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● Nick Wates in Tolmers Square.

PTO

THEY closed the Lord Palmerston pub, at the corner of Hampstead Road, on Sunday night.

Nick Wates and dozens of others for whom Tolmers Square had once been a cause and an obsession attended the last rites for what had once been a bright spot in a bustling inner London community.

But it was as if they were just passers-by. "It would have been different if they had tried this a year ago," said Mr Wates. "But people just stood around saying 'If only we had heard about this earlier...'"

A year ago the Tolmers Village Association would have been active, protesting against this further atrophy of a decaying but fighting area; the "they" would have been clearly identified as the stereotyped evils of property developer Mr Joe Levy and his company, Stock Conversion and Investment Trust.

But to most of the erstwhile campaigners, the battle for Tolmers Square has been won. Camden Council is buying up the houses, ensuring that the area is not ravaged by property development. Camden agreed the pub had to go.

So the closure served only as a useful pointer for Mr Wates' book **THE BATTLE FOR TOLMERS SQUARE** (Routledge and Kegan Paul, £2.95), published last Friday.

For the newcomer and the forgetful, Tolmers Square is the catch-name for 12 acres bounded by Hampstead Road, Euston Square and Euston Station which was the battleground between 1971 and 1974 for a public campaign to prevent the commercial redevelopment of the area.

Camden Council originally intended to aid Stock Conversion in building a lucrative office complex, in return for which the company would sell the remainder of the site to the council at a cut price for housing. In 1974 Camden decided to buy out Mr Levy and finance the housing scheme with the aid of profits from its own office development.

The book's 232 pages not only chronicle that public debate, but also reveal the earlier history. While it was common rumour that Mr Levy had been shrewdly assembling piece by piece his ownership of this key commercial site since 1962, Mr Wates reveals for the first time that Camden was also in on the negotiations from its creation in 1965.

With the permission of Councillor Roy Shaw, Labour leader of the council, he has been able to quote from council files, to show how a newly-created borough, strait-jacketed by a Government which was uncertain

'They' and the square deal

whether it wanted to pay the price of preserving homes on expensive central London land, became ever deeper enmeshed in property speculation.

Mr Wates, 25, became involved in the debate by accident, when as a member of a group doing their final year studies for planning degrees, they chose Tolmers Square as a suitable subject for a five-week project. He returned to squat in one of the many empty houses the team discovered in 1973, helped establish the Tolmers Village Association and became its first full-time coordinator, with the help of a Rowntree grant.

But now he is living with friends in Delancey Street, Camden Town, the TVA is dormant and the campaign banners are furled — even though Mr Wates heads his last section prophetically *The Struggle Continues*.

Stopping the Levy Deal — as it became known — was crystallised by a scheme devised by property journalists Christopher Booker and Bennie Gray, showing that Camden could raise the money commercially to buy up the land and subsidise the housing from the office development. The scheme was rejected by the council, but it is still the philosophy behind Camden's present strategy.

Mr Wates concludes of this episode: "The failure of the Labour group (of Camden) was not in misjudging the technicalities of the case, which could be argued either way, but in failing to recognise that the issue could be used by Camden as part of a political campaign against property speculation."

Maybe so, but Mr Wates admits in the book that the Booker and Gray scheme was no radical banner raiser. "It was a brilliant liberal reformist solution, enabling social gains to be made without requiring any changes in the rules of the game." Booker and Gray's subsequent fulminations against the cost of council housing would have made them embarrassing fellow travellers in any campaign for reform.

The other radical course of action, and that adopted by Camden, was convincingly spelt out by Peter Best, then deputy council leader: "... The right way to deal with the property developers is a progressive government and I don't for one moment imagine the next Labour government will be in that category... but a really progressive go-ahead Labour government might take some action to end the total nonsense of private ownership of land."

Mr Wates opted for reformism in his own work at Tolmers Square. He joined the local Labour Party. It gave him access to council members and a platform for resolutions to go to the council's Labour group and the party's constituency management committee.

But above all it provided him with information. "There is so little communication between people and the council," he said. "I could go to a meeting and say do you know, the council at its last meeting had a long discussion about Tolmers Square and passed three resolutions."

"If there is one thing that comes out of Tolmers Square it is that you have to fight at all levels. It is no good leaving it to MPs or councillors. Community associations on their own are impotent, squatters are impotent and Booker and Gray couldn't achieve much. Together these groups can achieve social change."

On the surface, that message seems triumphant at Tolmers Square. New council homes are going up, many old ones are scheduled for rehabilitation and tenants are secure in the knowledge they can stay in the area.

But the old dilemmas posed by profit remain. To finance the housing Camden needs 350,000 square feet of offices — more than Stock Conversion even publicly laid claim to. The threat of demolishing the actual square — the area's architectural and historic heart — is as real under Camden's rule as ever.

Mr Wates fairly describes these dilemmas. "There are several Labour councillors who take the line that they should build what the planners ideally want and write the losses off on the rates. Others say that if the offices market picks up, the office development might not have to be so large to be profitable," he said.

Yet others might say, with the benefit of hindsight, that going ahead with the Levy deal would have left Camden with much of the housing built or rehabilitated and Mr Levy with a financial headache delivered by the collapse of the much-maligned property market.

Phillip Sommerich