

# NEWSOCIETY

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Crucifixion plaque, circa 900AD/National Museum, Dublin

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# The Tolmers Village squatters

Nick Wates

**Squatters have been called 'the mob who never pay rent.'**  
**This personal account shows the energy and idealism of one group of them.**

"Squatting, 1975, is highly organised, nationwide, spreading rapidly—and DANGEROUS . . . it is not only a social problem, but a sinister political threat." This pronouncement from the *Sunday People* (8 June) launched the results of a 15 man, six week investigation into the "mob who never pay rent" by the *Mirror* group. Under headings like "Smashed by the grabbers: how the new squatters ruin hopes of the real needy," the articles made a hysterical and bigoted attack on squatters who were all identified as morally corrupt individuals, largely responsible for Britain's housing problems.

This has been followed more recently by a number of articles and letters in *The Times* and other newspapers which have tended to dwell on the negative aspects of squatting. While not disputing that squatting can be destructive in certain instances, I believe the positive aspects of squatting far outweigh the negative and it will be disastrous if new legislation crushes this dynamic phenomena. This article is about one area in central London where squatters have had great impact.

What is now known as Tolmers Village (in the

Euston area, London) has always been shabby. In 1871 there were 5,200 people crammed into a few streets of Georgian and Victorian terraces. By 1965, creeping commercialism and higher housing standards had reduced these figures to around 1,500: a diverse inner city community with an old established working class, a strong immigrant sector, and scattered students and professionals, living surrounded by small industries, shops and restaurants.

Then planning blight and property speculation ravaged the area. By 1973, 33 per cent of the habitable rooms were empty, 11 per cent (one acre) of the land was vacant, businesses had closed down and the population had dwindled to a mere 650. Those people that could, moved away, while those that couldn't—the poor and elderly—became increasingly disillusioned and bitter. For them decay and neglect had become part of life.

Tolmers was first discovered as squattable territory by three architectural students from University College in February 1973. They took over a dilapidated house owned by Camden council which had been empty for six years. Seven months later, five

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graduates (including myself) occupied a five-storey house owned by the major land owner—Joe Levy's property company Stock Conversion and Investment Trust which had been buying up property in the hopes of carrying out a major development. Over the next 18 months, 49 houses were occupied involving over 180 people. The invasion was gradual partly because the Tolmers Village Association (the local community association) thought it better policy from the point of view of blending with the existing community, and partly because of the derelict condition of the houses. Most of the houses had been left empty for several years; up to eight in some cases. Typically, plumbing, and wiring had been ripped out by thieves, roofs leaked, plaster was crumbling, windows were broken and basins and lavatories smashed.

The first weeks of occupation were hard. Water had to be carried from nearby taps in buckets, lighting was provided by paraffin and candles, and heating by open fires. Euston station superloos, the university, or friendly neighbours, were used for lavatories and baths until a community bathroom was set up in one of the houses.

Some households never progressed past this urban camping arrangement either by choice or laziness, while others painstakingly built their own facilities. Gas, water, and electricity supplies were obtained if one had the money for deposits and the know-how to wire up internally. Roofs were repaired, walls plastered and painted, windows mended.

Contrary to popular press and revolutionary mythology, squatters are not a homogeneous class, but a diverse range of people with differing social status, age, wealth and attitudes. A traditional breakdown into occupation gives some idea of this range. Of the 186 squatters in Tolmers Village in June 1975, there were 40 students, 16 white-collar workers, 16 workers in service industries, 13 artists and musicians, twelve manual labourers, twelve skilled labourers, eleven children, ten professionals, eight teachers, eight "housewives," four bakers, three resting travellers, two pensioners, 25 registered unemployed, including a number of people in unclassifiable community activities, and six unknown.

Many of the early squatting households came from the upper middle classes: architectural graduates, postgraduate medical students, trainee solicitors, teachers and social workers. Two houses were taken by Oxford graduates who soon had hot water, a telephone and potted plants. For many of these people, like myself, squatting in Tolmers was primarily of political importance; a way of taking a personal stand against property speculation. But it was also the only way of finding a place to live in central London. The choice was a poky flat in the suburbs with daily commuting, or a spacious five-storey house within walking distance of work.

For other people the freedom of the building space itself was of greater significance. An extensive rambling commercial building was transformed into a studio/workshop for artists from "Artists for Democracy" and Israeli art students, unable to return to their own country without being drafted, made a jewellery workshop and painting studio.

All the squatters coming to Tolmers Village were in some way searching for an alternative form of society. This might mean being active in left-wing political groups or merely being able to live communally with a group of friends unrestricted by the nuclear family, the bedsit or cellular council flat. Other people tried to create a completely alternative form of community to stand against the general alienation of London; almost a return to a rural

peasant economy, where craftsmanship and barter replace specialisation and money. Squatting was the only way that enough space could be obtained to experiment with alternative life-styles.

John and Vera, a middle-aged couple, completely renovated a listed Georgian house, thought to be unsquattable, and called it "community house." They built a workshop in one room which anyone can use, and a wholefood shop in another selling muesli, nutbutter, honey, grains and dried fruits. In the basement they started a bakery ("the village bakery") which produces 60 loaves a day of hand-ground, wholemeal flour, as well as small pies and cakes. They also recycle timber, nails and other building materials. The whole enterprise is non-profitmaking and everyone is encouraged to be involved, to break down alienation between producers and consumers. John says: "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."

Another group of "communards," in perhaps the most derelict houses, knocked down all the walls between their backyards and created a garden growing flowers and vegetables. They are also building a methane digester and wind generator. They reject the boredom of modern work coupled with the consumer society and prefer to live on a few pounds per week that they guiltlessly glean from social security. Their goal is for them all to move to a smallholding in the country, and be self-sufficient. Meanwhile they are trying to bring rural life back into the city. Another group operates a vegetable cooperative. Prices are two thirds of shop prices, due to replacing specialised labour by collective effort, and, as the local greengrocer ruefully points out, by evading rates and taxes.



Tolmers Square and squatters/group photograph by Philip Thompson

At the other extreme, another group of "we don't think, we just do things" militants set up a leftwing bookshop called Gorilla. They also established "Gorilla Welfare," whose objective was to open up empty buildings for people "incapable of squatting without assistance." Among other places, they opened up the Crown Commissioners, property, Cornwall Terrace in Regents Park and much of Albany Street. Other immigrants installed themselves independently; like one middle-aged Italian restaurant worker, a Mr Monachino and his family, who were squatting for months without anyone realising they were squatters. "We have friends upstairs who gave us a key. What can we do? We have no place to go. We want to pay rent but they won't take it."

Although most squatters were in their twenties, many were older. Harry, for instance, left the army in 1950 and started wheeling a barrow round the streets buying and selling odds and ends. He rented a room in Camden Town until the landlord wanted it for a bathroom. He then dosed in an old building until it was boarded up when he found an old van. Finally, bronchitic, and at the age of 62, he was befriended by some young people in Tolmers who gave him a room in their squat. Then there was Pam in her fifties, suffering from a debilitating spine disease. She moved into a communal house with young people and became an integral part of the house and the village. A far cry from the separation of an old people's home.

Most squatters came because they knew someone. But some just turned up on the doorstep with only a few belongings to their name; the so-called "real" homeless. There was Peg-leg-Pete, a petty criminal who lost a leg escaping from prison, and had become an alcoholic. Or Pete and Cricket, two young junkies who were desperate to get away from the hostel circuit and establish a home of their own. And Sarah who turned up one evening with a handbag and a baby, having just split up with her husband. Also there were numerous young unemployed people from the provinces looking for work. Squatting was the only way for them to escape from the vicious circle of "no home without money, no money without a home." Tolmers Village provided them with a sympathetic supportive environment in which to overcome their individual problems in their own way, and it became a haven for all kinds of social misfits. Finally, of course, the "professional drop-out squad," discovered the area.

The Tolmers Village Association has supported and encouraged squatting, arguing that empty properties are a hazard to the community as they attract vandalism, damp, and rats. They also add to the general decline of the community. Most long-term residents, even if reticent initially, slowly came round to accepting this view. Some became positively enthusiastic. As Dorothy Norden, an elderly lady, commenting in the film, *Tolmers: beginning or end?* on two girls who had just squatted a flat below them, "They're clean, intelligent, cheerful, friendly—and they've done more for this property than has been done in my 23 years of living here."

Squatters, working with the association, were largely responsible for several community projects; the creation of a garden on squatted wasteland and a community centre in an old bank; the organisation of street carnivals and jumble sales. They have also helped ageing tenants with minor repairs.

But it has not all been rosy. There are still a few tenants who have a paranoid hatred of squatters; old people afraid to leave their flats empty for fear they will be occupied; letter writers to newspapers

and councillors who complain about late night parties, and noisy motorbikes; and people who cannot come to terms with bare feet and beads.

The key to squatter community antagonism is not the taking of empty houses, but a clash of values and attitudes. "We don't mind if you take over all the empty houses in London so long as you don't disturb us," is a common plea. There is also the tendency for squatters to become scapegoats. Squatters have been known to steal, to break into occupied houses and to create disturbances like any other sector of society, and when anything happens it is only too easy to blame squatters collectively.

Only a small proportion of the squatters came to Tolmers specifically because of the political battles being waged over the development of the land. But the community was shaped under conflict. Everyone could have been thrown out with only a few weeks' warning. This threat in itself was enough to provide a sense of urgency and togetherness. The threat finally materialised one day in March this year when Stock Conversion took out summonses on all the occupants of their houses—a total of 81 people in 26 houses. The same evening, a meeting of all the squatters was held, the Tolmers Village Squatters Action Group was formed, and a campaign launched against what appeared to be completely senseless evictions. Even Camden council were surprised and gave the squatters their support.

The campaign aptly reflected the nature of the community. Artists produced posters and banners, anarchists wrote graffiti on the walls and built barricades, social democrats sent press statements, wrote letters to eminent people and tried to galvanise community support with a petition. The left tried vainly to involve the trade union movement and initiate an all-out attack on property speculation and finance capital. But in the end of course squatters cannot win in court, they can only delay the inevitable court orders. So energy was turned to physical defence tactics. An alarm system was constructed which could get well over 150 people on the street within minutes. Strategic barricades were built and a dawn patrol instituted so as to obtain advance warning of bailiffs.

The announcement this June that Stock Conversion had agreed to sell their six acres of land in the area to Camden Council, meant that these defences were never tested.

Without further research one can only speculate whether the efforts of the squatters played any part in the terms of the latest deal. The general collapse in the property market, a determined Labour Council, and an impending Community Land Bill are likely to have been the major influencing factors. But there can be little doubt that without constant pressure from the Tolmers Village Association, the squatters and the Labour movement in general, the Tolmers saga would have had a different ending.

Squatters in Tolmers took over a piece of urban fabric which had been taken out of the market. By doing so they halted the total collapse of a community, they housed themselves and effectively exposed the ineffectiveness of our present planning system. They have raised doubts about the kind of accommodation and tenancy arrangements which are provided by councils. Figures released by Camden's finance department in June show that council rents no longer even cover the repair, maintenance, supervision and management of the property. This suggests that squatters, who do their own maintenance, supervision and management, are a better financial proposition for Camden than rent-paying tenants. So much for being parasites.