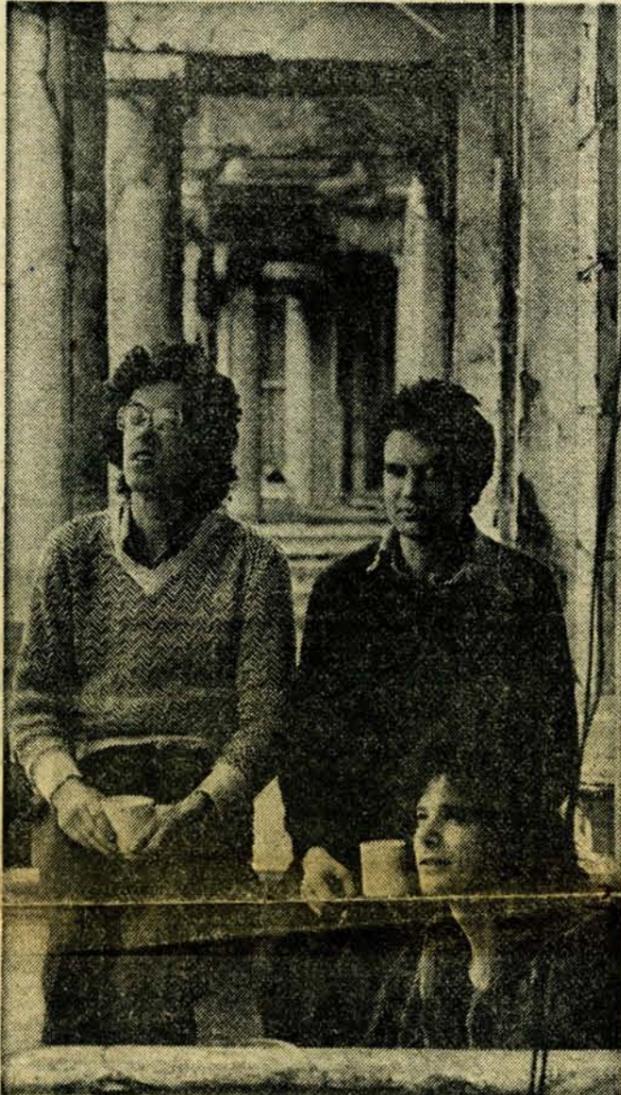


# When a person is left with no other choice SQUATTERS - THEY ARE NOT ALL IDLE LAYABOUTS...

'Chronicle' reporter TONY PATERSON examines one of Camden's most controversial subjects



SQUATTERS in harmony . . . These three young men are pictured outside their squat in Tolmers Square, Camden. Outside is tatty but inside they have maintained a good standard.

**WHEN over 200 homeless people recently moved into a block of empty flats in Camden the authorities called the take over "appalling"—and said that the law should be changed to stop squatting "once and for all."**

**BUT to the people now living there, the situation is far from appalling for unlike the 70,000-odd homeless people currently on the streets of London, they have found somewhere to live.**

Furthermore, a change in the law regarding squatting, as one previously homeless mother said "would mean going back to the routine of sleeping on other people's floors or paying about £18 a week for a shared room in a flat."

The homeless who opt for squatting invariably fall into the one category not catered for on the current London housing market. That is by being healthy, single or divorced; poor, or a homeless person. These seem to pass through the housing net provided by the public and private sectors.

Camden alone has 9,000 people on its housing list, all fretting for council accommodation. The majority of these are families or old people, who, by virtue of the council's points system, are treated as priority cases for housing.

#### BOTTOM OF THE LIST

A single homeless person does not qualify for points and is likely to be placed at the bottom of a housing waiting list when applying for council accommodation.

As a result the alternatives open to the single homeless requiring immediate housing are reduced to either raising a mortgage on a flat — an option beyond the means of people earning less than £5,000 a year — or renting accommodation.

But this final option is rapidly disappearing as a source of cheap living — privately owned rented accommodation has been on the decline since the late sixties.

The 1974 Rent Act introduced to provide security of tenure for those living in private furnished accommodation has been seen as a disincentive to landlords wishing to rent off their properties.

Some landlords even claim that they do not want to rent their flats because of fears that they will not be able to evict their tenants when they want to.

Even so, rents for bedsitters and flats have increased as the availability of rented accommodation has diminished. The result is that people who manage to find a furnished flat are often forced to pay alarmingly high rents for a room which they must share with one or even two other people.

#### NOT AFFORD PROPER HOME

One squatter now living in Camden claims that before he started squatting he had lived in rented flats paying

up to £15 a week for a shared room.

"In my last flat in Earls Court I was paying about £16 a week, but when the landlord decided to put the rent up to £18, I was left with no other choice but to leave. I take home about £37 a week and I could not afford a 'proper home'," he said.

Others like Frank, a 48-year-old Hungarian born electrician, tell similar stories about why they have been driven to squatting:

He said: "I was living in a council house in Willesden until my marriage broke up. I wanted to leave and when I did the council said they could not re-house me as I already had a home to go to. So I moved to my brother's place but that meant sharing one small room. Soon that became unbearable . . . so I took to squatting after trying for months to find somewhere to rent."

"I am very very happy to have found somewhere to live at last," he said.

To date the squatting movement has gained a bad reputation. Sensationalised newspaper articles have dubbed squatters "the won't pay rent brigade," and as "scroungers," "anarchists" and "property thieves."

But, according to Harry Podewski, of the Advisory Service for Squatters, which deals with over 100 inquiries a week from homeless people, "the anti-squatting propaganda is absolute rubbish."

#### JUST NO OTHER ALTERNATIVE

"Nearly all the people who come to ASS are simply looking for a place to live. Some are low paid workers who cannot afford high rents, others are students looking for cheap accommodation or divorced single parents again faced with the same problem."

"To say that all squatters are scroungers and rent dodgers is just not true. Many of them do quite respectable jobs; teachers and social workers as well as skilled tradesmen take to squatting because they cannot find any suitable alternative," he said.

A survey on squatters conducted in Haringey last year showed that 96 per cent of the people interviewed were squatting because they could not find cheap rented accommodation.

In Camden, where the population of young single people is on the increase, vice-chairman of housing, John Thane, claims that the initially young single homeless do manage to find

ed accommodation in the borough.

"It is not this type of person that we are really concerned about. We really want to bring back artisans and people who are starting a family into the borough," he says.

Nevertheless organisations like After Six, which deals with housing inquiries from homeless people, continue to receive about 100 calls a week from people wanting somewhere to live.

Capital Radio's "Help Line" also gets another 100 calls a week from the homeless or people looking for alternative accommodation.

#### UNABLE TO COPE . . .

But with 9,000 people already on Camden's housing waiting list, the council is unable to cope with the problems of the single homeless.

Earlier this month the council rejected proposals for bedsitter accommodation in Swiss Cottage in favour of accommodation for candidates on the housing waiting list.

The council has also decided to stop issuing short life housing licences to housing groups such as short-life

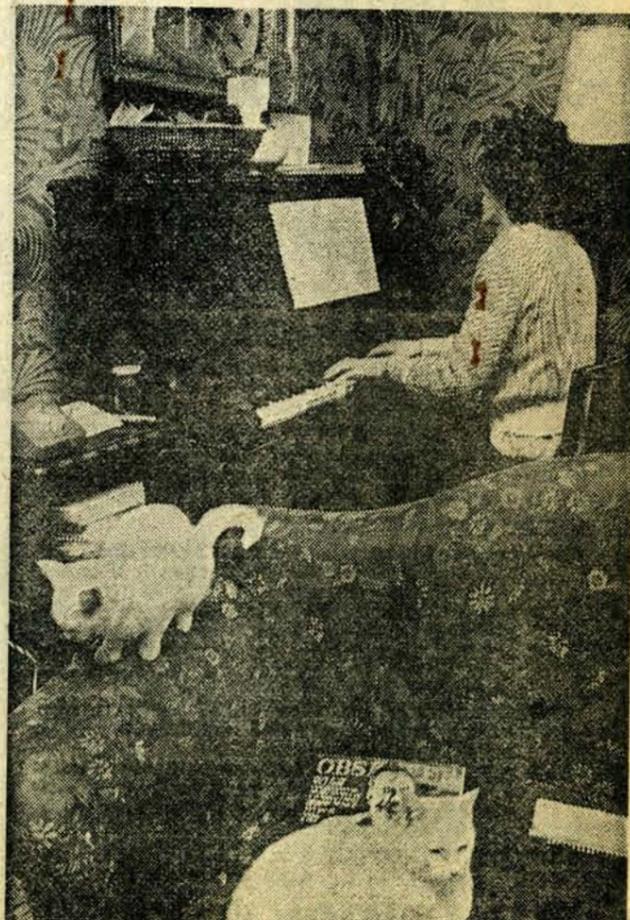
community housing. A council spokesman admitted: "Relations with these groups had become strained, almost to the point of becoming bitter."

Jaine Farr, of SCH, admits that most of the houses which had been licensed to the group are now being rehabilitated for council tenants but claims that the problem of the single homeless is still acute.

Meanwhile, the number of single people coming into London continues to increase and it is possible that squatting will be outlawed as a criminal activity if the proposed Criminal Trespass Bill, now going through parliament, is made law.

It is clear that a suitable alternative to squatting is urgently needed and that this can only come from the private rented sector where a vast number of flats and houses continue to remain unoccupied.

But the prospect of more rentable private accommodation becoming available is bleak, for the housing market has contracted so violently that being housed at all has become a luxury afforded only by the desperately needy and the well off.



KEEPING in tune with the good things of life is this young squatter inside his Camden squat, complete with piano, telephone, comfortable furniture and pet cats.

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