



# Circular fight for Tolmer's Square

THIS book tells of the incidents, spanning some two decades, making up the battle for the development of a Central London site in the interests of working-class people.

It covers the moves of Jo Levy and his property company "Stock Conversion" to develop the site, the counter-moves of Christopher Booker and Benny Grey to act, in effect, as the council's agents, and the not infrequent changes of mind of Camden Council to the eventual situation of Camden buying out "Stock Conversion" and preparing plans with an even higher office content.

## Squat

Nick Wates initially came to the area as a student carrying out a planning study, moved to squat in Tolmer's Village and then became the first full-time co-ordinator of the Tolmer's Village Association. The book demonstrates the value of insights gained from a close personal involvement in the situation, rather than any bias on the author's part.

The undertaking is an ambitious one, in that an attempt is made to tell the story of Tolmer's Square in detail whilst at the same time seeking to analyse all the factors bearing on that situation. At times this gives rise to stylistic difficulties, but on the whole the task is performed well, although the analyses of both the dynamics of community action and the complex web of relationships surrounding local councillors could have been fuller.

In his introduction Wates argues that: "Britain's cities are in chaos. While thousands of houses stand empty there are not enough homes for people to live in. While areas of land lay derelict, many thousands of building workers are unemployed."

## Blatant

Thus the context is set as that of a society manifesting the most blatant of contradictions, and nowhere more so than in our city centres.

Wates further contends that, despite a laudible series of community and political initiatives: "The basic causes remain untouched: the shaping of our cities continues to be determined by private profit rather than public use."

The book is essentially concerned to demonstrate that thesis via the battle for Tolmer's Square.

The analysis of the workings of a

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speculative property market is detailed and clear. The author does not fall into the trap of banding Jo Levy and "Stock Conversion" as big bad men.

He asserts that in their desire to develop Tolmer's Square with the prime motivation of maximising their profits, they were neither worse nor better than, but simply typical of property developers. For such people maximisation of profit is the ground rule, and one implicitly condoned by our society.

Whatever the motivation however the cost in human misery remains, and is graphically spelt out. The analysis of the Labour Government's demonstrable incompetence to deal with problems of office development in the 1960s is good, as is that of the insufficiencies of the Community Land Act.

## Ignorance

It is argued, quite correctly, that the influence brought to bear by local Labour Party branches was crucial. In describing why however, the analysis seems somewhat askew and betrays some ignorance of the details of how local parties are structured and exactly where the lines of accountability run. Also, although the description of the relationship is essentially a correct one, it merited a more detailed analysis in the context.

In addition it is probably true to say that a more wide-ranging analysis of the scope and limits of community action was called for. This could only have been achieved effectively by taking into account the experience of, and drawing comparisons with, other groups outside Tolmer's Square — a task not attempted.

Nevertheless, the book is good. It tells a story of great importance, precisely because in its essentials it could be repeated for scores of other inner city areas over the post-war period. It is splendid in its constant reiteration of the vital statistics of property speculation.

This book constitutes an essential piece of reading for all those trying to change the features of incredible waste and gross inhumanity characterising so many of our inner-city areas.