

29 Oct 1976
Estates Times

Big, baddie developers and all that

Once upon a time there was a big, bad property developer who went round knocking down houses, putting up offices and making huge profits.

But along came some poor, downtrodden tenants who formed an association to fight the baddies.

And won.

This is **The Battle for Tolmers Square** (Published by Routledge and Kegan Paul, £2.95) as seen by Nick Wates. It tends to portray the fight in these black-and-white terms, but is still worth reading.

Tolmers Square is an area of about two acres along the north side of London's Euston Road, just east of the Euston Tower.

Various described as "unsightly tat" by a local councillor: "a sordid jumble of terraced houses and industry" by the **Evening Standard**; and a "charming little enclave of porticoed crescents by **Private Eye**, it is basically a mixture of light industrial property and cheap rented housing.

The story begins in 1957 when the Tolmers Square Tenants' Association is formed in response to the Rent Act of that year.

In August 1959 the TSTA had its first taste of the struggle to come when a property developer applied for planning permission to build a 24-storey, 178,000 sq ft office block on the south side of the Square.

The tenants totally opposed the scheme since it would mean many families losing their homes.

And, after extensive lobbying, they won the fight.

Stock Conversion's founder, Joe Levy, comes into the story in 1960 when the association discovered that the development company intended building the 500,000 sq ft office block with showrooms, shops and luxury flats, Euston Centre, next to the square.

The tenants said the centre would displace people from the area and destroy its character.

But they lost this battle and the centre was built.

At the same time, Mr Levy's company was buying up land in Tolmers Square itself with the aim of developing offices and some industrial buildings.

Stock Conversion bought properties, demolished what they could and allowed the remainder to decay. By the 1970s, the whole area had come down with a case of planning blight, but none of the tenants knew why. Something was obviously afoot, but Stock Conversion's scheme remained a secret.

News of talks between Stock Conversion and Camden council leaked out in 1972.

The scheme under this deal consisted of a development of 250,000 sq ft



Tolmers Square

gross of office space and 120,000 sq ft for mixed commercial use.

About 8.5 acres would be

transferred for about £200,000 per acre to the council to build about 600 dwellings.

By 1973 even though the "Levy Deal" was in the final stages of agreement, the tenants launched a major assault. They wanted the area to be used for housing redevelopment, and said so.

Journalists Bennie Gray and Christopher Booker became the heroes of the hour at this point.

They formed a non-profit making company called Claudius, advised by surveyors Richard Ellis, and proposed that their company buy the land in the square and offer 8.5 acres for a nominal sum to the council who could use it for housing development.

All the surplus from the development would be directed towards providing social services, including low-rent housing.

But the Claudius offer was rejected because the council thought it might fall through.

So then the "Stop the Levy Deal campaign" took off. Camden Council, and in particular their planning and resources committee, became the butt of attacks from tenants, the Press and politicians.

Camden decided to think again.

After talks between Stock Conversion and Camden and pressure from the tenants, victory finally appeared to be in sight in June, 1973.

Camden council bought Stock Conversion's property interests in the area and

decided to develop themselves.

This is where one expects the book to end. But it doesn't. The story has a final ironic twist.

Camden's entry as developers did not produce the enlightened thinking expected. It may well cause as many problems as the private developer since the council proposed an office content in the scheme of 300,000 sq ft.

This is 50,000 sq ft more than was contemplated under the Levy Deal. The tenants' suggestion for housing has been cut and under the plan the whole of Tolmers Square will be demolished. So the battle goes on.

The book is packed with photographs and tables which help to give a flavour of the area. The research has been extensive.

But it has one obvious shortcoming. Although many newspapers and magazines are quoted, ranging from the **Daily Worker** to the **Daily Telegraph**, one most informative source — Stock Conversion themselves — seems to have been overlooked, therefore it has to be a one-sided story.

Publishers Routledge and Kegan Paul, too, have let the side down by printing some of the most badly reproduced photographs I have seen. At £2.95 a copy, they should be able to do better.