

TOLMERS
BEGINNING OR END

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Narration

Tolmers Village is near the centre of London, only 15 minutes walk from Piccadilly Circus and a stone's throw from Euston station.

For several years these few streets have been at the centre of a controversy which has focused attention on property speculation and its effect on ordinary people. For Tolmers Village is threatened by redevelopment. At first sight there is nothing special about this place and it comes as no surprise to most people that determined efforts have been made to demolish it. But it is not just buildings that would be demolished, it's a living piece of city.

And there are numerous businesses and activities - small workshops - cafes - restaurants - shops - pubs - hostels - offices and warehouses - social facilities - a jumble of diversity.

It is a haven for the small business, the craftsman, and small shopkeepers.

Mr Vine

39 years we have been here now - 40 years very shortly.

Mrs Vine

Well, it's more personal, isn't it. We look on our customers as friends. When you go into a big shop you're just a number aren't you. But with little shops - well you look on them like a friend - you know.

Narration

During the last 15 years an Asian community has become established in Drummond Street.

Mr Patak

CUT. Anyway we saw that there weren't many Indians in the surroundings so my father just opened up the shop because there were lots of students in the Universities over here from abroad and of course we wanted to cater for them so it grew that way and as more people began coming in from abroad, from places like Africa, India, Pakistan and other places, they came to know about our shop keeping all the groceries and specialities so this is how it became well known

Narration

The community now includes 7 shops, 5 restaurants, and a mosque as well as a substantial residential population.

Mr Shah

Become very well known this area throughout England and Europe that anybody wants something Indian they come right to the Drummond Street.

Narration

Tolmers Village is also a residential area. 700 people still live here - rich and poor - of all nationalities. But the population has fallen by half in the past ten years.

Mrs Holland

Well when I came here first ten years ago, it was so quiet. No traffic around the street.

There were a lot of people round here when I first came. But as the area started running down, people started leaving - to new flats or different areas - they got fed up watching the houses falling down and no-one looking after them or doing anything.

Narration

Tolmers Village has suffered extreme planning blight. For 15 years there have been rumours of redevelopment creating a spiral of decay; people have been reluctant to do repairs, land has been left empty, many people have become demoralized and left.

The major culprit has been a property company who have their offices just off Piccadilly Circus, Stock Conversion & Investment Trust, along with their estate agents D.E. & J. Levy. Recently this company successfully destroyed a similar diverse, thriving community across the road from Tolmers Village, along with a street market, and replaced it with this.

With this development they made a profit of over £60 million. In 1962 they decided to try their luck in Tolmers Village, and started buying property there. By 1971 they owned 40% of the village.

Mr Shah

Well they are big people. Their aim is only to pull down this area and make money, as simple as that. You know, you can see the Euston Tower - what they have done. You can see the House - that's all and there is no good for poor people.

Narration

And what about the people who live in their newly acquired property?

Mr Capanaros

Well, I've lived here 11 years using it as a studio, because I'm a painter. It's always been used by painters, this flat. It's all been running down ever since I've been here. Lots of it has been closed up and allowed to decay - deliberate neglect and malicious neglect too, on the kind of scale where people who wanted to live in better accommodation just couldn't take it any more with their families and just had to move, so the place just died. Well just going down.

There are other people living in this house as well, who have applied to move before. There is Lesley who lives upstairs. So he's still living in the same place in his bronchitic condition with water running down the walls. And they came to repair the roof once and they left some more of it open so it still leaks upstairs, the water still runs down.

I'd rather continue to go on living here and working here but the conditions are so unhealthy that I'm going to have to move because it's just fucked me up.

Mr Jones

I think that Levy is only for one thing, he's out for making a profit. X

I think he doesn't consider the people in the area. When I went and spoke to Stock Conversion a few months ago about this he told me that he felt very sorry for the people in this area. He would not like to live in property like it.

Narration

Of course the directors of Stock Conversion don't live in property like it. Joe Levy, for instance, one of the major shareholders, lives in Grosvenor Square, has a luxury apartment in the South of France, a yacht and some racehorses.

In March 1974 the net tangible assets of Stock Conversion were over £77 million. It is ironic that Stock Conversion are not prepared in many cases to spend the small amount of money required to keep the houses in habitable condition.

Miss Norden

The only repairs we ever ask for to be done are essential ones and we usually have to nag them for about a year or so before anything gets done at all, and anything that does get done gets done very badly. It just gets sort of patched up and it doesn't last a minute. X

Narration

In the autumn of 1973 an occupied house actually collapsed - the occupants narrowly escaping with their lives.

When property becomes empty, Stock Conversion do not relet.

In May 1974 a survey revealed that 242 rooms were unoccupied.

When a whole house becomes vacant it is boarded up and left to rot.

An empty house deteriorates quickly, lead is stripped from the roof, rain penetrates, windows are smashed, pipes are ripped out and decay is inevitable. To add to the decline, dossers use the empty houses and have become an established part of the community.

Dosser

Choose this area? Well I've been around here for years and years, so naturally you come back to the habitat that you are most familiar with. I've been in different places, different areas, but I always seem to end up over here. I've more or less settled down in the gutter over there.

CUT Well the way we live now is caused by broken marriages; that's how it started with me. I did time in prison and after that I just went on the drink and ended up now just drifting with the tide of your money. Sleeping out, getting persecuted by the police all the time. You can't even sit down. The panda cars come. We have absolutely no rights at all. Understand what I mean, no rights at all. Sleeping out in the gaddens of some/^{old}derelict building. That's what the life is.

Narration

In Tolmers Village no-one is surprised to see things deteriorating any more. Decay and neglect have become the way things are. They are part of life. Of those who are still left, some are angry, but most are merely disillusioned about everything and everybody. So who is to blame? Stock Conversion? The government? Camden Council?

Mrs Holland

CUT Well I think the council is to blame. I really do. For the past God knows how many years, into the 1960s, they started putting compulsory purchase orders on these houses and there have been three lots of compulsory purchase orders/^{put}on them, and each time we've thought we were going. We would like the council to step in and do something about it.

Narration

So why hasn't the council been doing anything? Surely it's their job to prevent this kind of despicable situation.

Frank Dobson

It's been unable to do very much about the Tolmers Square area and a lot of other areas because we don't own the land, and successive governments have not been very well disposed towards spending large sums of public money towards buying land for housing and other services to local communities at the current inflated market values.

Narration

The land values have been inflated out of all proportion by the speculators themselves. Between 1965 and 1973 some land values ~~land could be worth \$300,000.~~ increased by 2000%. / Faced with astronomical prices, governments in the past have refused to grant Camden Council the compulsory purchase powers it needs to buy the land for housing.

Dobson

I don't think that private companies should be able to exploit their position, but so long as the law remains as it is, and it has remained like this for the last thousand years at least, property owners are allowed to exploit their position at the cost of the rest of society. X

Narration

The council was therefore forced into negotiating a deal with Stock Conversion. Camden was to receive cheap land for housing in exchange for giving to Stock Conversion planning permission to build an office block. But the council backed down from this deal after borough-wide opposition to the proposal.

NARRATION J. Levy and Stock Conversion were asked if they would like
Dobson to put their point of view. They refused.

So that we now find ourselves going back to the situation where we are attempting to make c.p.o.'s on the whole area.

Narration

COT { But will the council be any more successful this time than on previous occasions? ~~||~~ The council has certainly been hampered by the limitations of its legislative power, combined with lack of government support.) But another barrier is their faith in comprehensive development as a solution. This faith is based on a complete misunderstanding of the area and the people in it. Given the present regulations and restrictions, comprehensive redevelopment inevitably means stereotype, single-use development with high rents. There would be little place for the people who now occupy Tolmers Village, as the manager of Simmonds second-hand furniture store explains.

Ralph Cooper

I think it would mean the total extinguishment of our business, because there's just not another place within a reasonable area of Euston which would be available at an economic rent. (We have made several enquiries about buildings for sale and the rent was so astronomical that it would just not be on at all, which would mean most of the staff would be redundant. Many of them have been here 20, 30, 40 years - in fact, our oldest member of staff 47 years - and of course they would just be out in the cold. X

Mr Vine

If we had to move it would be finished. We could not carry on with this business any more, it's too expensive for a small shop - too much competition, supermarkets. Once we are pulled up by the roots, like a plant, we die. X

Mrs Vine

Well I've never thought about moving.

Mr Shah

CUT Anything they want regarding Indians is available in Drummond Street, so we must have the area and we won't be able to come in the new buildings at all. We can't afford expensive rents as is an individual business.

Patak

Is going to mean a lot of hard work going down the drain and then we have to start all over again, just because somebody wants to trap everything and start massive buildings like the one opposite us.

Narration

No-one had asked the local residents and businesses for their opinions. Both the council and the developers were making their plans as if the people did not exist. Finally, in August 1973 the Tolmers Village Association was formed; an association of local residents and workers.

Maureen Holland

I became a member of the TVA about 1 year ago. I think it's what this area has needed for a long, long time. Someone to stand up and fight, especially to fight the council I must say, because the people here need to be got off their behinds and get moving. They have been kept down now for too long by all these different people and all these organisations, and I think it's a great idea.

Ralph Cooper

Everyone had their own private interests but it was largely a question of everyone defending themselves and it seemed a very good idea for us not just to meet the people who are in charge of the TVA, but to get all the business people who are interested

together and to get to know one another. (We probably all knew each other by nodding acquaintance but we did not know each other's individual problems at all, and I think this has been one of the very strong factors in getting people to support the association.

Mr Shah

I found only that organisation could help to the people who are really concerned and their lives are only going to be looked after by the TVA. Nobody else does care, neither council nor any big developers.

John Stansfield

I got interested in the Tolmers Village Association because I was afraid I might have to leave the area after I'd come here.

The objects of the Tolmers Village Association are to represent the interests of the people who live and/or work in the Tolmers Square area; to ensure that the planners concerned with redeveloping the area consult with local people fully before taking decisions; to lend support and protection to residents faced with eviction or harassment; and to ensure that no-one is forced to leave the area against their will; to support residents in their attempts to secure proper maintenance of their homes; to promote social activities between members, and generally to contribute to the life and character of the area.

Narration

A shop which has been empty for one year was occupied and opened up as a meeting place, information and advice centre. A community newspaper was started. Jumble sales and other fund-raising activities were organised. Soon after its formation the Association took part in a campaign which successfully prevented the council from making a deal with

Stock Conversion. Since then the Association has been putting forward its own ideas about how the area should be ~~re~~developed and asking for guarantees to safeguard the local people.

A grant was obtained to enable the Association to employ its own full-time co-ordinator.

Nick Bates

As I see it, the main purpose of the Tolmers Village Association is to get people taking control over their own lives. For years in this area people have been kicked around by Levy, and the council just hasn't done anything about it. You know, the houses are empty, there's empty land, and so on, and the real point is just to say to the council that if you won't do it, we'll do it. I would say the garden site next door is a very good example. It's been empty for 25 years and we've now just taken it over ourselves and are just making it into a garden. Squatting I think is on the same level. The houses which neither the council nor Levy can use we are now using.

Narration

The garden is now rented for £1 per year and a local firm has donated £1000 towards buying plants, grass and other materials. The Association tries to balance ^{between} ~~on~~ one hand being a responsible representative body acting within the system, and on the other hand taking direct action, which is seen as a threat to the system. Of course not everyone is satisfied.

Mr Jones

Well I'm very two-minded about the Association at the moment. I don't think they do enough for the older ones in the area. They seem to be concentrating about the squatters taking the old houses over, which really I don't blame them because the houses have been empty for some time and fair enough as long as they don't interfere with the older locals in the area.

Narration

Squatters have indeed had a major impact on the village. Over 70 people in the last year have taken over empty houses and made them habitable.

Pedro

Well structurally the house was in very good condition, but it was just full of rubbish inside. The toilet was smashed, the windows were broken, and it was generally in very bad condition inside, the decoration wise. What we did to it was, as soon as we moved in, we cleaned the two top rooms and started cleaning and repairing everything, including putting in new electric installation all round, making the toilets work and painting the whole thing and generally putting it in good repair again, mending the roof, and we spent about £100 and £150 on materials for the house.

Patrick

We're led to believe the house was empty for about ten years, but we can't really say. We've talked to the people around who say they've seen it empty for ages, and that in itself is really tragic because it's such an amazing house. It's an early Victorian terraced house and very beautiful, and we took some trouble to clean up the front of it and paint it in the style that other houses like this are kept in.

Jacque

Well I'm squatting because I was looking for a place to live and couldn't find anything at a reasonable rent that I could afford in the area or within London. I think that's the major reason why most people actually do squat. The trouble is that if there are houses available, or flats, the rent is too high for people to actually afford. There aren't many around in London.

Narration

The housing problem in London is drastic, and yet there are over 100,000 houses empty according to official statistics. The authorities have proved incapable of solving this anomaly and have been forced to come to terms with squatters. Frank Dobson explains his position.

Frank Dobson

If you ask me what my general attitude is towards squatting, although Camden has official squatters and unofficial squatters and distinguishes between them, I don't think that this is the proper distinction. As far as I am concerned, the only reasonable distinction is whether the squatters concerned fit in and behave reasonably towards the long-standing residents in an area and their neighbours, or whether they don't.

Miss Norden

Well, I think the squatters have introduced the only communal element we have ever had in this district. I've lived here 25 years and there's been nothing but backbiting, and now the squatters have brought a friendly atmosphere in. And as far as this property itself is concerned, two have just moved in and they're the most delightful element you could imagine - clean, intelligent, cheerful, friendly, - and they've done more for this property than has been done in my 25 years of living here.

Narration

So a new energy is building up in Tolmers Village. Empty houses are being repaired, empty land is being used. The TVA is having some success at battling with the council and the developers. As a symbol of this energy - a street festival.

Narration

But has anything really changed, or is it merely a cloak of frivolity covering the grim realities? Stock Conversion still owns the land.

Stock Conversion's interests are purely financial. They are only responsible to their shareholders. No-one who lives or works in Tolmers Village has any control over Stock Conversion, nor any way of influencing them, other than by direct action. Yet they have been able to disrupt the lives of many people, and virtually destroy a thriving part of a city.

It is nearly too late for Tolmers Village, but what about all the other places where developers are operating?

Stock Conversion have got their eyes on Camden High Street and Kings Cross, to name but two areas close to Tolmers Village. And there are many other property companies in the same game. Unfortunately the battle is not won even if the council buy out the land. Council redevelopment schemes are seldom very sympathetic to the kind of diverse area represented by Tolmers Village. But at least councils are susceptible to public pressure.

Tenants groups and community associations are growing up all over the country as people respond to the centralisation of power and decision-making. People have to organise themselves locally. No-one else cares. The people of Tolmers Village found out the hard way.

additional narration May 1975

The film you have just seen was made last July. In September, following lengthy negotiations with local people, the Council's consultant architects finally produced a proposal for a mixed rehabilitation and redevelopment scheme, which is generally acceptable to the TVA, and which the Council are ready to implement.

Life in the village is moving. Tenants living in wretched conditions in houses owned by Stock Conversion, have been rehoused by the Council. Their old homes were immediately squatted by more homeless people, and are now being repaired.

In empty houses squatters are an integral part of the village. They have established a bakery, a workshop, a printing press, a bookshop, a vegetable cooperative, and a community centre in a disused bank. All these ventures are run on a non-profitmaking basis for the benefit of the community as a whole.

But in March this year a bolt came from the blue. All the squatters living in houses owned by Stock Conversion were summonsed to appear in court. Stock Conversion wanted to regain possession of their houses.

The Tolmers Village Squatters Action Group was formed immediately, and a campaign was mounted.

There is no apparent reason why Stock Conversion should want the squatters out. But when the Community Land Bill becomes law later this year, Camden Council will be able to buy the land in Tolmers Village at its existing use value, instead of having to pay the much higher potential development value which will be generated if planning permission for commercial development is granted. The existing use value at present is very low because Stock Conversion have allowed their property to run down. But if Stock Conversion are able to gentrify the houses before Camden has time to buy them, it would raise the existing use value. Stock Conversion might then claim an extra £1 million in compensation, in addition to the cost of conversion work; money which would ultimately come from the

taxpayer and the ratepayer. / So the squatters' campaign to resist eviction proceedings is important for the government and the Council, as well as being crucial for Tolmers Village.

For this reason the ~~squatters~~ campaign is supported by Camden Council, the local labour party, trades unionists, and many tenants and residents associations.

So far the squatters have achieved some success in court. After two hearings at the High Court in the Strand; out of 17 cases, only 4 orders for possession were granted, 1 case was dismissed, and the remainder are unlikely to be heard until late June.

See But this is only a delaying tactic. In the end, squatters cannot win in court. Ultimately their fate will be determined by the bailliffs.

If Stock Conversion are not prevented from carrying out these senseless evictions -

140 people will lose their homes;

This unique community will be destroyed;

And finance capital, in the guise of property speculation, will once more demonstrate its ruthless power over the interests of ordinary people.

If any individuals or organizations can help the people of Tolmers Village in any way please contact the Tolmers Village Association

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~~or write to open door.~~