

One of the houses being evicted.

Selfless sufficiency comes to Bloomsbury

John, a former art teacher, is 50. His wife Vera is 43. They are two of London's 20,000 squatters.

For the past eight months they have lived in a Georgian terrace house in north Bloomsbury. It was uninhabitable by normal standards when they arrived. They are converting it into a home for themselves and a community house for the people living around.

They are a gentle, hard-working pair, and could easily earn enough to own or rent a house if they wanted to. Why squat?

He explains: "It was the only way we could get our hands on premises large enough to do what we want: to try alternative life-styles which may be of use to society in finding a way out of its anxiety and alienation. This house was just lying empty.

"To get a house like this any other way we would need to pay

an enormous rent, or have a lot of money, or raise funds. Money is poison. It diverts you from the real thing. As soon as you come to believe that you can do things only with money you are lost. In the end you will become fit for nothing but rattling the begging bowl."

They live on about £10 a week, for food, clothing, tobacco, and electricity. They earn it by doing odd jobs: repair, maintenance, decoration.

When they moved in in May the basement was open to the sky through holes in the roof, ceilings, and floors. The walls were rotten, the windows broken, plumbing and wiring defunct, and basins and lavatories smashed. Rubble and rubbish filled the rooms, and it was a haunt of alcoholics. There were piles of excrement everywhere.

They mended the roof to keep out the rain, mended the

floors and ceilings, scrubbed everywhere with disinfectant, and redecorated inside and out.

They have electricity but no water. The water had been disconnected by digging up the road and severing the pipe. It would have cost £80 for the water authority to re-connect. "It was not worth it", John says. "The thing is temporary. We may have to go tomorrow." Friendly neighbours supply water.

They live on the first floor in one large room with two cats, cushions on the floor, eastern pictures on the walls. The rest of the house is public, open to people living around.

In the basement they have made a bakery and a woodstore. They bake daily in a second-hand oven bought for £20 from flour ground daily with a hand-grinder that cost the same. They also make various nut butters.

Says John: "This is the village bakery.

"People need bread and need to relate to the person who bakes it. Shop bread is alienating. There is no contact between the farmer, miller, baker, supermarket and customer. People want to see the bread being made through the window, smell it as they walk down the street, talk to the baker."

In the woodstore is timber collected from skips and dumps; cleaned, de-nailed and graded. People who collect it give it; people who want it take it; no money passes. It is the same with the workshop on the ground floor, where a large collection of tools is used by John and Vera and by anyone else who wants to do work or borrow them.

On the ground floor they run a little shop where the bread and nut butter is sold together with other things bought in bulk and sold at cost: wheat, oats, beans, dried fruit, honey. Their prices are about two thirds of shop prices.

The second floor they are converting into another workshop where they will make hand-loomed for sale. On the top floor is a small press where posters and leaflets are made for the village. The front door is open all day and people are constantly in and out. It says "community house" above the door. "It is coming together", says John.

John and Vera could be evicted at any time along with many around so that their house can be "rehabilitated" at a cost of thousands as part of a "sensitive" redevelopment by Camden Council costing millions. It will have a community centre. "I expect it will have squash courts and billiard tables and a room for the vicar", says John. "It will be very different from ours."

Michael Bailly



Fred Shepherd

IMPROVEMENTS: Many of the houses have been improved beyond recognition by squatters, entirely with their own labour and money. The house shown in these photographs is listed as a Grade 2 historic building. (photographs available)

BEFORE



AFTER



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