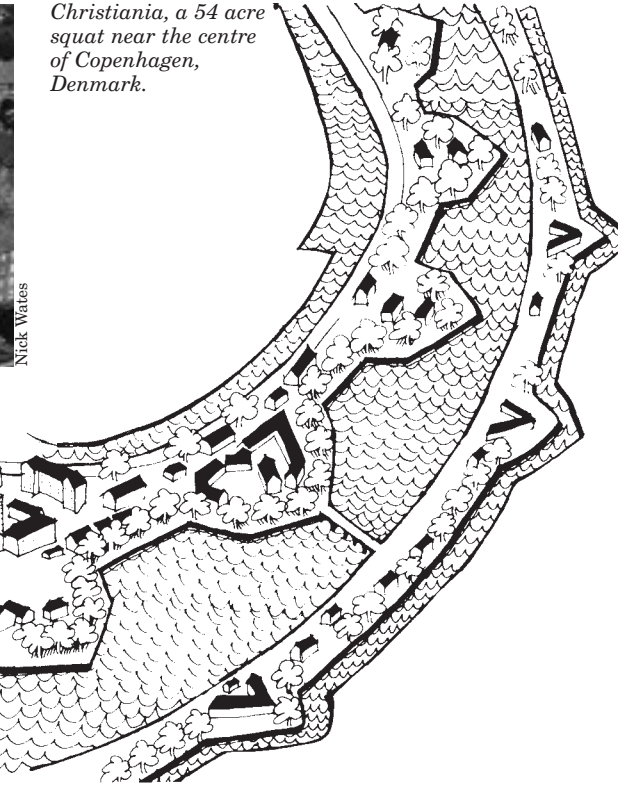
Lengthy court cases delayed eviction for two years and when Christiania finally lost in court, an elaborate defence strategy was prepared based on openness and non-violence. In the event of an eviction attempt a rather ambitious scenario was envisaged:

- Church bells would be rung and sirens set off
- A sophisticated telephone network would spread the alert throughout the country in minutes
- Copenhagen's bridges would be blocked by demonstrators
- Trains would be halted by people lying on the tracks
- Football matches would be played on airport runways
- Bonfires would be lit in the streets
- Pirate radio stations would intervene on local broadcasting stations
- Traffic would be disrupted throughout the city
- All taxis would immediately be asked through their radios to converge on Christiania

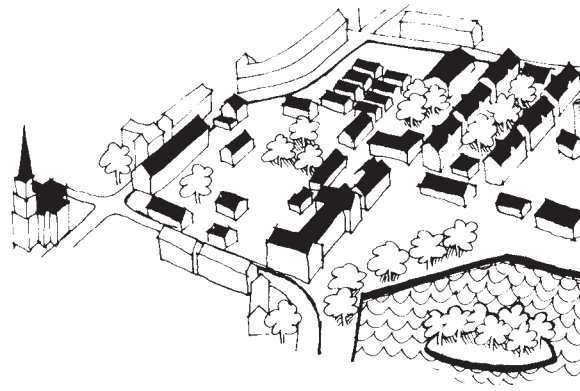
This co-ordinated plan for social disruption throughout the country was described by a former chief of the NATO Defence College in Rome on Radio Denmark as 'sound, extraordinarily intelligent, and strategically well-thought through.' Faced



*Building homes from waste materials.*



*View from a neighbouring church spire.*



*Bicycle workshop*



*A homeopathic clinic*



*Restaurant / bar in a bunker*



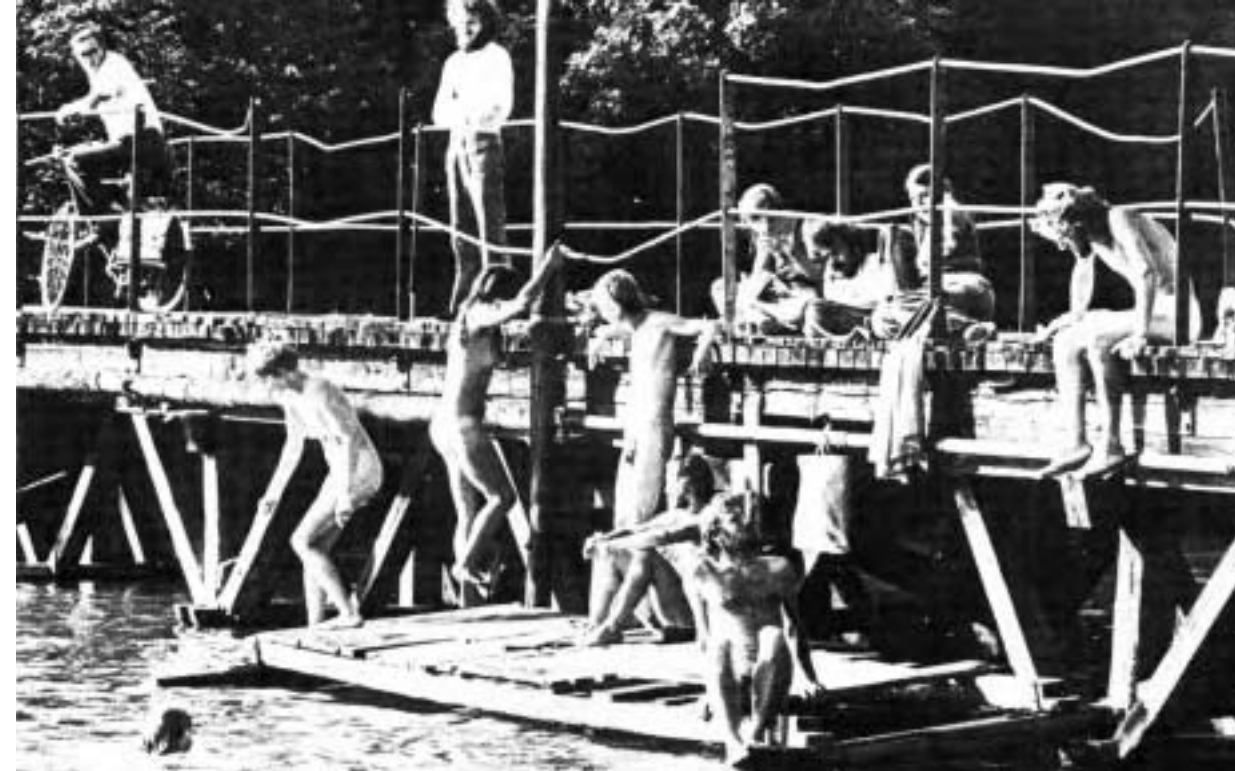
*Cars are not allowed*



*Clothes are unnecessary in warm weather*



*Christiania's Santa Claus army*



*Using the lake and the bars. Bottom right: Badge from the 'people's campaign against hard drugs'.*





with increasing public support for Christiania, the Government agreed to allow it to remain until plans for the area have been drawn up. At the time of writing (summer 1980) it appears as though Christiania will remain indefinitely, but Christianites fear that the Government will impose conditions and restrictions which effectively will destroy it.

### Spain

One of the centres of squatting in post-Franco Spain has been El Ferrol, ironically the late General Franco's home town. An official report in October 1977 reported 404 squatted dwellings there, and 1754 in the whole of Spain. The report recommended strategies which British readers may find familiar: promises of action to requisition empty property, regularising the situation of 'deserving' squatters and strong action against squatters who were not 'deserving' or refused to be 'regularised'.<sup>11</sup>

### Portugal

In Portugal, squatting was an important component of political developments after the overthrow of the fascist regime on 25 April 1974. Within a year of the coup there were 5000 squatted houses in the Lisbon area alone.<sup>12</sup> By 1976 there were an estimated 80,000 squatters in the whole country.<sup>13</sup> In the words of a Portuguese sociologist:<sup>14</sup>

'Though the occupation movement started rather spontaneously and lacked organisation at first, soon commissions of slum residents were created to structure the movement and control the occupations, to defend them and to fight against opportunism.

The movement extended to include the occupation of vacant houses privately owned. In other instances, groups of tenants decided to stop paying rents considered to be speculative. When eviction orders were passed they refused to leave the houses; when the police or the armed forces were called upon to intervene, the residents offered resistance and in some cases managed to stay. The provisional government recognised the bad housing conditions of the working class, but considered the occupations illegal. In September 1974, a decree was passed setting a period of four months for all land-

lords to declare their vacant houses. Most landlords evaded the law.

In spite of military and police repression the occupation movement continued to expand. By the beginning of 1975 it had become a national movement. Some organisations of the revolutionary left started supporting it and were themselves responsible for several occupations in order to set up popular clinics, cultural centres, nursery schools etc. The big political parties, including the Socialist and Communist Parties, condemned the occupations as being "anarchic" and "adventurist" behaviour.'

In 1975, buildings were occupied both for residential and communal purposes ranging from hotels used as meeting places to big houses used for children's play centres. The squats that were lived in were generally larger than those in Britain and were taken over as mass collective squats. Olivais Square in Lisbon, for example, was taken over by a group of 500 people organised by left wing militants.

In that exciting post-revolutionary atmosphere, the obvious next step was to expropriate property owned by the rich. Consequently many empty houses and vast amounts of land owned by affluent landlords were taken over and other struggles on housing developed. For example, in Setubal, groups of tenants banded together and paid half their normal rent. They received such strong support in the factories that the government found it difficult to evict them.

Some squatters had their occupation legitimised. They had to find the owner, get an evaluation from the tax department and negotiate a rent based on it. Neighbourhood associations co-ordinated this process. The other side of this coin was that squatters who did not do this were threatened with eviction, after the spring of 1976.<sup>15</sup> The Portuguese authorities have thus used the same tactic as the British and Spanish, dividing squatters into 'legal' and 'illegal'.

In the event, most of these struggles petered out as the government gradually re-established private property rights, outlawing both squatting and factory occupations.

### Italy

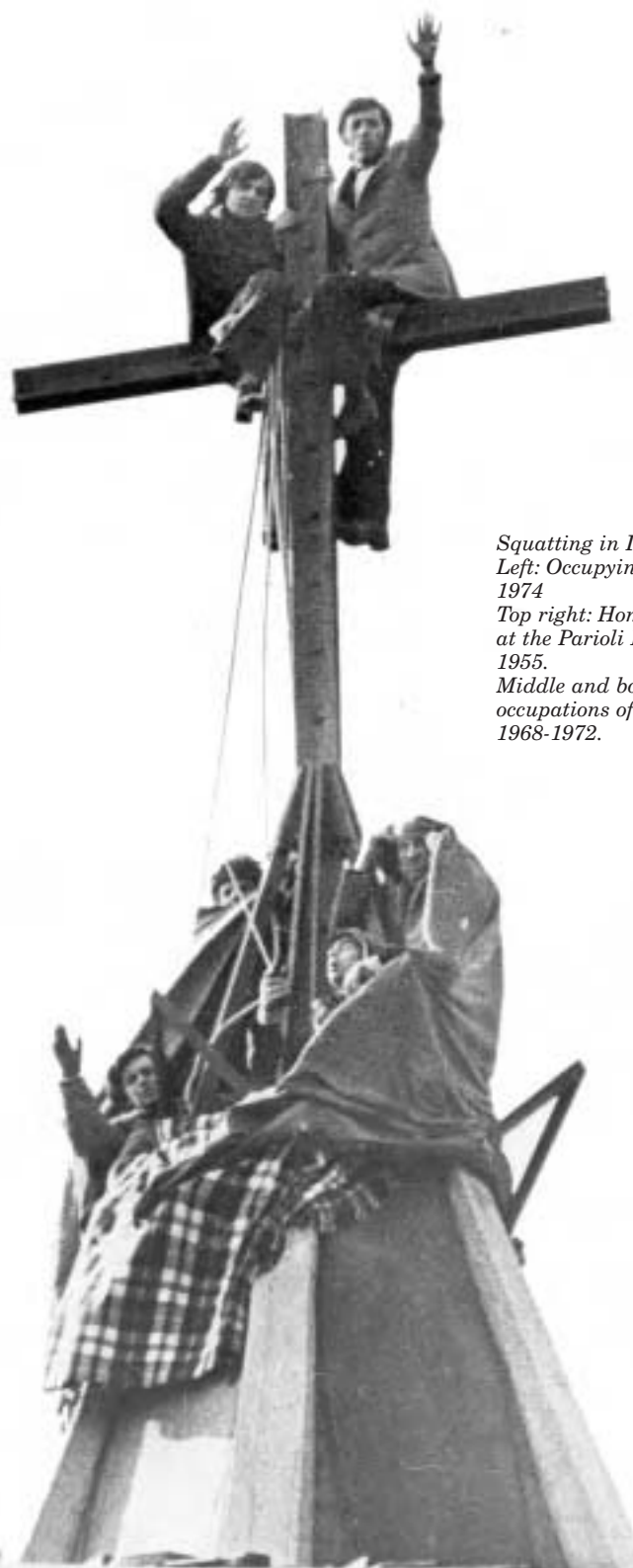
Italy is probably the only European country where squatting over the last ten years has been as widespread as in the UK and Holland. Italian police

have the power to evict squatters immediately, therefore squatting has usually been on a very big scale, large groups of people occupying empty blocks of flats. Squatters have often been supported, for the first few days at least, by large numbers of sympathisers. In Italy there is little public sector housing and, even more than in other countries, luxury flats rather than cheap housing have been built. It is common for these flats to stand empty for months or even years before tenants who can afford the rent are found.

A day in a squatting struggle in Rome, 28 April 1971, is described here by some of those involved: 'Very early in the morning a group of families take over another block of flats. Nobody knows yet whether the flats belong to the council or not. People begin to organise, staircase by staircase, while other families continue to arrive. In the afternoon there's a festive mood about the place; a turntable with loudspeakers has been installed on the balcony of one block, and all the other balconies are crowded with people who've come to take a look round, or to see friends or families who are squatting.

The first assembly takes place with a hundred squatters present. There's a general consensus of opinion: "If the flats are private, then the council should buy them and give them to us." The first police begin to arrive. Nobody takes any notice. Workers from other areas arrive to talk about the problems they're having. They promise to do the same, and encourage people not to give in. By about 8pm every block (about 400 flats) in the Via Angeli is occupied. And as other families arrive they occupy neighbouring blocks of flats. People arrive with frying pans, mattresses, cookers. They mean to stay.'<sup>16</sup>

In one of the most publicised squats 70 families occupied flats in the Via Tibaldi in Milan in June 1971. A week of battles with the authorities culminated in a demonstration of 30,000 people in support of the squatters who were finally rehoused by the council. Partly because of the large scale of organisation required for a successful action, squatting in Italy has mainly been confined to the largest cities – Milan, Turin, Rome and Naples. In 1974 it was claimed that there were 3000 families squatting in Rome.<sup>17</sup> But some squatting has been reported in smaller places such as Palermo, Livorno, Salerno, Bologna, Florence and Venice. In 1976 an Italian journalist estimated



*Squatting in Italy.*

*Left: Occupying a church, Rome, 1974*

*Top right: Home in a grandstand at the Parioli Racecourse, Rome, 1955.*

*Middle and bottom right: Mass occupations of flats in Milan, 1968-1972.*





that squatting 'has already provided more than 10,000 homes in recent years. Squatting no longer receives much coverage in the Italian newspapers as it has become such a frequent affair, especially in the large cities, that it is no longer news.'<sup>18</sup> The Italian Communist Party has discouraged squatting, even calling squatters 'enemies of the working class'. Squatting as a decentralised activity challenges and threatens the Party's strategy of revolution. By contrast anarchist and revolutionary left groups like Lotta Continua and Avanguardia Operaia have used squatting as a tactic.

A recent trend has been the occupation of properties more like British squats, ie decaying houses and flats in residential parts of cities. Parts of these have become community centres, cafes and alternative shops which also act as bases for extra-parliamentary political groups. These initiatives were given a boost by the proliferation of 'free' broadcasting following a decision of the constitutional court in June 1976 which removed the state monopoly on broadcasting. In the following year, at least 1200 radio stations and 60 television stations were set up throughout Italy, many of them organised by political groups.

Another important feature of Italian squatting is the strong link with local factories. To survive initial police opposition squats have to be organised in advance, and this has often been done from within factories. Sometimes, after evictions, blocks have to be re-squatted several times until the police give up. In Milan and Turin squatters have often been migrant workers and families who have moved from the poverty-stricken south of Italy to find work.

In 1973 in Palermo, building workers moved with their families into a block of flats which they had just finished building!

Trade unionists, immigrants and political parties have not been the only people to be involved in squatting. The rapidly expanding Italian women's movement has established feminist centres in several cities by squatting. In Milan for example, the Teresa Batista Commune of about 50 women was set up in a disused *palazzo* in the centre of the city in May 1976. The women explained to journalists 'we have seized the housing which this city denies us because we make a living from precarious jobs at low salaries and because we are the worst hit by unemployment.'<sup>19</sup> They pointed out that landlords sometimes refused to let flats to groups of women on the

grounds that a group of women would only want to live together to set up a brothel. For several years the squatted *Casa delle Donne* (Women's House) in Rome has been both a place for women to live and an organising centre for the women's movement.

In the late seventies there were fewer new occupations of empty buildings. Like in Germany 'terrorist' outrages have made fringe activities and alternative experiments difficult or even dangerous.

### Other developed countries

In developed capitalist cities outside western Europe there has also been squatting in buildings. In the United States there has been very little squatting in the last few years. As in some other countries where the police can evict immediately, most squatting has been a tactical action to draw attention to housing conditions rather than a way for people to house themselves. In 1969 and 1970 however, there was a wave of squatting in New York. This resulted from the fact that private blocks of flats are taken over by the city authorities if local rates have not been paid for a long time. New York is full of privately-owned blocks in a bad state of disrepair. Landlords, realising their buildings were too expensive to repair and virtually worthless, would collect rent and rates from the tenants but not pay the rates to the city authorities, hoping to make more money than the



*The authorities in Vancouver, Canada, end a long battle with a squatter on the seashore by burning down the house while the squatter is out 1974.*



*Young couples squat in newly built empty apartment blocks in Tel Aviv, Israel, to dramatise their housing difficulties, 1971.*

building was worth before the city authorities confiscated it. When people realised this was happening, they would stop paying rent and squatters would occupy any empty flats. The squatters in these "blighted" New York blocks were mostly blacks or Puerto Ricans. A few of the occupations lasted for several years like one in Manhattan where 80 families stayed for five years.<sup>20</sup>

In Canada between the Second World War and 1971 the affluent city of Vancouver cleared the shacks of about 20,000 squatters from the waterfront. A new community has been set up on nearby Hornby island, partly by the displaced waterfront squatters. The houses are self-built from the endless supplies of driftwood which wash up on the beaches.<sup>21</sup>

In Australia, the law on squatting is similar to that in Britain. In the North Fitzroy area of Melbourne there was some squatting by a women's group during 1975 and 1976. In Canberra, in 1974 a disused barracks was squatted, and squatters in Sydney have benefitted from the support of the local building workers. Going beyond traditional preoccupations of pay and working conditions, the unions there imposed 'green bans' whereby they refused to take part in demolition or construction which they regarded as environmentally damaging. Thus building workers supported squatters in

Victoria Street, in the Woolloomooloo district of Sydney in 1973 and 1974. The struggle exposed extensive corruption, Mafia links with speculators and extensive financial wheeling and dealing. This encouraging intervention by workers in wider issues has been copied in a limited way in Britain, notably over the proposed demolition of Birmingham Post Office.

It is difficult to know how to categorise the roof-top squatters in Hong Kong (still a British colony) who numbered about 50,000 in 1972.<sup>22</sup> Squatters are defined by the authorities there as 'occupants of any illegal structure on Crown Land, including pavement dwellers (but not summer street sleepers), occupants of caves and tunnels, roof-top and other squatters on private land, marine squatters in derelict boats or hulks'<sup>23</sup> There were almost 275,000 of these people in 1975.<sup>24</sup>



*Roof-top squatters in Hong Kong, 1978.*

### Communist countries

We know that there are community action struggles in Eastern Europe, but is there any seizure of property which could be described as squatting? Rumours have reached the West that there has been some squatting in Poland, but in the USSR authorities have consistently denied the existence of squatting in their country. In Yugoslavia, however, there has definitely been some squatting. In Ljubljana most squatters are migrants from the south of the country who occupy publicly-owned empty flats. They maintain a low profile and have not organised collectively.

In the winter of 1977-8 there was a well-publicised squat. A group of 25 young people, mainly students, took over a large house in the centre of Ljubljana. Following critical articles in the media which tried to discredit the action by

accusing them of stealing property and provoking 'anarchy in society', the squatters left after a fortnight.

In East Berlin there is a 'homesteading' programme similar to the Greater London Council's scheme (p 89). Neighbourhood councils let groups of young East Berliners live rent-free in previously empty and decaying properties on condition that they renovate them. Such programmes are a step towards making better use of available resources and could be considered as an official version of squatting.

### Summary

The pattern of squatting throughout the world is a myriad of struggles. Each country has its own traditions, laws, political and social system and level of economic development. Nevertheless there are a few meaningful and useful generalisations.

Throughout the cities of the developed world, similar developments have been taking place: the building of motorways through working-class neighbourhoods, the decanting of people from their traditional communities into alienating and isolating high-rise environments, and the construction of massive office developments. In opposition to these and to demand adequate housing and social facilities a dramatic upsurge of direct action has taken place in the last ten years with campaigns on such diverse issues as nuclear power, gay rights and high rents. Similarly, the established orders have had to devise new strategies for dealing with the 'threat'. Britain is one of the countries where the standard techniques has been to co-opt the activists and defuse the struggle rather than confront them head-on.

Not only are similar battles being fought all over the world, but in many cases they are against the same enemy. For example, during the 1950s, British property developers evolved a particularly brutal and effective technique of making vast profits from office building. Neither the declining British economy nor public outrage over the effects on the environment stopped them; they simply moved on to new pastures – first to other European countries like the Netherlands, and more recently to Australia and South America.

It has been difficult enough for squatters to organise on a national basis let alone an international one. Yet, some links between squattings campaigns in different countries have been made.

Dutch, Swedish and British squatters have several times demonstrated solidarity with one another at embassy demonstrations. Squatters from Christiania toured Europe showing films and slides and consequently, when the Free Town faced eviction, squatters from many countries travelled to support them. Coverage in the media has helped to spread squatting to other countries. For example, the growing movement in West Germany was partly inspired by the sight on TV of Dutch squatters triumphing over the authorities. Informal links such as visits abroad by squatting activists have also proved to be an important source of information and inspiration.

This brief outline of squatting around the world has uncovered marked differences both between the various movements and even within each country. For example, in Holland, Denmark and West Germany, most squatters have been young people often with strong political motives and seeking to live in a way that only squatting enables them to do. Squatters in other countries like France or Yugoslavia have often been migrants faced with little prospect of finding housing and yet others, like in the United States, began to squat virtually by mistake. Squatters in Portugal were at the forefront of a revolutionary movement which the Western Alliance saw as a threat whilst squatters in Italy are dismissed by the Communist Party as a trivial diversion.

Private control of landed property is one of the basic features of a capitalist system; and landed property has become an increasing proportion of wealth in capitalist countries, for example from 20 per cent to 26 per cent during the sixties in Britain.<sup>25</sup> The basic drive of squatting in all corners of the world has been the fight for everyone to have the use of a decent home or piece of land, and this has meant that it has exposed bad housing conditions and the unjust distribution of housing resources. In London, Milan, Buenos Aires and Lagos, there is a vast disparity between good housing and bad housing, sparking off the demand that housing should be allocated not on the basis of private wealth and economic power, but according to *need*. Squatting by itself does not do this – it cannot because it is arbitrary and piecemeal – but it is a step towards reasonable conditions for some of the poorest people. Squatting is only a temporary solution but as a component of progressive change in late capitalism it will continue to be significant. •





## Living in a tower block

From Mr F. Vermorel

Sir, I live with my wife in a GLC tower block. This is situated at the intersection of two motorways: the Westway and the M41. Directly below us an overground Metropolitan line crosses two busy British Rail lines (goods and passenger).

The noise is sickening. We live day and night with the unceasing thunder of motor vehicles, flat out and passing up and down the several slipways, and with the racket of passing trains (goods trains shunt through the night). All this noise hits our home directly.

It is impossible to read, think or listen to music. The tension generated by the noise makes us alternately irritable and lethargic. We sleep fitfully and wake with a huge din of traffic in our heads. Our air is contaminated by fumes and lead.

These conditions are the result of GLC planning. Our block, which is similar to many others in this area, was consciously planned and built with foreseeable results: specified, that is, as uninhabitable in any sane or humane sense of the word.

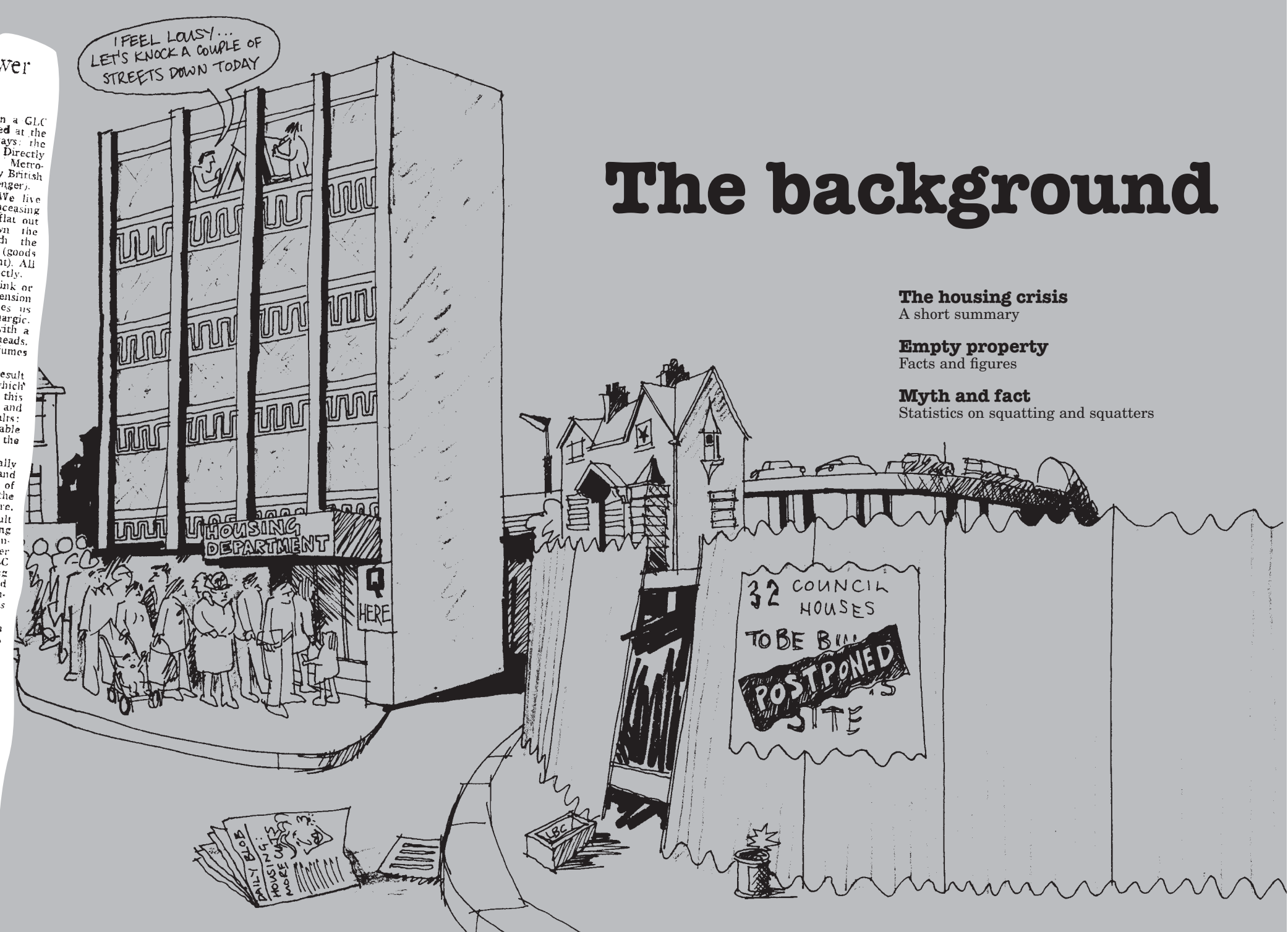
The planners have systematically denied us our most intimate and rewarding pleasures: peace of mind, study and reflection, the enjoyment of our home and leisure.

What can this constant assault upon mental and physical wellbeing be doing to children? As responsible people we could not consider having children here, but the GLC places families with very young children in these places. What kind of fantasies, moods and relationships can an environment like this nurture in a child?

I must confess that the vandalism which is slowly eating away this particular estate elates rather than horrifies us. How else does one react? The GLC is deaf to transfer requests and there are no effective ways of protest or redress. If to destroy these places is some sort of crime, to have built them is worse. All around us are squatters living in "derelict" (GLC owned) property. Built by speculators at the turn of the century, these houses are shielded from road and rail lines, are solidly built on a human scale and have gardens. We would gladly rent one. But they will shortly be demolished.

The GLC is still building unsheltered dwellings all along the Westway. With millions of pounds worth of expertise and materials, it is disseminating the suffering and environmental poverty I have described: factory farms for psychosis and barbarity.

Yours sincerely,  
F. VERMOREL,  
Frinstead House,  
Freston Road, W10,  
November 13.



# The background

## The housing crisis

A short summary

## Empty property

Facts and figures

## Myth and fact

Statistics on squatting and squatters



# The housing crisis

A short summary

*'The government has failed to accept the principle that everyone has the right to a home and as a result has not given the provision of housing for everybody the priority it requires. In our view in a civilised society one of the essential rights of every person should be the right to a decent home. This right has not been recognised by our society and so people have been forced into squatting. Squatting is not separate from the housing problem but part of it and can only be solved with it.'*  
(Squatting, trespass and civil liberties National Council for Civil Liberties, January 1976).

There is no date to which the start of the housing crisis can be traced. Ever since our ancestors moved out of their caves and jumped from their trees, there has probably been a shortage of decent accommodation in Britain. Certainly, in modern history, there is no year which can be selected as a period when there was not a shortfall of housing. Indeed, by most criteria, the inhabitants of our densely populated island are better housed now than at any time in recent history. There are fewer houses in disrepair, a higher proportion of more modern housing and less overcrowding. Yet, there is no doubt that there is still a terrible housing crisis. There is a large unmet demand for good clean, dry, well-designed housing in the right places. There is too, a seemingly endless stream of homeless and badly housed people whose needs are never likely to be properly met even if most do, eventually, end up under some type of roof.

As this book goes to press, we are at a watershed. Whilst the Labour Government of 1974-9 substantially cut spending on housing, the Tories elected in 1979 are now paring it down to a bare minimum virtually putting an end to the building of council houses. So whilst we are still reaping the benefits of housing schemes started during the

Labour years, the supply will soon dry up. We will then enter a 'new housing crisis' whose dimensions we can only estimate. The facts presented in this brief summary must be viewed in the context that things are going to get worse. They refer to England and Wales only, except where otherwise indicated.

Cartoon from "The Star" Sept 18 1946.



## Housing need

It is difficult to obtain an accurate picture of the nature of the housing shortage without going into a lot of technical detail that would be inappropriate here. To give one example, it is actually very difficult to assess housing need. The sort of questions that have to be asked are: What amount of space should each person/family have? Where do people want to live? Are people who are currently sharing with another household doing so voluntarily or do they want their own accommodation? Is the population increasing? There are numerous other questions that have to be answered before any firm statements can be made.

What is clear from available information is that overall there is a shortage of housing. The last comprehensive assessment of housing need was produced by the Labour Government in its Green Paper on Housing<sup>1</sup> published in 1977. It estimated that a programme of about 300,000 new homes in England and Wales per year was needed to ensure a continued improvement in housing conditions. That year the target was already well out of reach with 267,000 homes in Great Britain (236,000 in England and Wales) being started. But by 1980, construction levels were running at only about 160,000 new homes per year and the Green Paper's figure appears to be an impossible dream (see table 1). A report by a Parliamentary Committee<sup>2</sup> published in the summer of 1980 estimated that by the mid-eighties, there would be a shortfall of half a million homes in England and Wales.

**Table 1**  
**Housing starts 1945-1980 in Great Britain (1,000s)**

	Council*	Private	Total
1951	192	27	219
1955	185	128	313
1960	126	183	309
1965	181	211	392
1970	154	165	319
1975	174	149	323
1976	171	155	325
1977	132	135	267
1978	107	157	265
1979	80	140	220
1980 (prediction)	50	110	160

(Source: *Housing Statistics, Housing and Construction Statistics*, DOE)

\* including housing associations

As was noted above, in a sense we've never had it so good. The massive post-war building programme brought reasonably decent housing to a lot of people who had hitherto lived in squalor. In 1951 there were just over eight million households living in unfit, substandard or overcrowded conditions. In 1976 this number had fallen to 800,000<sup>3</sup>. In the mid-sixties the number of homes became greater than the number of households for the first time in living memory (probably since the plague). The difference has gradually increased and by 1977 there were 20.8 million homes and yet only 20m households, a surplus of 800,000. Surprisingly, this does not mean that there is no overall shortage, nor does it mean that there is no homelessness. The rather rosy statistics have to be qualified in a number of ways:

- It has been variously estimated that there are between 550,000 and 770,000<sup>4</sup> homes empty (see next chapter on empty property).
- There are almost 150,000<sup>5</sup> second homes which are used only for holidays and week-ends.
- There are an unknown number of 'hidden households' – people living with friends or relatives who would prefer to have their own accommodation if it were available at a price they could afford.
- Many houses are in the wrong place as people don't want to live there as there are no jobs.

The condition of the housing stock must also be considered when looking at the balance between demand and supply. According to the latest statistics available<sup>6</sup> there are:

- 900,000 homes officially categorised as 'unfit for human habitation', 700,000 of which are occupied.
- Over one million homes officially categorised as fit but needing at least £1,000 (1976 prices) spent on repairs to bring them up to standard.
- Almost one million homes lacking at least one or more basic amenities like hot water or a bath.
- Even a lot of the housing built since the war is in a bad condition. Tower blocks in particular have degenerated quickly and several have already been demolished less than 20 years after construction. Many new council estates have been so badly designed that dampness develops as soon as they are built.

The construction rate has already been examined above but the rate at which houses are improved

or renovated is another important indicator of whether housing conditions are improving. Indeed, the improvement rate increased during 1979 and 1980 after a decline for several years but it is hardly keeping up with the rate at which houses are becoming unfit. In 1979 160,000 houses were renovated and 30,000 demolished in England<sup>7</sup> but it is estimated that 150,000 per year are becoming unfit<sup>8</sup> making the net gain quite small (table 2). Also, once the cuts implemented by the Conservative Government start to affect the number of renovations, the result may well be that more houses start to become unfit than are being repaired.

**Table 2**  
**Renovations with the aid of a grant or subsidy in England (both public and private)**  
(thousands)

1974	270
1975	126
1976	121
1977	113
1978	134
1979	160

(Source: *Housing and Construction Statistics* DOE)

All these facts present a sad indictment of the failure of successive governments to meet housing need. The situation they present was accurately summed up in the Green Paper: 'One in ten (households in England and Wales) are living in circumstances which are just not acceptable by contemporary standards. This is the hard core of housing need, and it shades into housing conditions which though less unsatisfactory are not good enough and ought to be improved.'<sup>9</sup>

It would be appropriate to have statistics for the number of people actually homeless. There are two problems here. First, it is almost as difficult to define homelessness as it is to define housing need. All people living in intolerable conditions are in a sense homeless. People living in bed and breakfast hotels and hostels as well as those literally tramping the streets can also be considered homeless. Secondly, no statistics covering all homeless are available. The only ones that are produced cover only a fraction of the homeless – namely families and other households who have

been accepted as homeless by a council and offered accommodation (table 3). These figures completely ignore those people who are not normally eligible for council housing – single people, childless couples and those with no children under the age of 16. Indeed, CHAR, the campaign for the single homeless, estimates that there are at least 100,000 people sleeping rough or in hostels, lodging houses and resettlement units ('spikes') or living in institutions like mental hospitals and prisons for no other reason than they have nowhere else to go. CHAR admits that this figure is a 'guesstimate' which, if anything, errs on the conservative side.

A new law, the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, came into force at the end of 1977 and made it a duty for councils to take in certain categories of homeless people: families with children, pregnant women, old people and people vulnerable through age or health. As can be seen from table 3, the number of homeless leaped in 1978, the first full year of its operation. This can be partly explained by a change in the procedure of collecting statistics but it also shows a real increase in the number of homeless, many of whom might have been rejected by councils before the Act came into force. However, far from guaranteeing housing for all, the Act excludes not only people without children but also families who are deemed to have made themselves 'intentionally homeless' (ie those who in the council's view, have left accommodation by choice).

The exact definition of intentionality is open to a variety of interpretations and some councils have used it to exclude people evicted because of rent arrears, those who have moved to look for employment, people sacked from jobs with tied accommodation, etc. This explains why a large proportion of squatters are people with children (see p 233) despite the existence of an Act which would appear to give them a right to council housing.

**Table 3**  
**Number of homeless households accepted by councils (England)**

1976	33,720
1977	31,810
1978	53,110
1979	56,020

(Source: *Housing and Construction Statistics* DOE)



The housing crisis cannot be conceived only in terms of numbers. Too much housing is designed, regulated and managed by people who have little in common with those who live there and even less understanding of their needs. Except for the very rich, there is not much opportunity for people to influence the nature of their housing and provision is only made for people who are happy to live in privatised and standardised units designed for nuclear families. As there is still so much homelessness, it is hardly surprising that most attention is focused on the quantity of housing. But, even if there were 'housing for all', there would still be a housing crisis, albeit of a different kind – one of quality and control.



"What's so wrong and unfair is that some people should have three or four houses while others have only two."

### The options

Homelessness can best be brought into focus by considering the options, or rather the lack of them, for people without anywhere to live. Just over half the population live in owner occupied houses in this country, a third are in council housing and most of the rest rent privately or from housing associations financed by government subsidy. Can homeless people get access to any of these types of housing? The options open to them are extremely limited:

- **Buying.** An average house or flat in the summer of 1980 cost £23,000<sup>10</sup> (£29,000 in London) whilst the average wage was £6,000<sup>11</sup> per year. Since the maximum mortgage granted by building societies is between 2¼ and 2¾ times the lender's income (depending on the mortgage rate), and the societies require a substantial initial deposit, house purchase is clearly not an option open to

most people in middle, let, alone low, income brackets.

- **Renting from a council.** People covered by the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act who are homeless have a right to a council home. Yet, thousands who should be taken in are refused because, for example, they cannot get a job in the area where the council has offered them a home or they are judged to be intentionally homeless. And, although councils usually accept single people and childless couples onto their waiting lists, they house very few people who are not covered by the Act. Also, councils do not generally take in people who are living in overcrowded or bad conditions who, if a wider definition of homelessness is accepted, should have a right to be housed. These people can only sign on a waiting list and hope to reach the top of it. But waiting lists are increasingly becoming a mere bureaucratic device to trick people into believing that they have a hope of a decent house. In 1978, a million households had signed on to a waiting list<sup>12</sup> but only a tiny proportion could expect ever to obtain a council house. Most council houses that become available are let to homeless people who get priority or to those 'decanted' from development areas. Most councils operate points systems based on the state of the applicant's present housing and only people with lots of points (ie those in the worst housing) will stand a chance of being rehoused.

- **Renting from a housing association.** Housing associations experienced a rapid growth in the second half of the seventies thanks to massive injections of government money. Most of the people accepted by housing associations have been referred to them by councils and associations operate very similar allocation policies. With the exception of a few housing associations which specialise in housing single people, a housing association tenancy is not normally an option open to people who are not covered by the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act.

- **Renting from a private landlord.** There is very little private rented accommodation. Although in 1914, 90 per cent of the population rented privately, now only just over 10 per cent of the population live in this type of accommodation.<sup>13</sup> Although the Rent Act is supposed to protect people who rent privately by giving them security of tenure and controlling the rent level, in practice there is so much demand for it that people are often prepared to sign their rights away and pay exorbi-

tant rents just to get a place to live. Private landlords normally only let to people without children so renting privately is not an option open to families.

- **Other types of housing.** There are a few other types of tenure which form a tiny percentage of the housing stock and normally require a lot of effort (and luck) to get a home. Self-build is ruled out as an option for those in greatest need by high land costs, rigid planning laws and lack of finance. (Nevertheless, one company specialising in the management of self-build schemes estimated that 215 self-build houses were completed in 1979<sup>14</sup>.) A group of seven or more people can form a co-op to house themselves and while the number of people doing this has increased over the past few years, it is still extremely difficult to overcome the bureaucratic hurdles and obtain the finance.

It is clear that one of the main options for the badly housed and the homeless is a council or housing association home. But far from recognising that need, successive governments have reduced spending on housing (table 4).



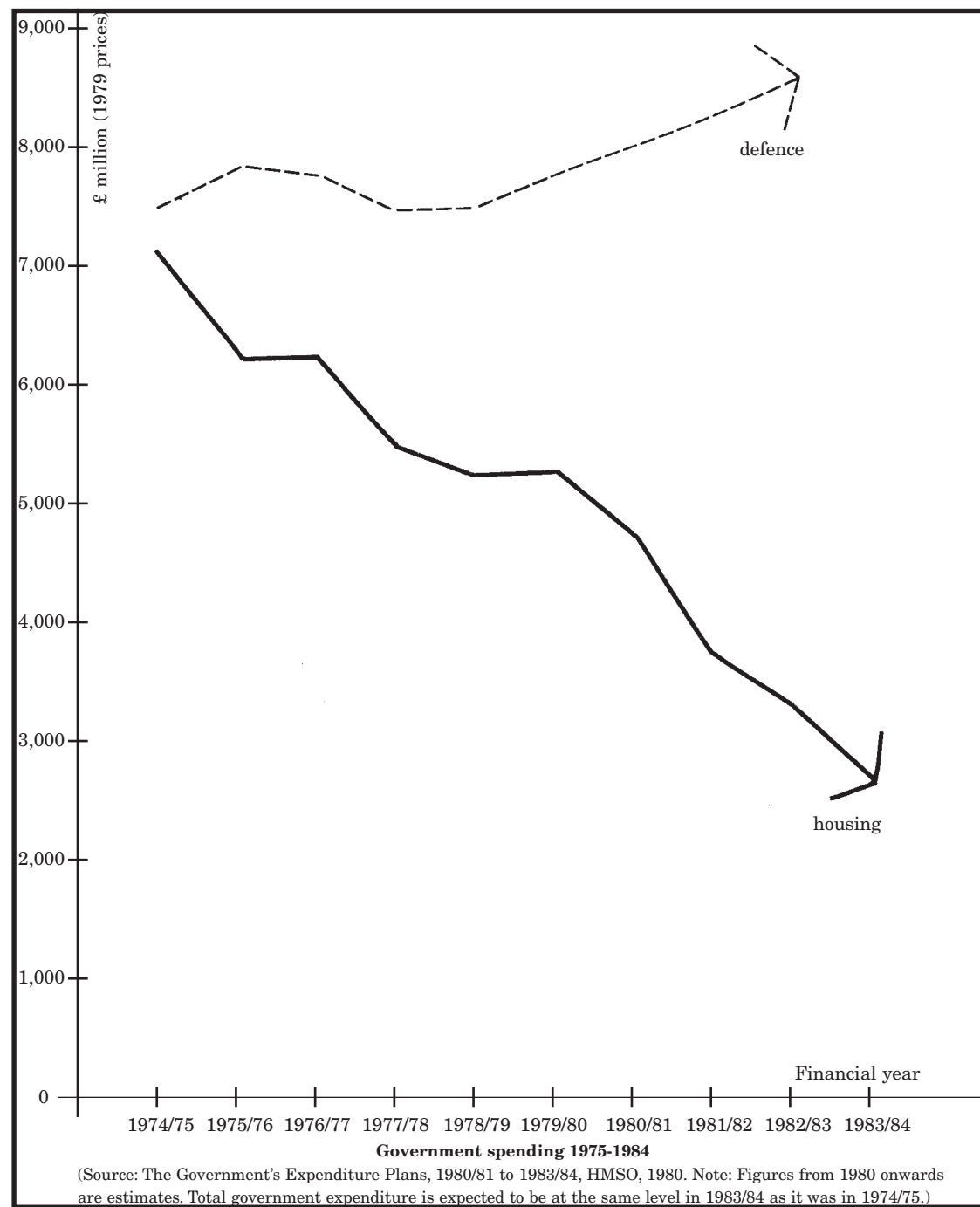
(actual)	£ million
1974/5	7,154
1975/6	6,299
1976/7	6,262
1977/8	5,519
1978/9	5,256
1979/80	5,372
(projected)	
1980/1	4,700
1981/2	3,840
1982/3	3,250
1983/4	2,790

(Source: *Government Expenditure Plans 1980/1 - 1983/4*)

These figures are the annual spending on housing except for mortgage tax relief. Most of this money is spent on repaying debts, interest charges, rent rebates and other non-building housing costs. Only a small proportion is spent on bricks and mortar (and this proportion will be even smaller as total spending falls because most of the non-building spending like rent rebates and debt and interest charges cannot be reduced).

The effect of these cuts on an already gloomy situation hardly needs to be spelt out. Waiting lists become even more of a sick joke than they already are. Many councils, particularly in large towns, are already at the point where they can only cope with the demands of those they consider to be homeless. The needs of the badly housed remain unmet and soon, councils might decide to shirk their responsibilities with the result that, once again there will be homeless children walking the streets.

This brief section demonstrates that however much propaganda has been produced by successive governments implying the housing crisis has been consigned to history, the reality of that crisis is still with us. Lack of adequate housing has always been the underlying cause of squatting. Housing is one of the most important basic needs and it is difficult to lead a happy and fulfilling life without a decent home. That so many people are still denied access to one is a national scandal and the best possible argument in favour of an organised squatting movement. •





# Empty property

## Facts and figures

Area	Number of empty homes	Date
England <sup>1</sup> and <sup>2</sup>	550,000 – 770,000	1977
Greater London <sup>3</sup>	72,000 (houses empty for three months)	1975
Cambridge <sup>4</sup>	300 (within a mile of the city centre)	1977
Cardiff <sup>5</sup>	725	1977
Kensington and Chelsea <sup>6</sup> (London)	3,557 (floors)	1978
North Wiltshire <sup>7</sup>	794 (private property only)	1974
Nottingham <sup>8</sup>	4,400 (4.5 per cent of housing stock)	1977
Sheffield <sup>9</sup>	2,561 (central area)	1976
South Brent <sup>10</sup>	1,621	1977
Southwark <sup>11</sup> (London)	1,066 (three wards only)	1975

Area	Survey results	Date
England <sup>1</sup>	66 per cent of dwellings had been empty for more than 3 months, 21 per cent for more than 2 years and 7 per cent for more than 5 years	1977
England <sup>12</sup>	100,000 empty of which 22,000 had been empty a year previously	1979
Exeter <sup>13</sup>	177 properties empty for 6 months, a third of which had been empty for 2 years	1976
Islington <sup>14</sup>	2,262 dwellings empty for 6 months, 805 of which had been empty for 2 years	1975
North Wiltshire <sup>7</sup>	550 of the 794 houses were still empty 18 months later	1974
Oxford <sup>15</sup>	Of 40 empty properties, 16 had been empty for a year and 5 for 5 years	1976
Paddington <sup>16</sup>	3,048 empty properties of which 953 had been empty 2 years before	1974
Southwark <sup>17</sup>	86 per cent of empty houses had been empty 6 months previously	

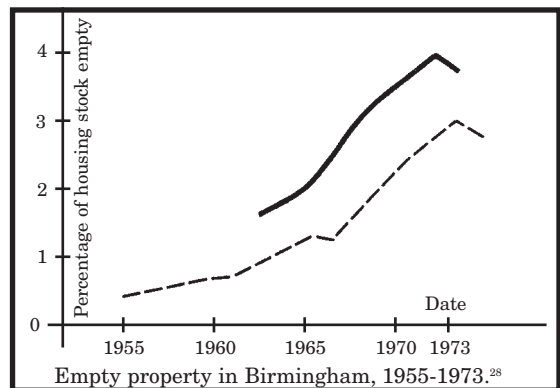
*‘The best way of preventing a property from being squatted is to see that it is occupied, and that the period for which any property has to be empty is kept to a minimum.’ (Department of the Environment Consultation Paper on Squatting, August 1975).*

### How many?

Official figures consistently show the existence of substantial amount of empty property. There has been no comprehensive survey since the 1971 Census which identified 675,000 vacant homes. More recent estimates range from the 1977 *Labour Force Survey's* figure of 770,000<sup>2</sup> to 550,000 given in the *Vacant Property Survey*<sup>1</sup> which used a tighter definition of ‘empty’. The *National Dwelling and Housing Survey*<sup>18</sup> also carried out in 1977, gave a figure of 750,000 vacant homes. All three surveys relate to England only.

Whatever the precise figures, there has certainly been a large rise in the number of empty homes during the past 25 years. The graph below shows this for Birmingham.

The Census showed that empty homes were concentrated in certain areas, notably remote rural regions (e g Cornwall where 7.4 per cent of homes were empty) and some inner city areas (such as Lambeth, Islington and Lewisham in London).



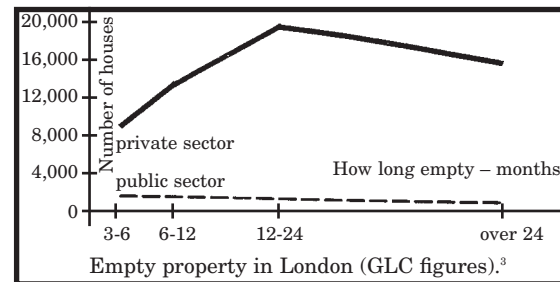
Local surveys, often undertaken by voluntary groups are the only more recent source of data, though some information on regional variations has become available.<sup>1</sup> Some examples are given in table 1, and table 2 shows that a large proportion of empty homes are vacant for long periods.

Surveys by voluntary local groups tend to understate the number of empty homes, mainly because the people doing the survey are unable to gain access to property. Many owners disguise their empty property, say by putting up curtains, in order to deter squatters and vandals. Nevertheless, figures from local groups are more likely to produce accurate figures than those provided by local authorities as the latter tend to be obtained from the rating list or are pure guesswork. The rating list is notoriously unreliable because many owners do not notify the council when their property is empty (particularly if the council charges the same rates on empty and occupied property) and because many empty properties, eg those awaiting demolition, are taken off the list entirely.

Local authorities are also very unreliable when estimating the number of their own properties which are empty. For example, in the 1975 London Boroughs Association survey, Lewisham council claimed to have only 27 empty properties. Yet, Ron Bailey<sup>19</sup> was able to list 34 properties in a handful of streets that had been empty for over three years and it is obvious that for a large authority like Lewisham with a lot of redevelop-ment work in progress, such a low figure is plainly ridiculous. This type of underestimate puts into question the value of such surveys. Neverthe-less, although empty property statistics vary in reliability, they paint an overall picture that demonstrates one of the main causes of the prevalence of squatting.

### Who owns empty homes?

Unfortunately the Census data does not distinguish between the public and private sectors. The GLC figures for 1975 suggest that the private sector is overwhelmingly to blame for the large



number of empty houses in London. Of 72,000 homes empty for over three months, 60,000 were privately-owned.<sup>3</sup> According to these figures, there were five times as many privately-owned empty dwellings as publicly-owned ones.

However, it is difficult to take these figures at face value in view of the local authorities’ tendency to underestimate their own empty dwellings. Other surveys have painted a rather different picture. For example,

- One survey found that while Southwark and the GLC combined owned 60 per cent of the houses in three wards, they owned 75 per cent of the empty dwellings.<sup>17</sup>
- Of 2,561 empty houses in the Sheffield survey, no less than 2,414 were owned by the local council.<sup>9</sup>
- 32 per cent of dwellings identified as empty in Kensington and Chelsea were publicly-owned and only 11 per cent of property in the borough is owned by the Council and the GLC.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously in rural areas the vast majority of empty property tends to be in private hands which is more a reflection of ownership patterns than anything else.

The balance of ownership of empty property varies greatly according to local conditions, but while the GLC figures give a distorted view of this balance, there is little doubt that the belief that local authorities are the worst offenders in keeping property empty is a misconception. Private owners are worse as shown by the *Vacant Property Survey*<sup>1</sup> which found that although only 13 per cent of the housing stock is rented privately, 40 per cent of empty homes came from that sector. Councils owned only 21 per cent of empty homes while owning 31 per cent of occupied dwellings. The equivalent figures for owner occupied homes were 32 per cent and 56 per cent.

### The cost of empty houses

Empty property costs money in a number of ways. There is a loss of rent income, and usually a reduction or loss of rates revenue too. It was estimated in 1980 that Islington Council was losing at least £45,000 per week in rent and rates from its 3,000 empty dwellings.<sup>20</sup>

Empty houses also have more direct costs. It is expensive to board up empty properties, to secure them after vandals or thieves have broken in, to clear away rubbish that is inevitably dumped in gardens, and to ‘gut’ them to prevent squatting. If it is intended to use them again, there is the cost of deterioration while they stand empty. In many urban areas, houses left empty for more than a few weeks have windows smashed by kids and wiring and piping stolen by thieves. Lead flashing is stolen from roofs and rain then causes severe damage. Holloway Tenants Co-op estimated the cost of keeping a house in Hornsey Rise Gardens, Islington, empty for 22 months (October 1976 – August 1978) as £2,400, over £40 per week. This was made up by the costs of securing the house, vandalism and rates. Similarly, Islington Council found that two flats left empty for four years cost over £9,000.<sup>20</sup>

And while properties stand empty, both local and central government spend fortunes on running hostels and other unsatisfactory accommodation for homeless people. The average cost of running hostels and reception centres for the homeless in 1977 (excluding capital costs) was approximately £30 per week for each family.<sup>21</sup> The cost of putting homeless families in bed and breakfast hotels is still higher. In 1974, according to DHSS returns, it was £40 per week, and it is now likely to be over double.

During the period 1970-76, 15,538 children were taken into care because of their parents’ homelessness. Since the weekly cost of keeping a child in care was around £36 per week, and assuming an average stay of seven weeks, the total cost over the period was £4 million quite apart from the traumatic effect on both parents and children. Keeping property empty, then, is a significant drain upon funds, since public bodies must use more expensive alternative accommodation.

In addition to the financial cost of empty houses, there is an enormous social cost. Empty houses are unpleasant for neighbours; they attract vermin which once established do not differentiate between empty houses and occupie

ones and they become damp. They are a cause of worry and concern to local people as a fire hazard and they attract vandals and thieves. Where many houses are empty in the same area, shops and other community facilities may be forced to close because of dwindling custom.

### Why property is empty - public sector

Of course a certain amount of empty property is inevitable when houses are rehabilitated or people move. Councils reckon that a vacancy rate of four per cent is reasonable in their own property, though with efficient management and quicker lettings, a much lower rate could be achieved. There are three major categories of empty property in the public sector: properties purchased for slum clearance, road schemes or other forms of redevelopment; properties awaiting improvement or renovation; and properties between lettings.

There are a variety of reasons why all these categories of property are left empty for long periods. Here are a few of them, some of which apply to all types and others which are specific to some of the categories outlined above.

#### *Lengthy purchase periods*

In large redevelopment or renovation schemes, houses are normally purchased by councils over a period of years and problems over buying individual dwellings can hold up an entire scheme, particularly because of the lengthy procedures attached to compulsory purchases and appeals. Since councils do not find it convenient to manage property on the basis of short- or medium-term lettings, houses acquired during the beginning of the purchase period tend to remain empty until the whole area is ready for demolition.

#### *Policy and planning changes*

These have been particularly significant in recent years due to different approaches to planning or changes in political control at both national or local levels. In particular, the widespread switch from wholesale redevelopment towards rehabilitation has resulted in extensive delays while plans are redrawn. Cuts in public expenditure have also led to schemes being scrapped or delayed, and those councils which purchased large numbers of substandard properties following the election of the Labour Government in 1974 found themselves unable to meet their rehabilitation programmes because of subsequent cuts. On a local



level, specific circumstances can bring about changes of plan which lengthen the time for which property lies empty. Road schemes are particularly susceptible to frequent alterations according, for example, to the financial situation, the composition of local or central government and environmental lobbying. Some schemes are planned years in advance of money being available to finance them or permission being granted. According to the National Empty Homes Campaign, for example, some houses in Birmingham remain empty in preparation for road schemes planned in 1946.

*The building industry*

Apart from technical difficulties which can waste time, the chaotic state of the building industry results in extensive delays. A typical construction project will involve dozens of sub-contractors, each dealing with specific tasks and all dependent upon the efficient operation of the others. A strike or a supply problem affecting one sub-contractor can hold up the work of the others. Because local authorities are compelled to accept the lowest tender for any job, they often have to deal with firms who bankrupt themselves in the process of trying to meet the tender. These difficulties not only result in property due for renovation being empty for long periods, but also lead to delays between demolition and redevelopment.

*Scale*

The large scale of projects is a key factor in properties remaining empty for long periods. A London Boroughs Association paper commented in 1975 that management problems ‘multiply exponentially with the size of programmes being mounted’.<sup>22</sup> The financial (let alone social) cost of lost accommodation due to the size of schemes is seldom taken into account when discussing their so-called ‘economies of scale’.

*Bureaucracy*

Delays result from the division of responsibilities in council bureaucracies between different officials and offices, aggravated by a lack of detailed local knowledge. Responsibility for repairs, allocations, maintenance, rent collection, evictions and other tasks are frequently in the hands of separate officials and departments possibly located in offices far from the properties concened. The Bradford Housing Action Group has even shown that the reason housing on some estates in

Bradford is empty for so long is not a reflection of letting problems per se, but the *time taken to identify empty property*. In other words, the council allocations section is not aware of when flats become empty. It is a common problem, and there are even cases of councils not being aware that they own a particular house at all!

*Power structures*

The decision-making structure of local government is extremely cumbersome and confused. Sometimes, it is not clear in which committee a decision should be taken and, on other occasions, relatively minor decisions have to be ratified by a number of different people or by committees which meet only infrequently. In turn, these decisions may then have to be agreed upon by a full council meeting or even referred to central government. There is little room for flexibility or personal initiative. Successful careers are had by local government officers who do not make mistakes or take controversial decisions, not by those with a flair for experiment or imagination. Keeping property empty is safer, and the outcome, unless squatters move in, more predictable and manageable.

*Allocations systems*

Bureaucratic rigidity is added to by the inflexibility of council allocation systems. Many properties are empty because of the refusal of local authorities to acknowledge that housing which is unsuitable for normal categories of waiting list applicants would be gratefully accepted by other people. For example, young, childless people are frequently willing – and may even wish – to live in housing which is unsuitable for people with children. A Shelter survey in 1980 revealed that according to the councils’ own estimates, they owned 250,000 difficult-to-let homes.<sup>12</sup>

*Lack of will*

While it is inevitable that a small proportion of property will always have to be empty at any given time, there is little excuse at a time of housing shortage for the large amount of empty property, or the length of time for which much of it stays empty. Government policy has been made clear on a number of occasions. For instance, under the Conservatives in 1974 the Department of the Environment issued a circular<sup>23</sup> which stated:

‘Maximum use should be made of short-life property acquired for such purposes as redevelopment or roadworks . . . Authorities should not abandon or board up properties prematurely or leave them for vandals . . . [They should] use properties awaiting development on a temporary basis . . . [and] work with local housing associations or voluntary bodies including reliable squatter organisations.’

This was reinforced by a Labour Government circular<sup>24</sup> in 1977 which stated:

‘Whenever a local authority holds or acquires residential property for redevelopment . . . this property should be used as living accommodation for the longest possible time.’

Too little attention has been paid to either circular. The over-riding problem is the lack of will or determination of elected councillors and council officers to ensure that property is used to the maximum extent possible, and the absence of legislation to make them do so.

Councils are not the only public bodies with empty property. Public bodies such as health and education authorities sometimes own property which is empty pending schemes that have had to be scrapped or postponed due to public spending cuts. In addition, public corporations, like British Rail, the Post Office and British Waterways, own large amounts of property for future development which they are unwilling to let. Other public bodies own large amounts of empty housing. The Ministry of Defence has thousands of units of accommodation for servicemen which are kept in reserve for any future evacuation of forces personnel from overseas and left empty in the meantime. These public bodies frequently suffer from the same bureaucratic organisational problems as councils, referred to above. In addition, having no statutory responsibility for housing they have little incentive to use their empty property efficiently.

Housing associations, though, are probably the worst offenders in the public sector after councils. One survey<sup>16</sup> by tenants of Paddington Churches Housing Association found 49 per cent of the association’s property in Paddington to be empty. Inefficiency and the rapid growth of some associations are to blame as well as other factors mentioned above as causes of empty council housing. Housing associations also suffer from the lengthy bureaucratic procedures they have to fulfil before obtaining grant approval for projects.

**Why property is empty – private sector**

Public sector empty property naturally arouses most concern, simply because it is public resources which are being wasted, but, as shown earlier, the private sector is probably more at fault. Private owners often claim that their property is empty for reasons beyond their control, and occasionally this may be true. But again *the absence of any determination by owners to make the best use of their property and the lack of any effective legislation to make them do so are the major underlying causes*. Here are the main reasons for private property being empty.

*Speculation*

Speculative motives have always been at the root of much property lying empty, reflecting the increasing role that property plays as a financial, rather than a social asset. Speculators come in different sizes. At one extreme there are the giant property development companies which buy up large areas of housing in the hope of redeveloping or refurbishing for a more profitable use. In the process of assembling land, property can be left empty for years, both because companies are not equipped to manage housing, and because they deliberately leave it empty to hasten the decline of the community and deterioration of the buildings. Permission for redeveloping may then be easier to obtain from the relevant authorities. Then there are the speculators who own property which they keep empty until the market is right for selling or letting. The constant changes in the property market encourage this by making it beneficial for the seller sometimes to withhold sale despite high interest rates. Speculation is not the prerogative of property companies; trade union pension funds, insurance companies and building societies all invest their money in this way. Even individual owner occupiers get caught up in the upward spiralling value of property. Estate agents will advise sellers that their property is worth more than it really is, and sellers may wait for years in the hope of realising the inflated prices.

*Planning blight*

Private property is frequently left empty because planners have indicated that it may be needed for future development. People then become unwilling to invest in it and areas gradually decline

as maintenance is not done.

*Security of tenure*

Security of tenure and statutory rent control have undoubtedly been responsible for some empty property. Landlords who, finding it uneconomic to rent out their property decide to sell it. Individual flats may then remain empty for years while the landlords try to persuade or harass the remaining tenants to leave in order to sell the whole building with vacant possession. It is worth noting that contrary to what is often suggested, official figures show that only between 8,000 and 31,000 homes are vacant because of the ‘impact of the Rent Acts’, much less than is usually claimed.<sup>25</sup>

*Red lining*

Building societies ‘red line’ certain areas in which they refuse to give mortgages. This has the effect of increasing the number of empty properties as sellers are unable to find buyers in those areas.

*Closing orders and listed buildings*

Property owners with closing orders on their dwellings because of unfitness are often unwilling or unable to bring them up to the necessary standard. These houses therefore remain unoccupied, often indefinitely or until bought by the council. A similar situation occurs with certain listed buildings whose owners do not want to spend money on renovation. They leave them empty, hoping they will deteriorate sufficiently for permission to be granted for demolition.

*Second homes*

Particularly in tourist areas, many houses are left empty because they are owned by rich people who live in the cities elsewhere for most of the year. There are 200,000 second homes in the UK and the number is increasing by around 12,000 each year. These are not included in statistics for empty homes.

*Bureaucratic delays*

Delays in obtaining planning permission and home improvement grants are a frequent cause of property remaining empty longer than necessary.

*Owners unknown and inheritance disputes*

A few buildings are empty for long periods because owners cannot be traced or are involved with

liquidation or inheritance disputes. The Exeter Housing Action Group, for instance, found one house that had been empty for 20 years because its owner was in an old people’s home.<sup>13</sup>

**Prior demolition**

One alternative to leaving houses empty is to knock them down. There is not a single town in the UK which does not have its share of derelict land, on which homes were demolished long before the sites were needed. Graffiti on corrugated iron around one derelict plot in Brixton Road, Lambeth, tells its own story:

- Jan 1975: 19 adults and 8 children living here*
- Mar 1975: evicted to build a footbridge*
- Sep 1975: £12,000 paid to demolition firm*
- Dec 1975: footbridge plan dropped*

The site was still derelict at the beginning of 1980.

Then there was the case of the Totterdown district of Bristol:

‘Here both the County Council and the local council acquired properties for road schemes and other development . . . a total of 479 properties were purchased. A question to Avon County Council and Bristol Council asking “How many empty houses do you own in the Totterdown area?” would produce the answer “Seven”. However, the question, “How many occupied houses do you own in the Totterdown area?” would produce the answer “Two”. The other 470 properties were demolished between one and three years ago; half of Totterdown has been razed to the ground.

The development schemes are not due to commence for at least five years.<sup>26</sup>

‘Prior demolition’ is even worse than keeping property empty, because it removes the possibility of putting pressure on owners to use the houses. Local authorities sometimes even demolish houses in a neighbourhood *before* the public inquiry into its future, thereby presenting residents with a *fait accompli*.<sup>27</sup>

**Solutions to empty property**

A vast number of ‘solutions’ have been put forward for reducing the amount of empty property, ranging from requisitioning to speeding up bureaucratic procedures. Although some have been tried half-heartedly, there has never been the political will to make them effective. •



# Myth and fact

Statistics on squatting and squatters

## What is a squatter?

A squatter is a person who occupies land or empty buildings without legal title and without paying rent.<sup>1</sup> Most recent squatting in Britain has consisted of people occupying buildings although there have been some land squats, particularly by gypsies and other travellers. In legal terms squatters are trespassers. This does not mean they are committing a criminal offence as trespass is a civil matter and the concern of the owner and the trespasser rather than the police (except in Scotland, p 158).

The term 'licensed squatter' is used many times in this book. A licence means permission or authority to do something so, in fact, the term is a misnomer; either people are squatters without permission to be in the property or they are licensees who have been granted the right to be there by the owner. So what is a licensed squatter? The term is used in a specific way in this book (reflecting common usage) to refer to people who have per-

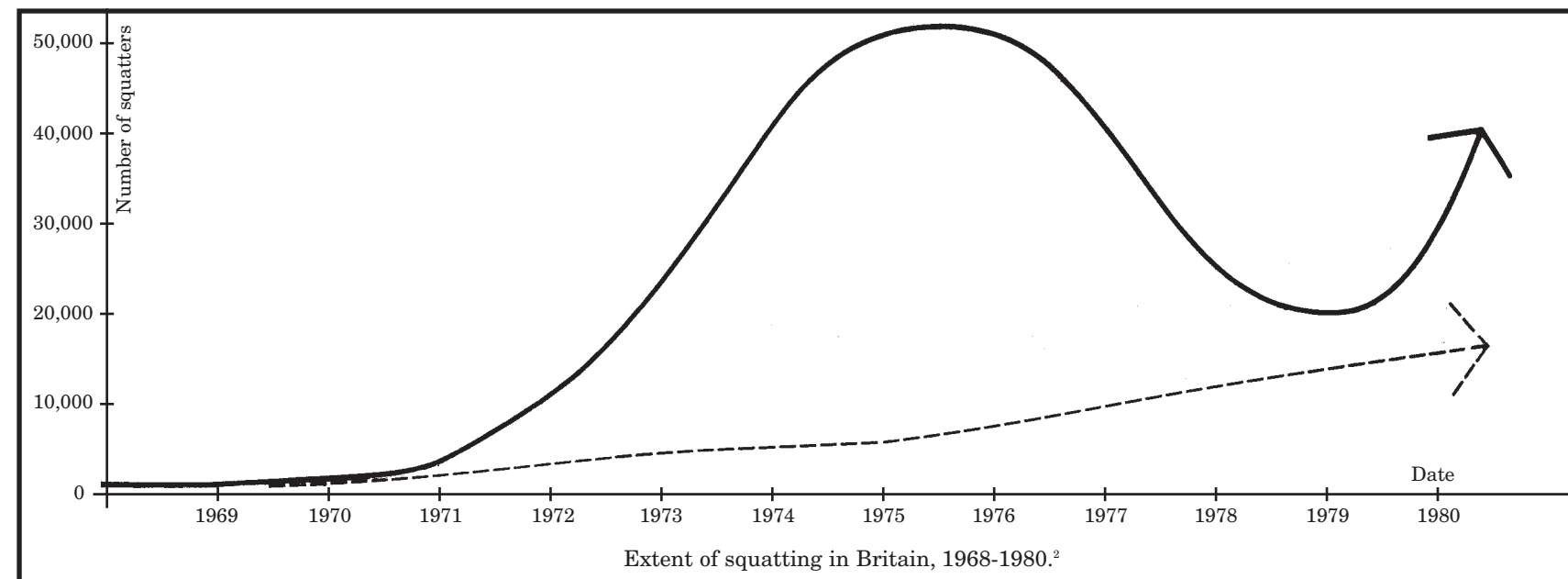
mission to occupy empty homes on a temporary basis. They may be people who took over a house as squatters but were given permission to stay by the owner or they may belong to a short life housing group which manages houses given to it on licence by the local council or a housing association. Licences may have various conditions attached to them and some licensees even pay rent (though they are not covered by the Rent Act) to the owner or the housing group managing the property. Licences need not be in writing and have sometimes been given inadvertently by an owner who says, for example, 'You can stay until the summer'.

## Extent and growth of squatting

After a slow growth initially, the number of people squatting increased dramatically between 1971 and 1975. It stayed constant for several years at the peak level of around 50,000 people.

After 1977, the year in which a new law, the Criminal Law Act, was passed in an attempt to reduce the number of squatters, there was a downturn until 1979 when squatting started to increase again. The graph shown here is a necessarily tentative attempt to plot the course of squatting since 1969.<sup>2</sup>

Any estimate of the number of squatters is inevitably a matter of educated guesswork. Squats are constantly being opened up or evicted; some last for several years and others for only a few hours and this makes it difficult to keep count of them. Also it can be in the best interests of squatters to keep their presence secret from people carrying out surveys or asking for information. Therefore property owners, particularly large companies or councils, may well be unaware of their existence. There is no system for recording the number of squats in private property, and even councils, when they have estimates at all



have consistently underestimated the number of their properties occupied by squatters.

For instance, when the Greater London Council gave an amnesty to all its squatters (p 89), it conducted a detailed survey which revealed 1,438 squatted properties. In fact, during the month it gave squatters to register, a further 400 squats were made known by the occupiers coming forward to sign up for the amnesty. In other words, it underestimated the number of squats in GLC property by almost a third.<sup>3</sup>

Or, in another example, in 1976 Haringey Council supplied a supposedly comprehensive list of its squatted properties to assist a survey<sup>4</sup> of squatting in the borough. On investigation, it turned out that of the 22 addresses supplied, 11 were empty or demolished and one was tenanted. The survey revealed a further 21 council-owned squats of which Haringey was unaware.

The graph of the growth of squatting is based on estimates from organisations closely involved in squatting, the limited number of available surveys and court records of possession orders (p 160). One other 'guesstimate' helps to provide an insight into the scale of the phenomenon of squatting. If the graph is at all accurate, then, assuming an average length of a squat is three months, over a quarter of a million people squatted at some time in the seventies.

## Where people squat

The majority of both unlicensed and licensed squatters since 1969 have been in London. By 1975, for example, there were over 2,000 houses licensed to squatters in London compared with under 500 outside<sup>5</sup> and this imbalance has been a consistent feature of squatting throughout the present wave.

Squatting is a mainly urban phenomenon. Even within towns, squatters have tended to concentrate in specific districts. A survey<sup>6</sup> in 1977 found that most squatting in London occurred in 10 boroughs and in another 10 there was hardly any. Within boroughs too, there has frequently been a marked concentration as in the Haringey survey mentioned above where over half the squats were in three wards.

There are good reasons for this concentration. The most suitable properties for squatting are those owned by local authorities or other large institutions. They must also be in reasonable

structural condition and likely to remain empty for some time. Areas where large-scale redevelopment or rehabilitation is planned often contain large numbers of houses well-suited on all these counts and likely to attract squatters.

These districts also tend to be areas of housing stress where homelessness and overcrowding are common. Empty houses are likely to prove attractive to local people living in bad housing conditions particularly once a few of the most desperate have taken the plunge and started squatting. There is a snowball effect. As more people squat in a particular street, locality or town, the stronger they become as a group, and the less likely they are to be harassed or evicted. Information about how to squat, the location of suitable property and how to get services connected becomes easier to obtain. The lack of such effective information and support networks is partly responsible for the small amount of squatting in many towns outside London. But the main reason for the heavy concentration in the capital is the peculiar nature of its housing problems, and its unique role in attracting so many people seeking a better life and employment. Also, the size of the housing problem in London is, in terms of absolute homelessness (as opposed to housing conditions), the worst in the UK.<sup>7</sup>

## Who owns the houses?

Although there is always more empty privately-owned than publicly-owned property (see p 227), most squatting has taken place in publicly-owned housing and, in particular, council property. This is not because public bodies have shown any sympathy for squatters but because of their public accountability. Squatters can embarrass them by highlighting the existence of council-owned empty property. The fear of bad publicity can make them unwilling to evict squatters from houses for which they have no plans and make them unwilling to attempt strongarm tactics.

The vast majority of squatted property is awaiting demolition or renovation. The much publicised notion of squatters jumping the housing waiting list is therefore largely without foundation but remains the root cause of much resentment against squatters. Indeed, even if they do take over property that is about to be let, they can be evicted very quickly.

The Haringey survey, for instance, found that

of 122 squats, only three were required by the Council as part of its permanent housing stock (ie ready to let) . Over half were privately owned and those owned by Haringey were either awaiting renovation or demolition. The squats had been empty, on average, for over six months. And a survey in 1975 of squatters in council property commissioned by the Department of the Environment (DOE) found that only one sixth of the sample was in permanent stock and that even much of this was regarded as 'difficult-to-let'.<sup>8</sup> The reality is not that squatters jump the housing waiting list or deprive others of a home but rather that they opt out of the queue altogether and make use of houses that would otherwise be empty.

## Holiday squatters

A lot of publicity has also been given to the tale of squatters who take over homes whilst the inhabitants are on holiday or even just out shopping. Again, this myth has generated a fantastic amount of public hostility towards squatting. Yet, there is no substantiated report of it ever happening although many journalists and researchers have tried to find examples.

Both at a local and a national level, the idea has been largely discounted except by a few sensation-seeking politicians. For example, the London Boroughs Association reported in September 1975: 'The Association has had no genuine cases of squatting in occupied property drawn to its attention and is forced to regard this particular area of discussion as a red herring, if not deliberate scare-mongering.'<sup>9</sup> And in parliament, Home Office Minister Brynmor John said in June 1976, in reply to a question about squatters in occupied property: 'The limited evidence available suggests that instances of this kind of squatting are rare.'<sup>10</sup> In fact squatters taking over occupied property would receive short shrift from the law as the Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Robert Mark made plain in 1975:

'In order to relieve any ill-founded public anxiety resulting from recent press publicity about squatting, I wish it to be known that the Metropolitan Police will have no hesitation in assisting the lawful occupiers of furnished accommodation to eject anyone in unauthorised occupation of it.'<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, Parliament felt it necessary to



include in part of the Criminal Law Act, passed in 1977, a section which made it a criminal offence to squat occupied property. Needless to say, no-one has ever been charged with that offence. Yet, the Automobile Association continues to have as part of its standard ‘five star’ insurance for motorists touring abroad, a clause which promises to refund expenses caused by ‘unauthorised occupation by squatters’. There appears to have been no claims for such expenses.<sup>12</sup>

There have been some instances of squatters moving into local authority or housing association property already allocated to permanent tenants. This is inevitable given that it is normally impossible for a would-be squatter to find out whether a home is empty for a valid reason or not, or how long it is likely to remain empty. Indeed, it is often impossible even to find out who owns an empty property as the Land Registry is not open to the public and inevitably property owners will claim that their empty property is about to be used. Most squatters have moved out willingly when they have discovered that the home they have just moved into is about to be let and squatting organisations have criticised people who failed to do so (p 86). This is now covered by the Criminal Law Act which makes it an offence not to leave council-owned property about to be let when asked to do so.

### Builders or wreckers?

Squatters are frequently accused of causing damage to properties that they occupy but instance

	<i>Percentage</i>
Wiring	35
Plumbing/gas	32
Roofing	15
Replacing windows	38
Replacing floorboards	12
Repairing ceilings	8
Redecoration	55
Removing rubbish	25
Plastering	13
Other	1
None	23

*Many squatters had undertaken more than one of these repairs.*

of this have in fact been very rare. More typically squatters have greatly improved the houses they occupy. For example, the DOE survey found that 71 per cent of squatters claimed to have made some kind of improvement to the property they occupied and other surveys have confirmed this.

Indeed, the very presence of squatters often prevents damage as empty houses are an easy target for lead thieves, totters and vandals. Much of the damage attributed to squatters is usually done before they move in or after they have gone. On several occasions, councils have blamed squatters for damage done by their own workmen. Indeed, any damage squatters may have caused pales into insignificance when compared with the deliberate destruction of habitable houses (‘gutting’) by property owners, especially councils, in trying to prevent squatting (p 52).

When both the cost of deterioration in empty houses (p 227) and the improvements made by squatters are taken into account, it is evident that squatters have added millions of pounds to the value of the houses they have occupied.

### A burden on the ratepayer?

In addition to allegations that squatters damage property, councils often attribute other costs to them such as lost rates or rent revenue. Yet, since most of the squatted houses would have otherwise been empty, they would not have generated any income. Most squatters, particularly those who manage to stay for some time, pay rates and that money more than offsets the loss of rent in those rare cases where squatters have moved into property about to be let.

Many of the real administrative costs attached to squatters moving into council properties are avoidable. The cost of eviction proceedings, for example, could be greatly reduced by flexible policies whereby squatters would be allowed to remain in property until it was required and then offered alternative short-life housing.

If the cost of alternative accommodation in hostels, resettlement units or bed and breakfast hotels is taken into account, it is clear that squatters have actually saved councils large sums of money. The majority of squatters have been people with children and virtually all of these people should have been housed by councils were they not squatting. Since they would

have been put into expensive hostels or bed and breakfast hotels which are subsidised by councils, the amount of money squatting has saved councils is immense.

### Who are the squatters?

*‘The word ‘squatter’ is often used as though it is a single genus. In fact, about the only safe statement in this field is that one cannot generalise about squatters.’ (Report by GLC Acting Head of the Housing Department, 28 May 1974)*

*‘Squatters are not a homogenous group. Some, whether families or single people, have a genuine need for housing . . . Some have political objectives – either to influence central and local government housing policies, or to bring about more far-reaching changes. Others may prefer the life-style of squatting and its cheapness; or they may be existing council tenants trying to force the council into giving them a transfer, or the children of tenants trying to obtain their tenancy. Yet others may be disaffected groups or individuals who welcome the freedom and anonymity of squatting, may be passing through or tourists. The list could go on.’ (DOE Consultation Paper on Squatting, August 1975)*

*‘The squatting population is largely composed of those to whom access to local authority housing is barred, for whom ownership of their own home is impossible or unsuitable, and for whom the private-rented sector is no longer a source of cheap, adequate housing.’ (A survey of squatters, Mike Kinghan, August 1976)*

A great deal of opposition to squatters has been founded on ill-informed generalisations about the sort of people who squat. For example, it is often suggested that they are different from the deserving homeless. It is implied that their need is not genuine and they are typecast as middle-class rebels living off the state.

In fact, squatters no more form an easily identifiable group than owner occupiers or council tenants. A wide range of different kinds of people with a variety of beliefs, ideas and lifestyles have squatted. Generalisations are difficult to make but surveys do provide some of the basic information needed to get an overall picture.

Both the DOE and Haringey surveys found that most people claimed they were squatting because

	<i>Percentage</i>
I wanted to live communally with other people	9
I couldn’t find anywhere at a rent I could afford	59
I wanted to make a protest about houses being left empty	13
I wanted to leave money for other things than rent	3
I wanted the freedom that squatting offers	)
I wanted to be able to spend my time as I like without having to earn money to pay rent	) 8
All others	11

	<i>Percentage</i>
I couldn’t find any rented accommodation which was suitable and cheap enough	96
I wanted to live communally with others	)
I wanted to live cheaply so as not to have to work	) 11
I couldn’t be bothered to look for other accommodation	) 7
I wanted better housing than would otherwise be available to me	) 16
I did it as a protest	) 8
I wanted to get involved in some kind of social or political action	) 3
I will not be in the area long enough to make it worth-while looking for somewhere else	) 3

*In each case, some people gave more than one reason, so totals add up to more than 100.*

they could not find other accommodation at a price they could afford (table 2). Although some people squat because it provides more opportunities for independence and communal living, and others have squatted for political reasons, they form a tiny minority of the squatter population. Surveys show that a high proportion of squatters are unemployed (27 per cent and 23 per cent respectively in the Haringey and DOE surveys). This is a huge proportion even by the standards of a depressed area. These figures can be partly explained by the fact that squatters tend to be young and unskilled. For example, the DOE survey found that ‘three-quarters of the respondents were aged under 30 and only 10 per cent were over 40’. Surveys also show that a disproportionate number of squatters are unskilled or semi-skilled workers with low incomes, little savings and few educational or vocational qualifications. In the DOE survey, 75 per cent of the squatters had finished their formal education before reaching 18. In Haringey, 60 per cent of the respondents had no educational or vocational qualifications and in the DOE survey only 13 per cent of the males working full time earned over £50 weekly in 1975. It is important to note that many of the squatters who are technically counted as unemployed in fact spend their time engaged in long-term projects or learn skills which stand them in good stead when looking for employment in the future.

While most squatters are naturally pleased not to have to pay rent, this is not a major reason why they choose to squat. Many squatters offer to pay rent but this is normally refused by owners as they fear – frequently with justification – that acceptance would turn the squatters into tenants with the right to stay permanently. Other bills like rates and services are normally paid by longer-term squatters although councils sometimes refuse rate payments from squatters, and gas and electricity boards may refuse even to supply squatters (p56).

It is unfair to condemn squatters as the only people who get a free ride when it comes to housing. Many owner-occupiers with mortgages effectively get free housing (or even make a profit out of it) thanks to generous tax concessions and to the rapid rise in house prices.

Some squats, particularly those in central London have been heavily dominated by single people.

For example, there were only 11 children out of 186 squatters in Tolmers Village, Camden in 1975.<sup>13</sup> But most squats have had a high proportion of people with children. In the Haringey and DOE surveys, 51 per cent and 54 per cent respectively of the houses visited were occupied by people with children. Surveys in Lambeth<sup>14</sup> (over 60 per cent) and Cardiff<sup>5</sup> (77 per cent) revealed even higher figures. The disparity can be explained partly in terms of the respective areas covered by the surveys. Central London is traditionally an area where single people form a high proportion of the population whereas Haringey isn’t. But more important is that squats like Tolmers Village with a long history of struggle against the owners tend to attract young single people who are better able to cope with living under the permanent threat of eviction and who want to live in the sort of community that is created in these mass squats. Most of the people covered in the surveys lived outside such communities, isolated from any other squatters and are a more representative sample of the overall squatting population.

One more myth needs to be blown – the notion of squatters as being mainly outsiders or foreigners. The Lambeth survey found ‘two-thirds of the squatters came from within the borough’ and similarly, in Haringey, almost half the respondents (47 per cent) were born in London. Those who have come from outside the area have usually moved in search of jobs, something that has been encouraged by successive governments. Yet, when they leave their home town, they find that councils tend to discriminate against people from outside their area and squatting becomes the only possibility.

The message from the surveys is clear. The standard stereotypes of squatters created by their opponents and perpetuated by the media do not hold water on closer examination. Yet, they live on thanks to the vast amount of publicity they have been given. The truth, as usual, is much less remarkable. Squatters are not articulate scroungers or hippy drop-outs. They are a fairly random cross-section of the population who, in times of high unemployment, expensive rents and widespread housing shortage have squatted out of need. •



# Notes

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- 3 Westbourne Park Road, West London – Philip Wolmuth.
- 4 and 6 Cumberland Road, Portsmouth, 1978 – Nick Wates.
- 7 Great Western Road, West London – Philip Wolmuth.
- 8 Hornsey Rise, North London – 1975.
- 9 West London – *International Times*.
- 10 Burton Street, Central London, 1979 – Ray.
- 11 North London, 1973 – Aden Kelly.
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- 15 St Agnes Place, South London, 1977 – Nick Wates.
- 16 and 17 Prince of Wales Crescent, London, 1975 – Mike Goldwater.
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- 20 Villa Road, South London – Union Place Collective.
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### Who said what, when.

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- 2 Douglas Eden, Vice-chairman, GLC Housing Development Committee, *Daily Telegraph*, 4 April 1975.
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- 7 David Stimpson, Leader of Lambeth Council, letter to *The Guardian*, 20 December 1978.
- 8 Charles Abrams in *Housing in the Modern World*, p 12.
- 9 Under Sheriff of London, Michael Harris, 28 April, 1976, at the eviction of squatters in Hornsey Rise, London.
- 10 Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*, 1903.
- 11 *Anarchy* no 16, 1975.

### Demonstrations

The pastiche on pages 66 and 67 is made up of photographs from Cambridge, Guildhall, 1972 – *Cambridge Evening News*; Canterbury, Longport Court, 1974 and Municipal Buildings, 1975 – *Kentish Gazette*; Cardiff, 1975 – John Sturrock/ Report; London: CACTL march, 1977 – Nick Wates; Centre Point, 1974 – Martin Slavin; High Court, 1975 – Liz Jellinek and Andrew Wiard/Report; Islington Town Hall, 1975 – Lawrence Fechtwanger and John Sturrock/Report; Islington gas showrooms, 1975 – John Rasmussen/Report; Marylebone Magistrates Court, 1974; Olympia, 1975(?) – Aden Kelly; Prince of Wales Crescent, 1973 – *Time Out*; *Sunday People* picket, 1975 – Chris Davies/ Report; Tower Hamlets council cham-ber – Tony Bock/ Time Out; Tower Hamlets, 1973 – Martin Slavin, and 1974–Peter Harrap/Report; Swansea, Skctty, 1975 – *Western Mail*; York, 1975 – *Northern Echo*, Darlington.

### Graffiti

Location and credits for photos on pages 72 and 73

- 1 Shirland Road, West London – Westminster Empty Property Action Group.
- 2 Prince of Wales Crescent, North

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14	15			18		
	19	20	21			

### Squatters brighten up the environment.

Location and credits for photos on pages 78 and 79.

- 1-6 Villa Road, Lambeth – Union Place Collective.
- 7-11 Villa Road, Lambeth – Self Help Housing Resource Library.
- 14 James Street, Covent Garden – Nick Wates.
- 12-13 Tolmers Square, Camden – Lwin.

1	2	3	4	5	
	7				
6	8	10			11
	9				
14		13	12		

### Squatters' posters

The posters on pages 74 and 75 were produced by the Campaign Against the Criminal Trespass Law, Freston Road squatters, Chris Harper, Huntley Street squatters, Islington Single Homeless Campaign, Isling-ton squatters, Lenthall Road Work-shop, Paddington Print Shop, the Poster Collective, Red Dragon Print

Collective, Tolmers Village Action Group, Union Place Collective, Villa Road Street Group, Westminster Empty Property Action Group and others who are unknown.

### 1979-80 squats

Credits f or p 100 and p 101

Medway: South Eastern Newspapers; Harrogate: Ackrill Newspapers Ltd; Old Street: Ray; Dorset: Reg Vincent; Kings Cross: London News Service; Cambridge: London Squatters Union; Chislehurst: Dave Walking; Hackney: Mike Goldwater; 'Nice house' banner: Mike Wigg; Badge: London Squatters Union; 'Whoops' cutting: East London Advertiser, 23 May 1980; 'Its curtains' cutting: Islington Gazette, 7 September 1979; 'We are still winning': Yona Kroch.

### 1 Introducing squatting

- 1 Except where indicated, evidence for the influence of squatting is based on 'off the record' discussions between the author and Department of the Environment officials.
- 2 See for instance the following reports: London Boroughs Association, 2.5 1973; Greater London Council, 28.5. 1974; Lambeth Council, 11.11.1974 and Islington Council, 20.2.1975. These clearly indicate that squatting provided the basis for reforms.
- 3 Department of the Environment Press Release, 28.7.1977.
- 4 Self Help Housing Resource Library figures.
- 5 See Myth and Fact, p 230-233.
- 6 Labour: see for instance *The squatters* by Ron Bailey, p 189; Liberal: see for instance p 139; Conservative: see Evening News, 4.8.1975.

### 2 The squatters

- 1 London quotes are from A *Survey of Squatters* by Mike Kinghan. Those from out of London are taken from unsolicited letters sent to the Advisory Service for Squatters with the exception of those from Hebden Bridge which were taken from a report prepared by squatters there for Calderdale Council. Some of the letters have been abridged.

### 3 Setting the stage

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- 5 See Housing Emergency Office. *Dictators in the Town Hall*, Shelter, 1980.
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- 9 Quoted in *West London Observer*, 2 October 1969.
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- 4 **Squatters here, there and**
- 1 *The Guardian*, 28 June 1972.
- 2 Quoted in *Slough Evening Mail*, 4 April 1973.
- 3 Author's estimate (probably low) based on squats reported in *East Anglian Daily Times*, May 1973.
- 4 *Essex County Standard*, 25 May 1973.
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- 7 Prince of Wales Residents' Association statement to public inquiry, 1973.
- 8 Local newspaper cutting, undated, available at Self Help Housing Resource Library.
- 9 *The Guardian*, 21 September 1975.
- 10 The Bristol figure is an author's estimate based on local press coverage of squatting; the Portsmouth figure is from *Squatters News* No 2; *Brighton Evening Argus*, 29 April 1975; *Surrey Daily Advertiser*, 7 March 1975; The Swansea figure is from *Squatters News Bulletin*, No 2; *Cambridge Evening News*, 25 March 1975; and *Leicester Mercury*, 29 July 1975.

### 5 Mounting opposition

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- 2 Department of the Environment (DOE), *Consultation Paper on Squatting*, August 1975.
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- 4 Report by Acting Head of Housing, GLC, 28 May 1974.
- 5 As previous reference.
- 6 *Hansard*, 24 November 1975.
- 7 DOE, *Consultation Paper on Squatting* (as reference 2 above).
- 8 The case was heard in the High Court at Leeds on 17 June 1975.
- 9 Memo from Camden Libraries Department to all branch libraries, September 1973.
- 10 Report by Co-ordinator of Housing on Squatters, 20 February 1975.
- 11 Not to be confused with the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Hospital, Euston Road, also the scene of an occupation.
- 12 *Peace News*, 21 September 1973.
- 13 As per reference 4 above. Examples quoted were Mercers Estate (Tower Hamlets), Poynings Road (Islington) and Walerton Road (Westminster).
- 14 *Kentish Times*, 29 August 1974.
- 15 Article by George Tremlett published as part of a collection of papers in *Squatting Seminar*, School for Advanced Urban Studies, Bristol University, 14 April 1974.
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- 18 6 August 1975.
- 19 14 July 1975.
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- 21 Brian Winterbotham, 'The change in the presentation of squatting, 1969-75', M Phil thesis, Exeter University, 1976.
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- 23 16 July 1975.
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- 28 *Wandsworth Borough News*, February 1975.
- 29 27 September 1976.
- 30 *Evening Courier*, 19 March 1976.
- 31 14 May 1976; see also *Peace News*, 21 May 1076.
- 32 Director of Housing, 'Squatting in the Council's Dwellings', 20 January 1976.
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- 5 As reference 2 above.
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- 7 *Sunday Times*, 5 December 1976.
- 8 Christian Wolmar, Homes or Jails, Release Publications, 1976.
- 9 *Squatters News* No 10.
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- 14 *Housing Review*, August 1974.
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**Myth and fact**

- In Australia, squatters are large scale farmers who are tenants of the crown. Typically wealthy and influential, they have been nicknamed the squattocracy.
- Sources for the graph: 1969 and 1971, author’s estimate; 1973 and 1974, Family Squatting Advisory Service estimate; 1975, Advisory Service for Squatters estimate; 1977-1980, Self Help Housing Resource Library estimate. As explained in the text, the figures are only estimates but they have not been seriously challenged and have been widely accepted by the media.
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**Late credits**

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# Bibliography

Only material specifically relating to squatting is listed in this bibliography and no attempt has been made to cover wider aspects of housing, empty property, direct action etc. The bibliography has been compiled by the Self Help Housing Resource Library whose address can be found in the section on information centres. The Library holds most of the material listed here and has a large collection of leaflets, newssheets and other material produced by squatters. Not all material has been fully referenced because of the failure of publishers to provide detailed information. For reference material on squatting before 1968 see the notes to chapters 8 and 9 (p 235).

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AHAS, 5 Dryden Street, London WC2E 9NW (Community initiatives)
London Squatters Union, 48 King William IV Street, London WC2.

Self Help Housing Resource Library, Polytechnic of North London, 2-16 Eden Grove, London N7 8DB (tcl: 01 607 2789 x 2065).
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**Ann Pettitt**, born 1947, tried unsuccessfully to find squatting when a student in Bristol. But squatting found her when she moved to live in the East End of London round the corner from Arbour Square squat. Lived in London (1969-1977) and worked as a teacher and solicitor’s clerk. Now a semi self-sufficient housewife living on an intensively cultivated ‘tinyholding’ in Wales where she feeds, kills and eats lots of animals. Is involved in the local anti-nuclear and disarmament campaign.

Tom Osborn in 1974

**Tom Osborn**, born 1931, has owned a house on a mortgage and presented a five hour objection at a compulsory purchase inquiry. In the course of a varied middle class life, has been a doctor, psychiatrist, stage director, translator, group leader, polytechnic lecturer and teacher of massage. Squatted in St Agnes Place, Lambeth from 1976 to 1978.

Steve Platt in 1974

**Steve Platt**, born 1954, has lived in squats and licensed property since moving to London in 1973. Carried out a research project on squatting in Haringey (1976). Worked for the Self Help Housing Resources Library for several years and is now a co-ordinator of Islington Community Housing, a short-life housing group.

Jill Simpson in 1974

**Jill Simpson**, born 1949, came to Villa Road, Brixton, in December 1974 through a desire to live in a communal house and because she felt that what was happening on housing issues in Lambeth was important. Currently works for a solicitor’s firm in Brixton as a clerk.

Piers Corbyn in 1974

**Colin Ward**, born 1924, is the author of *Anarchy in Action*, *Tenants Take Over* (Architectural Press), *Housing: An Anarchist Approach*, (Freedom Press) and *The Child in the City* (Architectural Press). Worked for the Town and Country Planning Association until recently.

Andrew Friend in 1974

**Nick Wates**, born 1951, squatted in Tolmers Square, Camden between 1973 and 1979. Wrote *The Battle for Tolmers Square* (Routledge & Kegan Paul) and was assistant news editor of *Architects’ Journal* for two years. Now working as a freelance journalist.

David Watkinson in 1974

**David Watkinson**, born 1947, is a barrister who has represented and advised squatters on numerous occasions during the past six years both inside and outside his practice. Member of the Campaign Against A Criminal Trespass Law and a founder member of the first barrister’s collective in Britain. Co-author of *Squatting, Trespass and Civil liberties*, a pamphlet published by the National Council for Civil Liberties and is a contributor to *Civil Rights Guide* (NCCL).

Heathcote Williams in 1974

**Heathcote Williams**, born 1941, is a playwright and his plays include *AC/DC*, *The Immortalist*, *Hancock’s Half Hour*, and *The Speakers*. Squatted in Notting Hill for several years during which time he founded the Ruff Tuff Creem Puff Estate Agency which provided free accommodation for the homeless.

Christian Wolmar in 1974

**Christian Wolmar**, born 1949, has been a journalist for most of his working life except for a three year period as a housing adviser with Release. Squatted in Villa Road, Brixton for four years. Was a member of the Advisory Service collective for several years and helped to produce the two most recent editions of the Squatters Handbook. Co-authored *Trouble with the Law, the Release Bust Book* (Pluto Press) and currently works for *Roof*, Shelter’s housing magazine.

Andy Milburn in 1974

**Tristan Wood**, born 1950, trained and worked as a journalist in the West Country contributing to several ‘underground’ papers. Moved to London in 1974, squatted in Seymour Buildings in January 1975 where he still lives. Former secretary of the Seymour Buildings Residents’ Group and of Seymour Housing Co-operative. For the past four years has worked for housing associations and is also a teacher of re-evaluation counselling.