

Living in King's Cross



This exhibition looks at changes in social housing from the 1900s to the present day. It presents personal stories of the ups and downs of everyday life in the area, using recordings of local people, archive material and photographs. *Living in King's Cross* focuses on the history of living on the Priory Green and Hillview Estates, and Tolmers Square, and presents tales of squatting in the 1970s and 1980s.

At the end of the 19th century, the area around King's Cross had some of the worst slums in London. The 20th century saw 'model' estates built, but these were often poorly designed and badly maintained. Empty and semi-derelict houses presented opportunities for politically motivated young people who squatted whole estates, and took up short life tenancies where councils failed to let homes. In many cases they improved the estates: repairing buildings, forming tenants' associations, resisting corporate development and staging community events.

About the Project

King's Cross Story Palace is a project celebrating and sharing the history of the King's Cross area over the past 100 years. The two-year project has been made possible by National Lottery players through a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. It is being delivered by Historypin and The Building Exploratory.

Thank you to all of our storytellers and the following people who have contributed to this exhibition:

Research, Inspiration and Photography

Jeremy Crump
Seda Sokmen
Angela Cobbinah
Alison Laas
Naheed Bilgrami
Nick Wates, nickwates.com
Alexandra Lima Dimitrijevic

Hosts

Small Works King's Cross
Peabody Trust



historypin

The Building Exploratory

Peabody



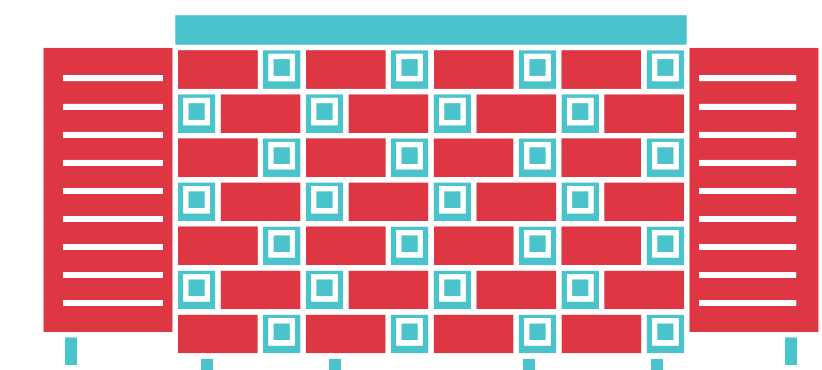
TOLMERS SQUARE



SOMERS TOWN



HILLVIEW



PRIORY GREEN



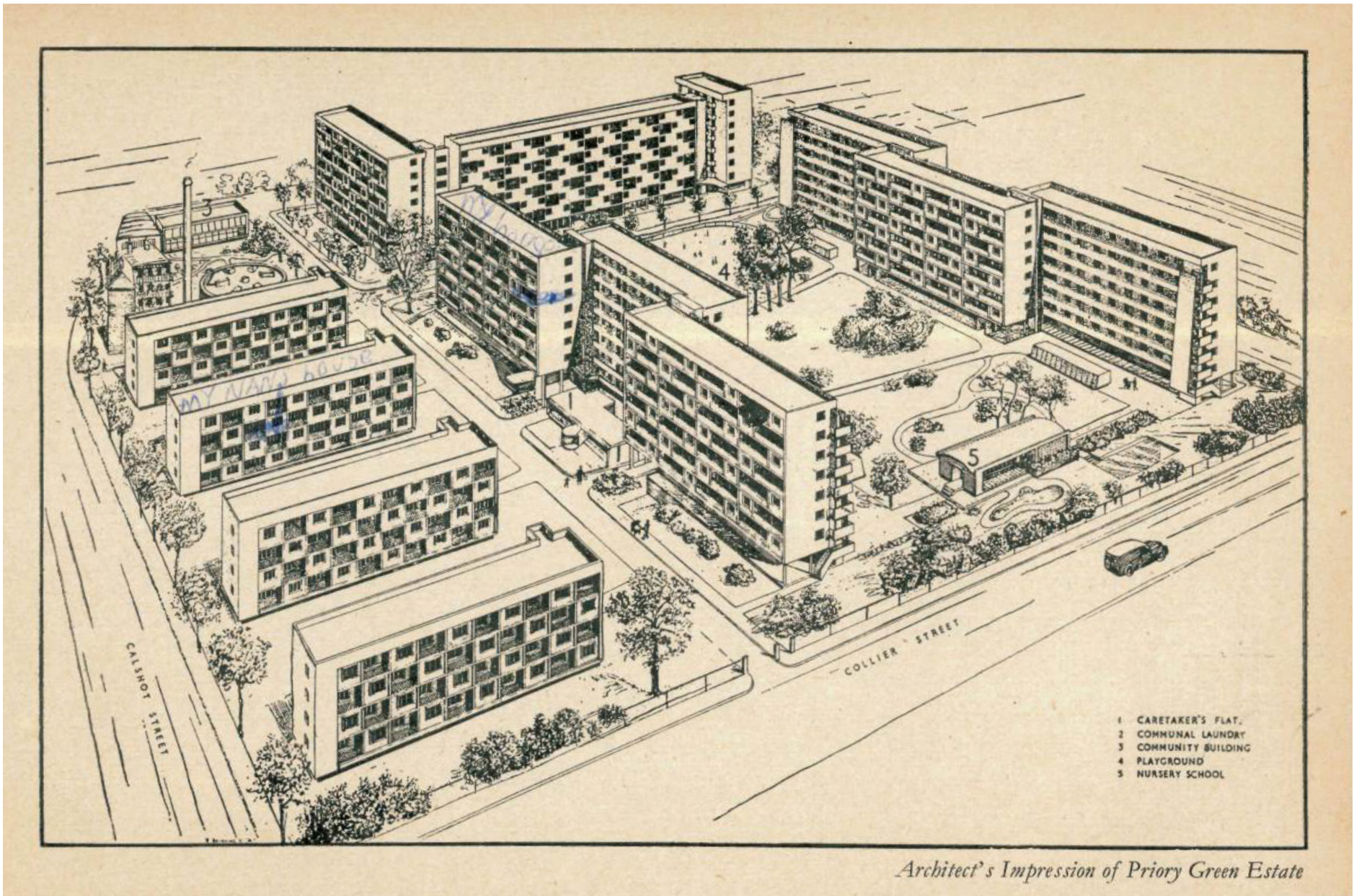
Priory Green Estate, 1952. RIBA Collections

Priory Green: The Vision

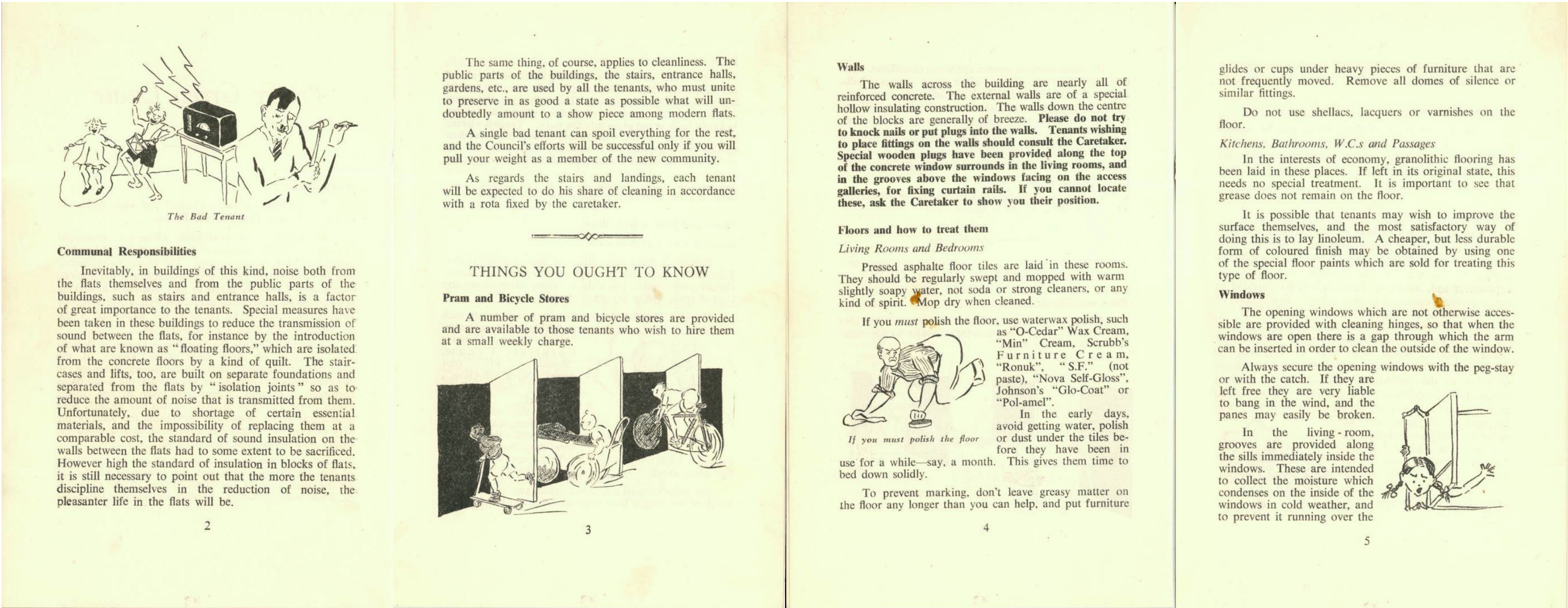
The Priory Green Estate was built on the site of a former slum on Busaco Street that was cleared in 1939. Finsbury Council held a competition for the redevelopment of the site in 1935, which was won by architectural collective Tecton. Its most famous member Berthold Lubetkin was a pioneer of the Modernist movement and studied social housing across Europe. He believed that architecture is a tool for improving people's lives and that community facilities should be a key part of the overall design of housing estates. His designs for Priory Green sought to maximise sunlight in the estate's homes and included playgrounds and communal laundry facilities.

The lack of available funds and building materials following World War Two meant that corners were cut. More homes were added and some of the facilities originally planned, such as a children's nursery, were axed. The original Tenants' Handbook hinted at a potential problem:

"Unfortunately due to shortage of certain of certain materials, and the impossibility of replacing them at a comparable cost, the standard of sound insulation on the walls between flats had to some extent to be sacrificed". - Priory Green Tenants' Handbook



Architects' plans of Priory Green with handwritten notes from a former resident indicating the location of their house and their grandmother's house. Image courtesy Peabody Housing



Tenants began moving into the estate in 1952. The Tenants' Handbook issued to all new residents outlined their responsibilities with regard to cleaning and being respectful of neighbours. Image courtesy Peabody Housing



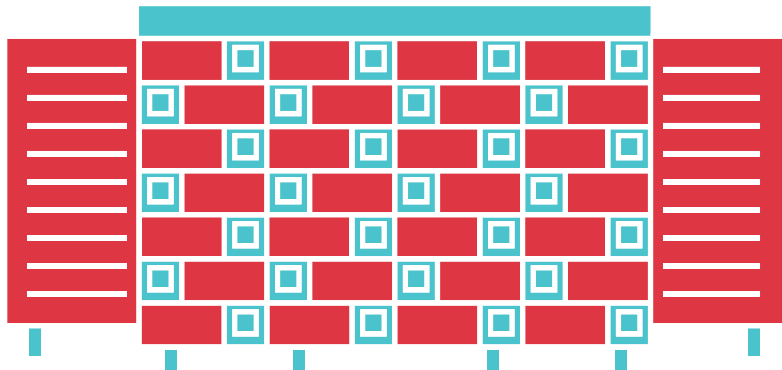
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Val Henney, Help on Your Door Step. Photo by Michael Hall

Priory Green: A New Way of Living?

“It’s a little bit like a maze where you go from one bit to the other. It was actually a really good escape route”.

– Val Henney

Living in Priory Green was never tranquil and problems were reported as early as 1952 when the first residents moved in. By the 1970s they were organising rent strikes over the filthy living conditions. One former resident recalls her time on the estate:

“In the late 1970s the Priory Green houses were deemed hard to let... It was in a very poor state and it was regularly vandalised...the lighting was poor and it was generally unsafe. Anyone could walk up because there wasn’t any security gates and the lifts rarely worked and when they did you were reluctant to step in them because you often found a turd”. – **Former Priory Green resident**

Steve Lake, who squatted in nearby Grimaldi House in the '70s, also has memories of that time:

“Priory Green Estate was always full of suitcases...clothes being thrown about because people used to go down to King’s Cross Station, nick suitcases...take them back and go through them”. – **Steve Lake**

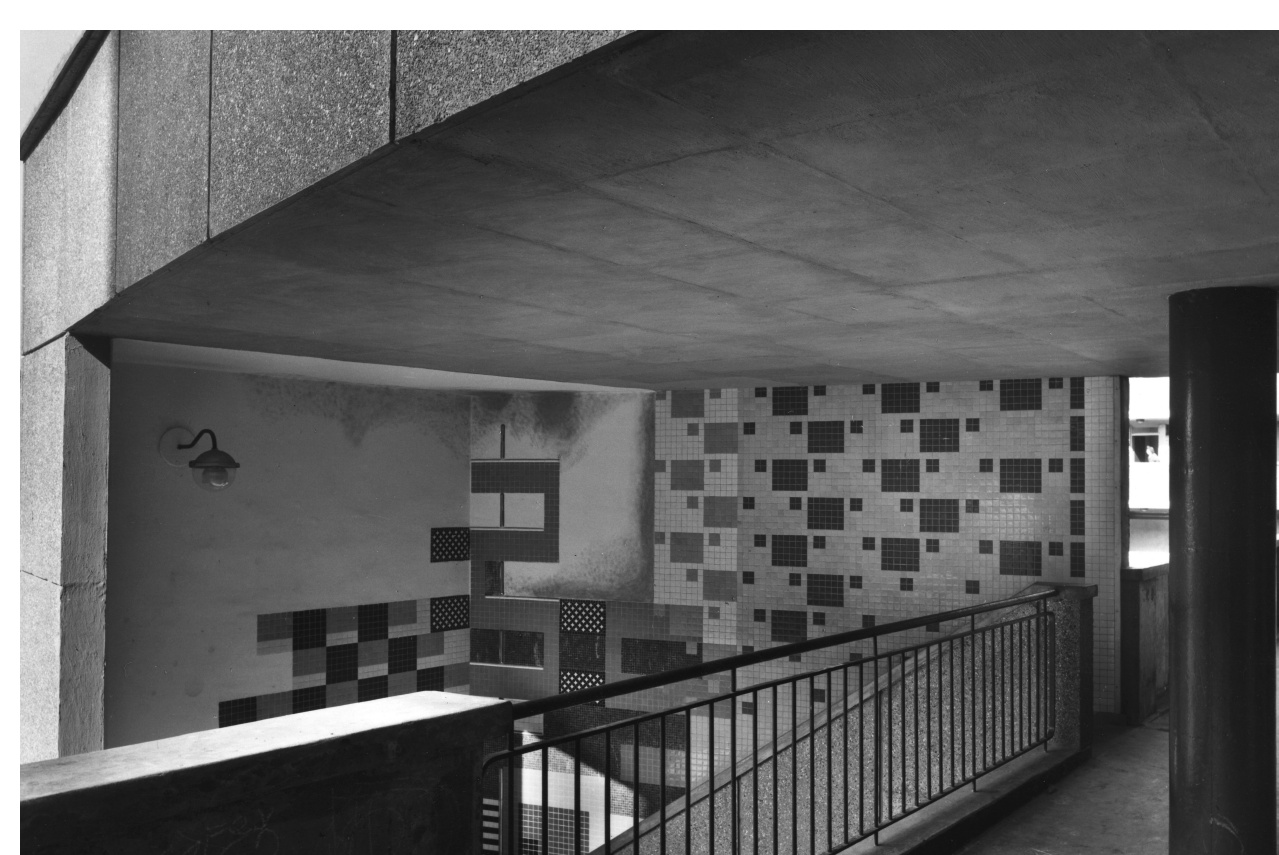
By the 1980s, the estate could no longer support the demands of modern life. Buggies did not fit in the lifts and refuse chutes couldn’t cope with the quantities of waste. Despite some refurbishment, the estate was still a challenging place to live in the 1990s:

“King’s Cross had a massive problem with drugs and prostitution... Priory Green became an area that they’d try to escape to and hide. It was easy to get into the blocks”. – **Val Henney**

In 1998, Peabody Trust took over Priory Green and undertook a £15.2m redevelopment of the estate: flats were upgraded, new landscaping was added along with a children’s playground and a new community centre.



Steve Lake, Grimaldi House. Photo by Michael Hall



Priory Green Estate, 1957, RIBA Collections

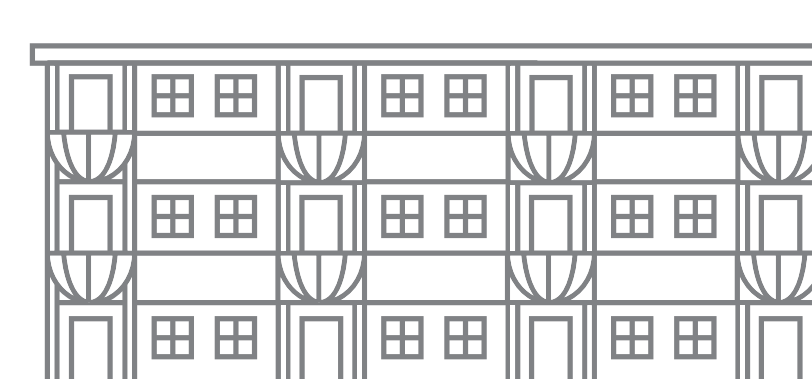
- ▶ **Track 1:** Steve Lake
- ▶ **Track 2:** Val Henney
- ▶ **Track 3:** Dee Cutts



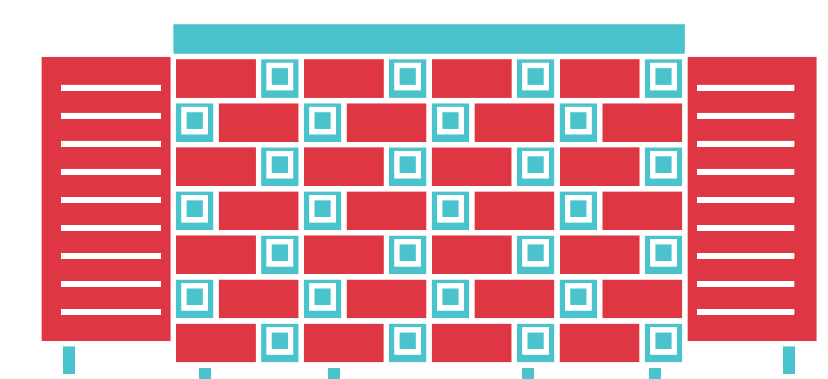
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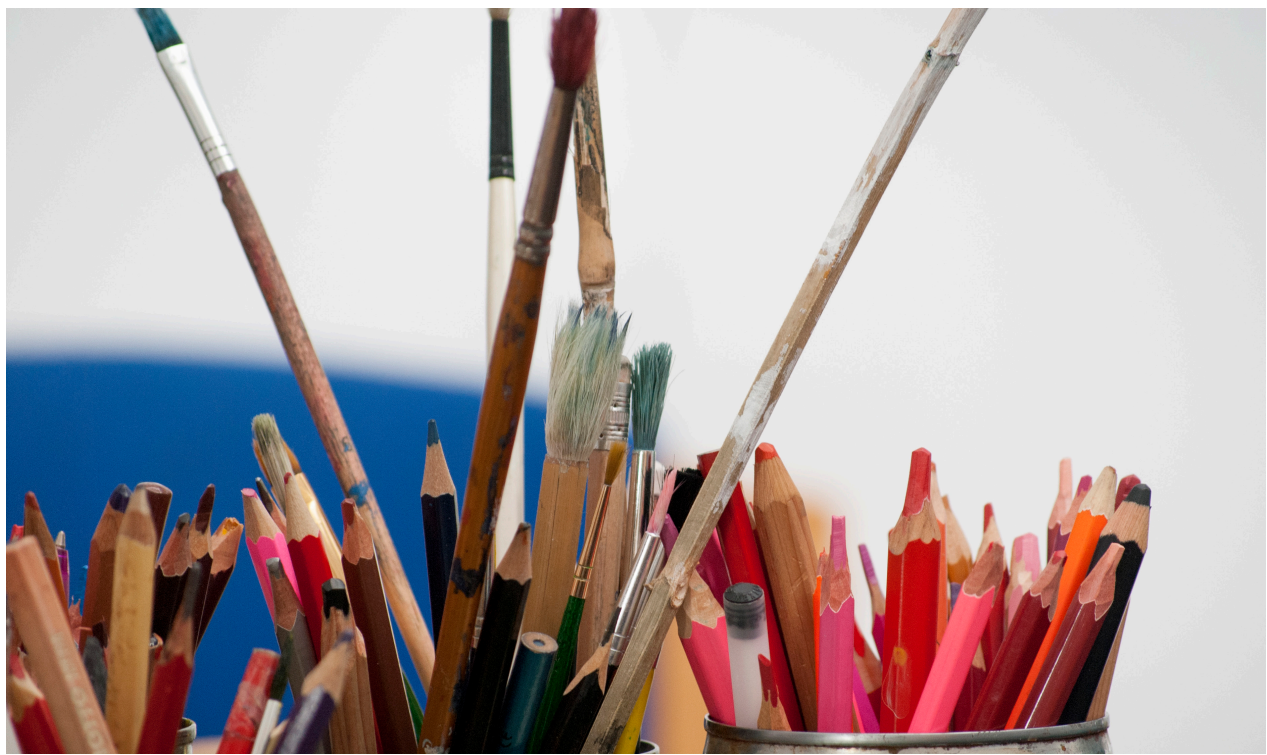
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Priory Green: Today

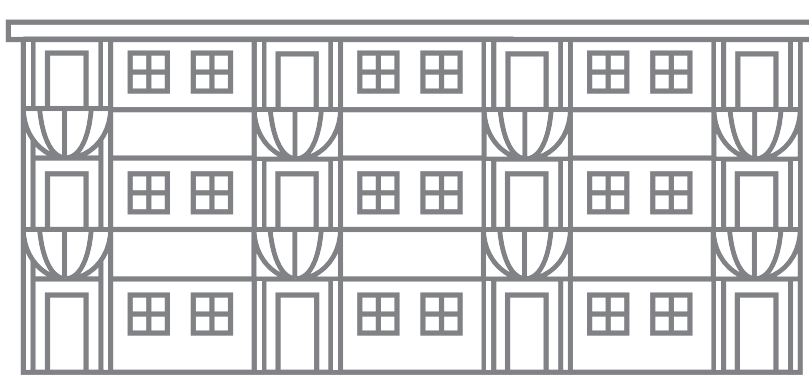
Photo essay of the Priory Green Estate and its residents as photographed by project volunteer Seda Sokmen in August 2018.



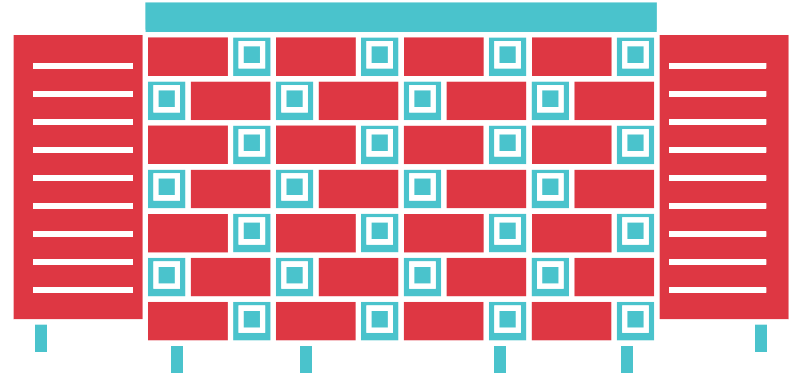
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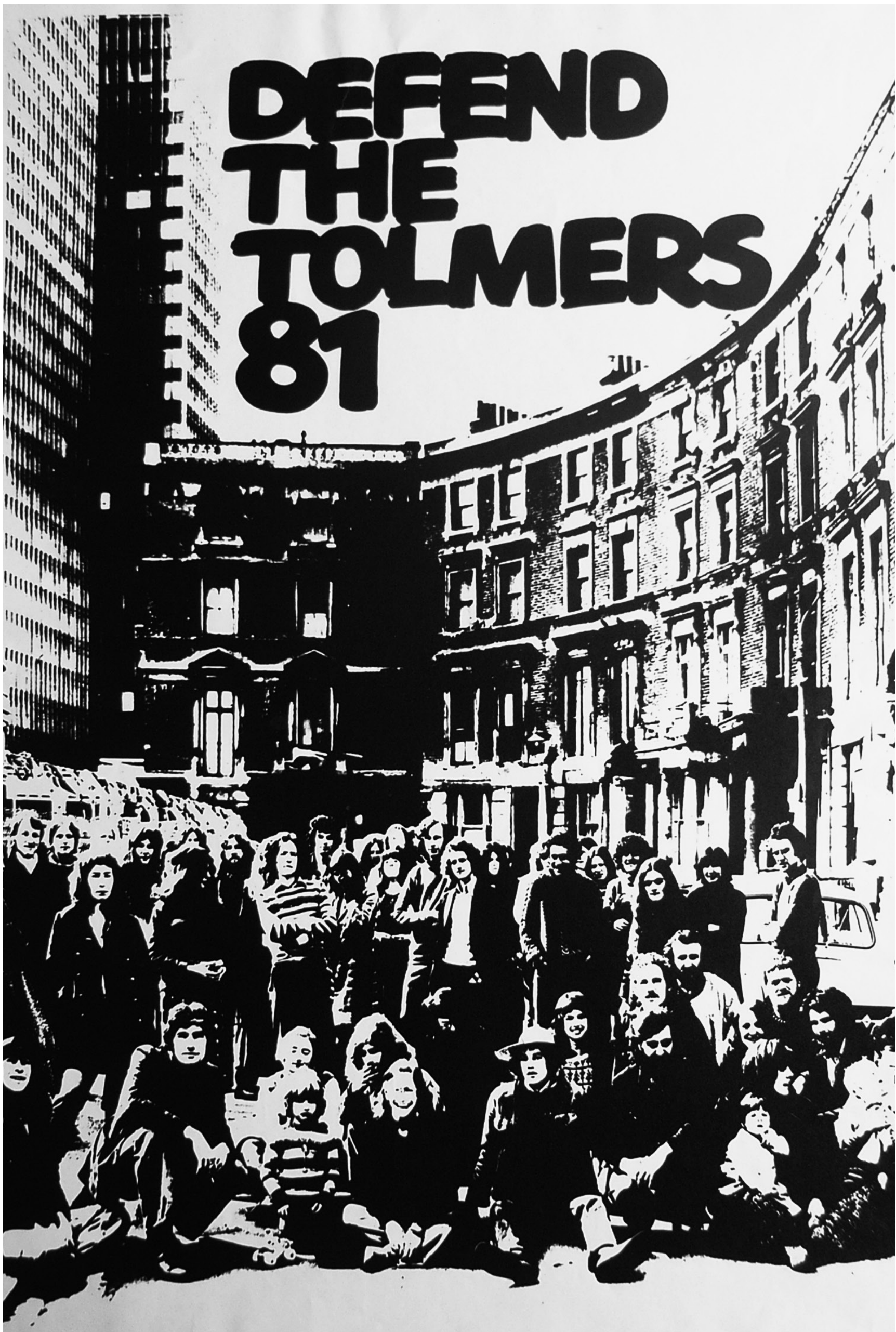
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Patrick Allen at Tolmers Square 2018. Photo by Polly Rodgers



Tolmers Square campaign poster © Nick Wates

Tolmers Square

“We were able to take control of our environment and create a living space that worked for us”.

– Patrick Allen

Tolmers Square, a group of Victorian houses behind Euston Station, became home to young, politically organised squatters in the 1970s.

“I was interested in [squatting], partly because I thought it was politically interesting, and partly because I needed to save money...for my law studies”. – Patrick Allen

Empty space, social networks and free housing allowed Alex Smith, then an architecture student, to take experimental living to extremes:

“I lived in Tolmers Square for a year without using any money. My dad gave me a £5 note...and I used [it] to light the fire...Living without money was such an easy life. It took about 20 hours work a week to keep body and soul together”. – Alex Smith

Developers proposed transforming the square into office blocks and this became a rallying cry for squatters keen to turn ideology into practical action:

“A property developer called Joe Levy...was acquiring properties slowly ...as tenants left they were boarded up...then his workmen would come in and smash them up a bit to make them less likely [to] be squatted”. – Patrick Allen

Undeterred, the squatters saw the empty space as an opportunity to build a new community:

“We [repaired] the guttering, we had to mend some broken windows, we got the electricity connected – that was easy, in those days the electricity board was very happy to connect anybody who wanted to pay.” – Patrick Allen

A long campaign of resistance against the development followed. In 1975 Camden Council bought the square, and the squatters were evicted in 1979. The new development, including social housing, a small office block, and a community pub, was completed in 1982.

“People should have some control over their lives and how their communities work”. – Patrick Allen



Alex Smith and ex-wife Chiara © Nick Wates



Patrick Allen (centre) and fellow squatters © Nick Wates

▶ Track 4: Patrick Allen

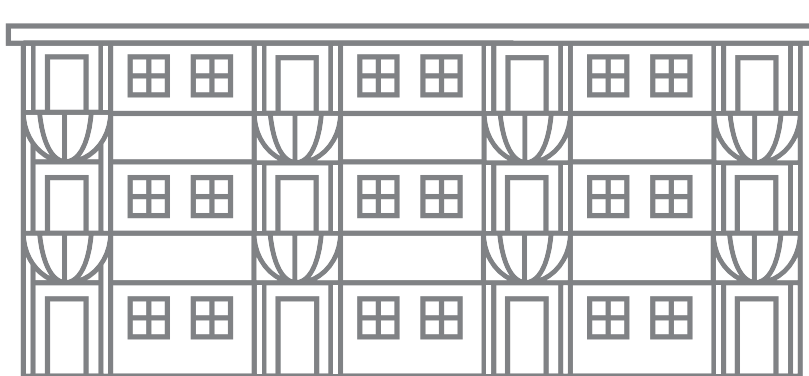
▶ Track 5: Alex Smith



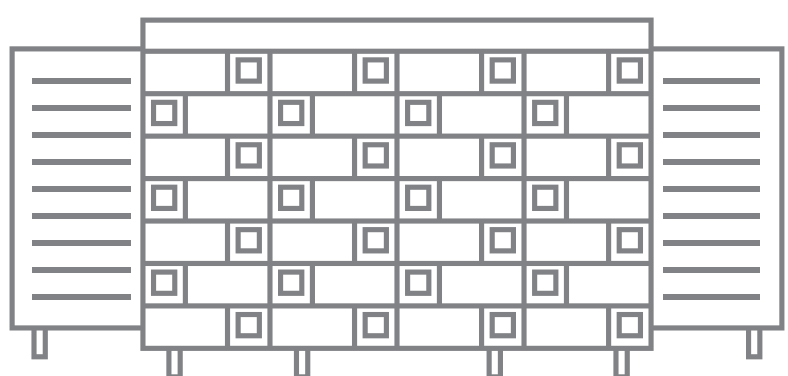
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Whidborne courtyard, Hillview, in 1979

Hillview Estate and Short Life Housing

“As a single man I had no chance of getting a council flat...The beauty of short life housing is that it created social stability... between homelessness and secure housing”.

– John Mason

Hillview Estate, built south of Euston Road in the early 1890s by the East End Dwellings Company, aimed to ‘house the very poor while realizing some profit’. Charwood Properties bought the estate in 1955:

“[They] weren’t interested in maintaining the place and things went downhill. Rubbish became a particular problem...one day we collected all of it and dumped it on the steps of the Town Hall”. – **Barbara Hughes**

Camden Council acquired the estate and by 1978 were letting it as short life housing to tenants willing to help improve the area. Some viewed shortlifers as middle class opportunists taking tenancies from more deserving families. This attitude softened as the benefits emerged:

“As an experiment in co-operative democracy its record was never perfect, but we ran the estate in a way that was sensitive to the needs of tenants and created a tolerant and inclusive atmosphere”. – **John Mason**

From the 1980s, the Council began to redevelop Hillview, which by then had a reputation for drugs and prostitution. Problems continued throughout the 1990s when Shola Alli moved in. Wheelchair-bound after infant polio, Shola lives in a specially adapted flat:

“The area was still very much linked with drugs and prostitution so I was wary about the place...But the estate itself looked lovely and I decided to give it a go”. – **Shola Alli**

Today the estate is managed by One Housing, and Khalid Ali, originally from Yemen, works as the full-time caretaker:

“If the place is not looked after properly, things quickly deteriorate and people stop taking a pride in where they live, I always make sure I do a good job and residents like it”. – **Khalid Ali**



Police notice on Argyle Square, 1990s.



Shola Alli. Photo courtesy Shola Alli

▶ **Track 6:** Barbara Hughes



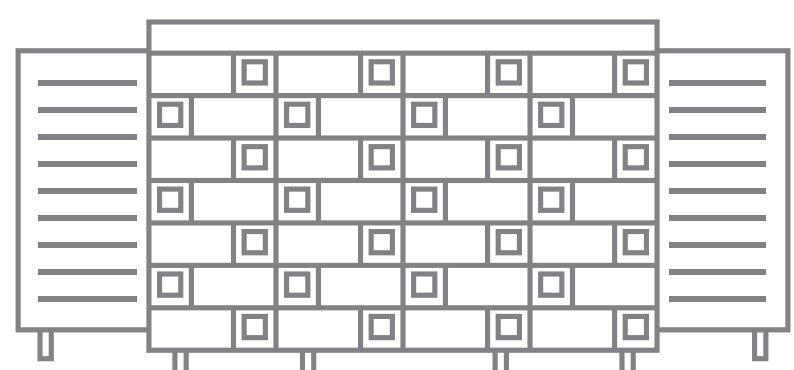
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Travellers Site, Post-Eviction, Camden Town, 1985, Photo by Mark Cawson

A New Generation of Squatters

“I’d never had a set of keys really, and then I got offered a place in Hillview... it was the first time I had security”.

– Mark Cawson



Mark Cawson, 2018. Photo by Michael Hall



Somers Town. Photo courtesy Jane Penton



Jane Penton, Somer Town, 1980s. Photo courtesy Jane Penton



Being evicted, Somers Town. Photo courtesy Jane Penton

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher was elected and a period of social upheaval followed. High unemployment, strikes and protest became commonplace. People felt disenfranchised, and this was reflected in music, art and the way they lived. The run-down housing and buildings in King’s Cross provided opportunities for a new generation of squatters:

“When I first moved into King’s Cross it was a kind of a J.G Ballard dystopian, crumbling, futurist city, that was on its last legs... It was a mix, a lot of creative people, circus performers, writers, musicians, the Pogues came from there... I started thinking about art again”. – **Mark Cawson**

Being resourceful was all part of living rent free. Steve Lake from anarcho-punk band Zounds, moved to Grimaldi House in 1979:

“Our place was furnished pretty spartanly...most of the furniture came from skips... While we were away this other guy found the place, and thought it was abandoned; he squatted our squat...so we all continued to live there together. We never received an electricity bill, and managed to have free electricity for quite a long time”. – **Steve Lake**

The need for social housing and Thatcher’s Right To Buy policy put pressure on these lifestyles. Jane Penton moved to Somers Town during the 1980s, and remembers the evictions:

“The Council were systematically moving out the tenants in Chamberlain and Levita Houses and renovating them for their social housing. The security firm hired heavy dudes...quite intimidating”. – **Jane Penton**

Today squatting is all but impossible following a change in the law in 2012 to favour the rights of the owner.

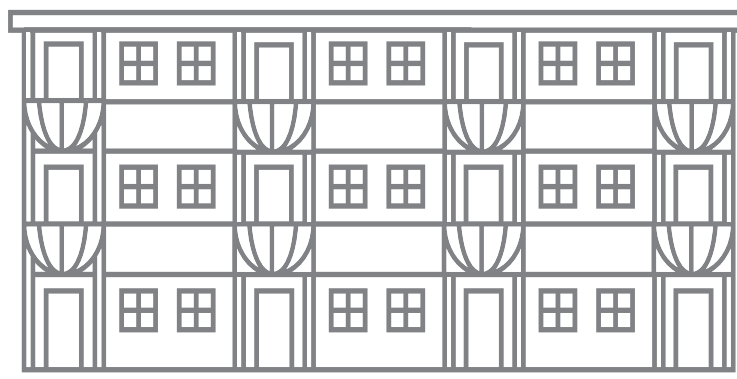
 **Track 7: Mark Cawson**



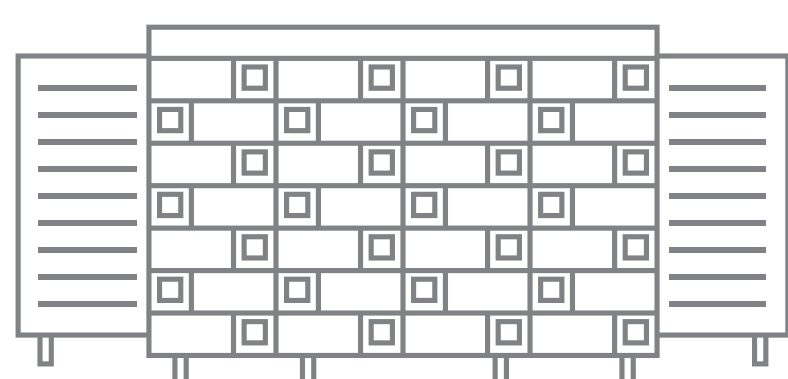
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PRIORY GREEN

Your Memories of **Priory Green**



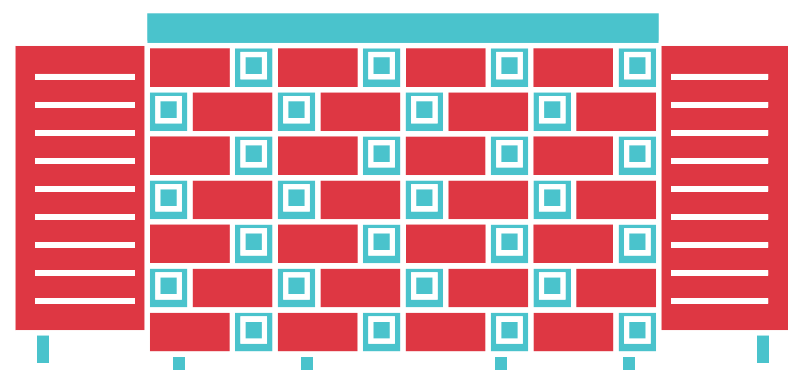
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