

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street (1975-1995)



SYLHET HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE



THE INSIDE STORY



An East End Connection Publication



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To all those squatters who struggled and suffered; developed solidarity and defended their communities; fought for decent homes; created innovative solutions to address needs; helped preserve many neighbourhood gems that would have surely fallen under the destructive feet of the bulldozers.

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street (1975-1995)



Parfett Street
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An East End Connection Publication

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Foreward

Kamal Uddin Ahmed

Chair of Trustees

People from the land called Bangladesh, since 1971, have been coming to the UK for more than a century. Most of the early arrivals were from Sylhet and worked on British merchant navy ships. Some arrived, stayed for a few days and went back working on the ships, while others jumped ship and tried to make a life in the mother country, the home of the British Empire. They were called Lascars.

There are many interesting and incredible stories of the young lascar men who worked for the British merchant navy, some of whom made a life in London and several other port cities in the UK. But this project is not about the story of the lascars. A little background on early migration has been provided as a longer historical context to what the Bangladeshis in East London experienced from the 1960s onwards.

Squatting has a long history in the UK, but as can be seen from the interviews and materials studied for the project, people breaking into empty homes to put a roof over their heads really got going from the late 1960s onward and intensified during the 1970s. Housing conditions in the East End were very bad, especially in the western end of the Borough of Tower Hamlets. Because of extreme racism and racial violence, targeted at the Bangladeshis, most tended to congregate where most of the immigrants lived and worked in the famous East End rag trade. Single Bangladeshi men could not get Council housing, so they mostly lived in very overcrowded, privately rented properties. These properties were in a very bad condition. Due to bomb damage and slum clearance policies, a large amount of publicly owned properties, scattered around Tower Hamlets, were boarded up and designated for redevelopment. However, neither the Greater London Council (GLC) nor the local authority in Tower Hamlets were able to redevelop such designated buildings and sites. This left many locations and areas blighted and run-down.

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Bangladeshi women and children started to join their husbands and fathers in greater numbers as the 1970s progressed, so living in overcrowded, privately rented properties became every more difficult. Those who managed to get offers of council housing away from the western end of the Borough which was relatively safe, found the racism too fearful and intolerable. They either didn't want to move to mainly white areas or, many of those that did, came back quite quickly to the western end of Tower Hamlets. By then white squatters were making headlines. Some experienced actual evictions and some only attempted evictions in places like Myrdle Street and Parfett Street even as early as 1972, and their resistance against attempts to throw them out of their homes. Bangladeshis soon joined them and started to squat, on a larger scale, from around 1975 in Old Montague Street, and Pelham Buildings in 1976, with the help of white squatters and anti-racist activists.

Although I was not a squatter, many of my friends and family members were. I have heard stories of them living in appalling housing conditions and grew up hearing about their struggles for decent housing and the longer-term impact of the coming-together of the community in an organised fashion from 1976 when the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) was founded. For a long time, people have stopped talking about the story of the Bangladeshi squatters and not much has been written on the topic. As such, this is a very important project, and I hope, although it is a very small project, that it will be a catalyst for further and deeper work on the topic, to bring out the story in a fuller sense.

This project's focus is on Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street, Parfett Street and Fieldgate Mansions (in both Myrdle Street and Romford Street), and includes a slightly wider immediate area, such as Varden Street and Nelson Street. We will all benefit from recording and learning about, more factually, the housing struggles of the Bangladeshi community and how we came so far. I believe, in relation to the Bangladeshi community in the East End of London, the best is yet to come.

Acknowledgement

Abdul Khalam Ali

Secretary

The East End Connection's (EEC) interest in the subject matter emerged from talking to several people and seeing some relevant and interesting materials – annual reports and photographs. They talked about the old days and how it was like struggling for better housing, more facilities, and fighting against racism and discrimination. The reports and images seen contains rich materials that need excavating and interpreting.

After East End Connection (EEC) decided to embark on the project, it contacted and had discussions with some previous squatters, activists and archivists to understand the full potential of such a project. It was decided to develop a small project initially and a number of individuals, groups and institutions agreed to support it.

First my special thanks go to the ten interviewees: six Bangladeshi squatters and four non-Bangladeshi squatters. In both groups some of the individuals were also activists. They are (Bangladeshis): Ala Uddin, Helal Uddin Abbas, Kazi Hurmotjan Begum, Kola Miah, Soyful Alom, Sharaf Uddin; non-Bangladeshis: David Hoffmann, Jon Hems, Nora Connolly and Terry Fitzpatrick. I would like to thank them with deep appreciation for sharing their incredible, insightful and detailed stories of the struggles of the squatters of that period.

Next, the local community volunteers who joined the project, helped with carrying out the interviews. They also helped promote the project and contributed towards developing better insights on the subject matter and generating more valuable outcomes. They helped develop a detailed draft for developing a guided walk called Squatters Heritage Walk. They are Ahmed Chowdhury, Cherifa Atoussi, Hayette Atoussi, Kamrul Islam and Rosy Awwal. With respect to the guided walk concept and detailed draft, this was achieved through training

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provided by Dr. Georgie Wemyss. The EEC appreciates this valuable contribution.

The Tower Hamlets Local History Archives and the London Metropolitan Archives that have relevant materials have supported this project. Halima Khanom from the former and Maureen Roberts from the latter made presentations at our project launch on 3 July 2019, providing more details of the squatting movements and the relevant materials that they have in their archives. The project planned to utilise more materials from these archives and work with their officers on the project, however, the Covid-19 Pandemic changed all that. But what help, support and encouragement they have managed to provide have been incredibly valuable to the project.

Further thanks to Dr Canan Salih, Applied Theatre and film artists and academic, for her transcription of most of the interviews and the launch, and for editing this final publication.

Last but not least, it is important to record our thanks and appreciation to Bodrul Alom, one of the founding trustees of EEC, and Shaharul Alom, a trustee, for their unconditional support towards the development of this project and Dr Muhammed Ahmedullah for his relentless effort in making the project a real success.

The East End Connection is grateful to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for awarding a grant to finance the project.

Introduction

M Ahmedullah

Project co-ordinator

Human existence, the nature of life and how societies organise themselves around the world, inevitably, create conditions that compel some people to practice what we today call squatting. Squatters are individuals and groups who squat in properties - houses, offices, factories or enclosed lands - that belong to others. Squatting means moving into and occupying spaces by people who do not own them or have permission to do so from their legal owners. But inequality, privilege, history, economy, religion, private property rights, politics and hierarchy have always meant some people possessing more than others. The 'more than others' category includes various degrees of relative and absolute dispossessions that people experience.

Dispossession has always created conditions where people, by necessity, have had to transgress limits set by rules and laws. History has shown many examples of people - out of desperation to survive or to put a roof over their heads or of their families - taking control of lands and properties that belong to others.

Criminals and armies also take over other people's lands but that is not considered to be squatting. In the latter's case, conquests by power and force have been mostly glorified by the victorious side. In the case of criminals, this usually happens in countries that have weak institutions and involve the poor. They rarely, if ever, take over the properties of the rich and powerful. In time, through immoral means and influence, many manage to gain legal ownership of properties taken through criminality.

All human beings are born equal. But when they come into the world, they find the reality different from their innate rights. Some find themselves privileged to different degrees, while others are on the opposite side with various degrees of dispossessions. It includes, in some cases, people in absolute situations where they have nothing. So, there arises a need for ideas, justifications and programmes to enable those who possess nothing or very little to gain a bit, or a bit more of a share of the world and its bounties.

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

The recent history of squatting relates mostly to post-war developments and the banning of residential squatting in 2012. Soldiers returning from war, taking control of abandoned military compounds, and urban squatters breaking into boarded-up, mostly but not exclusively, publicly owned, residential properties have been discussed extensively.

The phenomenon of urban squatting in the UK and in several European countries are thought to have started in 1968 with 'the London Squatters' Campaign's first action... a publicity stunt on 1 December', when they 'staged a demonstration on the rooftop' of 'The Hollies', 'with banner and a press conference'. The London Squatters Campaign (LSC) was set up by Ron Baily. This event was soon followed in February 1969 by 'two hundred people' marching 'to a street containing multiple empty council properties in Redbridge'. They were careful not to break any laws and followed some procedures before entering and housing several families. (*The Politics of the Crowbar: Squatting in London, 1968-1977*, by Rowan Tallis Milligan). In the 1970s, there were famous squatter movements in Maida Vale, Brixton and Camden and elsewhere. The relatively less known history of squatting and the squatting movement in Tower Hamlets is the subject of this project, but not about all of it.

In 2019, East End Connection (EEC) received £10,000 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to undertake a project called 'Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Parfett Street and Myrdle Street'. The focus was specific in terms of geography and ethnicity. However, as nothing exists in isolation and there are all kinds of dynamic relationships between areas and peoples, this project inevitably involved looking at a slightly wider scene. Within the catchment area of the project, the story of Fieldgate Mansion squatting is an important element. But the reason why the project names two streets in its title was because the properties that came under the control of the Sylhet Housing Co-operative in 1983 were all situated in Myrdle Street and Parfett Street.

The relationships and interactions between Bangladeshi and non-Bangladeshi squatters, the appalling local housing conditions and what happened in surrounding areas were an integral and important part of the story of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street. This includes, for example, squatting in Pelham Buildings, Old Montague Street and Rampart Street. Without an understanding of these the wider context of what happened in Parfett Street and Myrdle Street would be lost.

A project launch was organised on 3 July 2019 at the Kobi Nazrul

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School in Settle Street. It attracted a wide response, including people associated with that period and squatting, who contacted East End Connection to share their stories. One email from Jobeda Ali, who was suffering from a terminal illness, made the whole thing very poignant.

“I used to be one of the original squatters, but it was in Old Montague Street. Before that, the family also squatted in other places but I’m not sure my mum remembers the names of those streets. I was under 5 during this time. I was born in 1975 and we came to London in 1975 and I’ve been trying to get some history of the early days from my mum. But it’s hard to get parents to tell us their history sometimes so I would like to volunteer my mum (and myself) to participate in recording some of this history. We lived in dilapidated accommodations which were not fit for human habitation. One place didn’t even have floors and mum and dad had to make improvised flooring! Also, I have a few pictures (colour!) of us from the 70s. Unlike anything you see today among British Bangladeshis, feels like a different demographic sometimes.

Anyway, how can I get involved? I’m also writing my memoirs. I have a chronic illness and it’s terminal so I’m trying to write down my history anyway. I should say I have a history degree from Cambridge University, so I hope I’d be an asset in your endeavors with this project. I wish you every success.”

When the project was ready to interview Jobeda Ali in early 2020 - after recruiting the volunteer community participants, providing them with an induction and training on oral history and allocating roles - she was contacted by phone. She answered from a hospital bed and said that she was very ill and unable to give an interview. Sadly, in April 2020, she passed away.

In total, 34 properties - 9 in Myrdle Street and 25 in Parfett Street - came under the control of the Sylhet Housing Co-op. But the organization in reality provided some structural support, in several different ways, to local Bangladeshis living in both squatted and non-squatted properties, including in other nearby roads.

The project was designed to be an introductory account of the world

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of the struggles of Bangladeshi squatters of the period, focused mainly in the Parfett and Myrdle Streets and surrounding areas. Rather than something comprehensive it was meant to be a catalyst to inspire others to undertake more detailed work.

Its target was to interview fifteen people in total – nine Bangladeshi squatters, three non-Bangladeshi squatters and three individuals, who supported the squatter movements and can say something about Bangladeshi squatters from a non-Bangladeshi perspective. However, as soon as the interview started, Covid-19 emergency got going and the lockdown began. So, the whole process that was set-up to complete the project came to a halt in late March 2020. But, by then, seven face-to-face interviews had been collected and, since then, three other individuals shared their stories with the project – two written and one recorded from a safe distance.

The completed project consists of ten interviews – six Bangladeshi squatters and three non-Bangladeshi squatters, some of whom were also activists and were actively involved with the Sylhet Housing Co-op, and one non-Bangladeshi activist. Between them they have provided access to a world not known by many people living now. Their experiences were diverse and together they shared complementary accounts of the time, what life was like, their struggles and triumphs.

After the initial interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. Some of the interviewees were then contacted to ensure accuracy. During the process, additional information has been added and the texts edited to ensure a good read. In one case, Nora Connolly produced a shorter version, written by herself. So it was decided to include both in the publication as they complement and add dimensions. The recorded interviews and the verbatim transcripts will be handed over to the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives (THLHLA) to add to their local history collections.

The project also included the provision of training some local people to develop a Squatters Heritage Walk. In this regard, Dr Georgie Wemyss delivered two training sessions. After that, participants that were trained produced a Squatters Heritage Walk proposal that consists of thirteen stops, starting from Altab Ali Park and ending at the former St Mary's Centre, called Stepney Community Trust since 2002. The pack consists of a route map, thirteen stops with arrows from start to finish and information on each of the stops.

The accounts provided by the ten people bring to light the multi-

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dimensional and complex nature of the squatting phenomenon. On the one hand, during the 1970s, there was an increase in families joining Bangladeshi men already in the UK. Most of the women were young and came with one or more children to join their husbands. They found themselves in very confined, overcrowded spaces, sharing poor-quality rented housing. In many cases, a family with several children shared a single bedroom and one kitchen with other families or a combination of single people, couples and families. Most of the properties were damaged, had holes, broken windows and very cold. They also lacked indoor toilet facilities. The cold environment, the lack of proper heating and confined overcrowded spaces caused many Bangladeshi women and children to suffer from a variety of illnesses.

Most of Tower Hamlets was also a no-go area for Bangladeshis who experienced extreme levels of racism and racial violence. In order to protect themselves they mostly tried to live in the western end of the Borough where, mostly, jobs in the tailoring sector existed and had a more ethnic minority presence. Many of those that managed to get council housing away from the western end of the Borough soon came back to the western end or tried to come back due to racial violence and fear.

In all likelihood it is impossible to know precisely who the first Bangladeshi squatters were in Tower Hamlets. But it is certain that some Bangladeshis were squatting quite early on, even though the numbers were small. From discussion with individuals and groups, and published materials, it is clear that by the mid-1970s there were many Bangladeshi squatters in the borough. For example, Jubeda, quoted above, mentioned that her family was squatting from 1975, the year of both her birth and when she came to the UK.

‘In the summer of 1975, the first mass Bengali squat in Spitalfields opened up the empty houses in Old Montague Street. Twenty-two adults and 50 children had put a roof over their heads. The squats had an electrifying effect. For the first time, through their own efforts, Bengali people were making housing freely available. Verdan Street was squatted, Nelson Street taken over. As more squats were secured, everyone became increasingly safe from eviction. It was becoming too big for the council to deal with, although it did try a show of force against the Faceless Homeless in

1975’.

(Spitalfields: A Battle for Land, by Charlie Forman).

In line with squatting movements elsewhere in London, mutually feeding from each other, Tower Hamlets also experienced, quite early on, squatters taking over boarded up properties, including in Myrdle Street and Parfett Street. They were mostly white young people with a background in arts, teaching, music and other creative professions. There are press cuttings of squatters in Myrdle Street being evicted as early as 1972. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some Bangladeshis also squatted from the start of the London squatting movement in 1968.

The young white squatters came from a range of mostly arts and creative backgrounds. Some among them included radicals with left-wing political agendas and anarchists. Many lived in communes and explored and sought to develop alternative lifestyles. Some have been described as drug users. Although all kinds of people became squatters, all kinds were not part of the same squats or parts of the same groups. One individual interviewed talked about how they lived in a commune and all the crazy and creative things they got up to. But one such individual became horrified when, inadvertently, got associated with squatters that used drugs.

On the one hand, many areas in the East End were cleared and boarded up due to bomb damage – some taken over by trees, shrubs, grass and urban wildlife. On the other, there were boarded up housing units - terraces, tenements and blocks - earmarked for demolition. But, due to lack of funding, the authorities failed to develop them, leaving areas derelict and blighted. In order to prevent people from squatting, the authorities would damage toilets, doors and windows, and cut off utilities. The squatters would move in, repair and get the utilities re-connected and start living there. However, in many cases, especially in some of the Bangladeshi squats, the quality of housing restored by squatters were appalling, due to the quality of the housing in the first place, and the low income of the Bangladeshis who could not afford to repair them to high standards.

Regular evictions of squatters and attempted evictions kept the squatter movement dynamic. A series of victories against attempted evictions kept the movement’s morale high and inspired them to carry on.

The Bangladeshi squatter movement officially began with the set-up of

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the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) in 1977. A public meeting was held at the Montefiore Centre in Hanbury Street, attended by about sixty Bangladeshis, where they established the BHAG organization. Following that, from April 1976, the formal organised occupation of the first Bangladeshi lead squat began. It was the Pelham Buildings situated in Woodseer Street, behind the Montefiore Centre.

In this, the names of Terry Fitzpatrick, Farrukh Dondhy and Mala Sen stand prominent. They provided the theoretical justifications and practical know how to break into boarded up housing blocks and restore them to livable conditions, at least for a short while. Darkus Howe from Race Today was an important figure in all these activities. Farrukh Dondhy worked for Race Today. Their fight against racism, in terms of a theoretical understating of race issues and programmes of actions to change things for the better, guided the perceptions and actions of the local activists. At that time, London was run by a two-tier system. The Local Councils and the Greater London Council (GLC) and their roles were divided to ensure a better city governance.

The interviews carried out by the project, and included in this book, provide rich details of what happened, how the Bangladeshis squatted, what life was like for the squatters, who helped them, and how the GLC and the local council in Tower Hamlets were persuaded to provide the Bangladeshi community with the housing that they wanted to live in and raise their families.

Around the same time, as the Sylhet Housing Co-op was created, with thirty-four properties in Myrdle Street and Parfett Street under their control, the St Mary's Centre was established to create a resource for local people. Initially, in 1983, it was called St Mary's Housing and Welfare Resource Project. Later, in 1986 it managed to purchase 46 Myrdle Street, with the help of the GLC, just before its demise, and it established itself as a local community centre. In 2002, the name was changed to Stepney Community Trust.

Since it came into being, the centre played a very important and active role in spearheading campaigns, initiatives and detailed work to improve the local housing and environmental conditions and provide services for the cultural, health improvements and employment needs of the local community. In addition to the St Mary's Centre, other Bangladeshi organizations and bodies that played a significant role in the life and development of the local Bangladeshi squatting and non-squatting communities in the area were the Bangladesh Youth Movement (BYM),

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Dawatul Islam, Young Muslim Organisation (YMO), East London Mosque, Whitechapel Centre, Shapla Shangha and Asha Women's Group.

Between these groups, they provided both religious and non-religious activities. Although the YMO, Dawatul Islam and the East London Mosque provided mostly for needs related to religion, they also played some part in helping people with their other needs, including for example, education, through mathematics and science classes at 52 Fieldgate Street. In this regard, they also acted as a source of motivation and provided role models for young people to pursue higher education.

Under the leadership of St Mary's Centre, both in their premises and in other venues, many types of activities, in addition to welfare advice, were organised for the local Bangladeshi community. Some examples are provided below:

1. Pensioners' Luncheon Club
2. Youth and cultural activities – holiday projects, play schemes, camping, trips abroad
3. Women's development work – English as a Second Language (ESOL), cookery classes, sewing classes and health education c
4. National celebrations – Martyr's Day (Shoheed Dibosh), Victory and Independence Day
5. Supported the annual Bernier Festival organised by Bangladesh Youth Movement (BYM)
6. Eid celebrations
7. Christmas and New Year gatherings
8. Nazrul festival

Through these activities, the local Bangladeshis, both squatters and non-squatters, were supported with their needs, development and integration within the mainstream.

As the 1980s progressed into the 1990s, all the thirty-four properties were restored, some renovated and others demolished and rebuilt. By the end of the 1990s, the houses in Myrdle Street and Parfett Street became Grade II listed buildings that required additional funding to carry out work to certain standards. The renovation work was carried out by Solon Co-operative Housing Services.

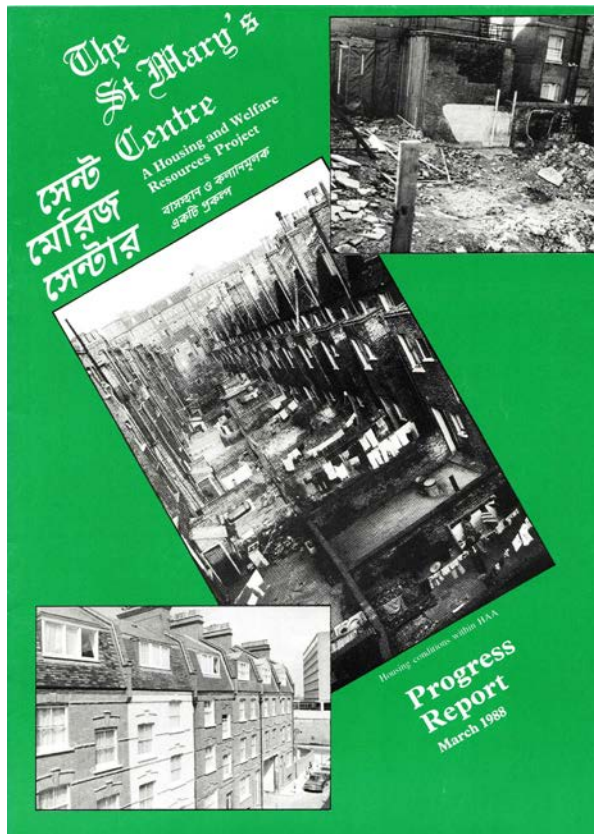
The Sylhet Housing Co-op members decided in 1994 to transfer the properties to be managed by more traditional housing associations.

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About fourteen eventually went to Bethnal Green and Victoria Park Housing Association (BGVPHA) and twenty-one went under the management of the CDS Co-operatives.

By then the St Mary's Centre became an established local resource, providing increasingly more sophisticated services and activities and holding public consultations. It developed training and employment projects, campaigned to help improve educational standards of pupils, and played a part in renaming the St Mary's Park into Altab Ali Park, installing the initial architectural decorative gates and a plaque as part of the commemoration of the tragic murder of Altab Ali, a machinist working in the local rag-trade, in 1978.

Several pages from the 1988 progress report produced by the St Mary's centre and some photographs, below, show clearly the energy and activism of the Bangladeshi community at the time. They energised by the the struggles of the squatters for better housing, supported and guided by white squatters, anti-racists activists and housing experts.



ST. MARY'S CENTRE-

- AIMS**
- (a) To give advice to residents of the St. Mary's Ward on Housing and welfare rights.
 - (b) Act as resource centre, particularly in relation to planning and environmental issues concerning the residents of the St. Mary's Ward.
 - (c) Provide facilities for and organise sports, recreational and cultural activities particularly aimed at women and young people.
 - (d) Take up training and educational issues that concern the local residents.
 - (e) Work towards the creation of a harmonious multi-cultural community in the St. Mary's Ward.

OBJECTIVES

1. To promote for the benefit of the inhabitants of the St. Mary's Ward in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and the surrounding area without distinction of race, sex or of political or religious or other opinions by associating local authorities in a common effort to relieve poverty, advance education, preserve and protect health and provide facilities in the interest of social welfare for recreation and leisure-time occupation with the object of improving the conditions of life for the said inhabitants.
2. To establish or secure the establishment of a community centre in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, St. Mary's Ward and to maintain and manage or to co-operate with any local statutory authority in the maintenance and management of such a community centre including provision for young people and nursery facilities.
3. To promote high standards of planning and architecture in or affecting the area of benefit.
4. To promote good race relations in the area of benefit by endeavouring to eliminate discrimination on grounds of race and encouraging equality of opportunity between persons of different racial groups.

ST. MARY'S CENTRE AND OFFICIAL OPENING

The initial thinking of setting up such a project arose during 1983 by a small group of local residents of the Ward. The main objective of the Centre is to act as an umbrella forum through which local people voice their needs and grievances. Also, to act as resource centre to cater for the local needs.

However, it is notable that with the help of the abolished GLC, the premises acquired are freehold. During September 1985, the Centre started the delivery of services to the local residents. Subsequently, the St. Mary's Centre attracted funding from THIAF which has graciously enabled the Centre to carry out a major refurbishment and extension works to the ground floor and the basement of the building. Furthermore, the official opening of the St. Mary's Centre was launched on the 10th April, 1987, soon after completing the extension work.

The Centre was officially declared open by the Chief Guest of Honour, Councillor Lesley Hammond, Chief Whip of ILEA. Many other distinguished guests were present and participated at the opening ceremony, including :-

Chief Guest Speaker Rt. Hon. Peter Shore, M.P.,
Councillor Sue Carlyle
Councillor Jan Alam
Councillor Robert William Ashkettle
Councillor Bernie Saunders
Councillor Sadique Ahmed
Councillor Phil Maxwell and Cllr. Arthur Downes
and ILEA members Peter Aylmer and Belle Harris

All the distinguished guest speakers highlighted the significant role the St. Mary's Centre has to play by the virtue of its location in one of the most socially and economically deprived inner city areas of London.



St Mary's Centre — Official opening. Cllr. Lesley Hammond speaking at the opening ceremony. (Left to right) Helen Powell Cllr. R.W. Ashkettle, Soyful Alam (Chairperson).

ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCE SUB-COMMITTEE'S REPORT

It hardly seems possible that a year has gone by since we produced our last Annual Report. As always, the last year has been an eventful one for the Centre. Funding has been the most important factor in determining the work of the Centre. We are very grateful to the THIAP., Stepney SNC., CRE., LRB and the Tower Hamlets Council for their generous consideration in funding this Centre. As a result, we were able to adequately employ staff and purchase essential items of office furniture and equipment which have been of great help in providing a much needed service to the local community.

We would also like to thank all the members of the various committees for their help and support in the past year and to all the staff of the Centre for their hard work, and to the councillors and officers of the Tower Hamlets Council and CRE who have championed our cause in 1987/88 and ensured continued support to the Centre.

The Admin & Finance Committee met once a week and systemised procedures for implementing decisions of the Council of Management. This forum enabled us to maintain regular links with the workforce of the Centre.

To the best of our ability, we have also followed a course of action whereby we would like to regard ourselves as an equal opportunities employer. In this respect we have provided training opportunities to the workforce, issued contracts of employment and declared our intentions to be an Equal Opportunities employer. Above all, we hope that the St. Mary's Centre has acted as a springboard for many of our workers, who are now undertaking employment assignments with much wider and complicated brief.

Also, we are happy to report that in July 1986, the St. Mary's Centre was incorporated as a company limited by guarantee; and finally, after a long hurdle, in November 1987 it became a registered charity.

HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT

Positive Developments in the St. Mary's Ward Settles Street School

During the past year there has been much publicity devoted to the scandalous shortage of places for primary school children in Tower Hamlets. ILEA has been forced to react to pressure from the local Bengali Community and has acknowledged that the area immediately surrounding the St. Mary's Centre is where the need for the school places is greatest of all.

Following a public meeting arranged by the St. Mary's Centre, Councillors on the Stepney Neighbourhood Committee gave outline planning permission for ILEA to draw up plans for a primary school at the site of the Settles Street Cleansing Depot. This is presently owned by the Council, who have decided to transfer the services to the Toby Lane depot instead to vacate the site.

Detailed plans have now been drawn up for a two-storey building, allowing for a nursery class, a mothers and toddlers drop-in centre, and an intake of 30 pupils each year, who will continue their

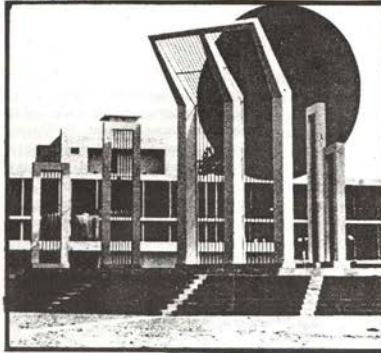


Settles St. School. Settles St Depot site for proposed school development

studies at the school until they are aged eleven. There will also be a youth club available outside school hours, a large meeting hall which will be able to accommodate at least two hundred people for public meetings, and a sports playground for local youngsters.

There is also a proposal to erect a Shoheed Minar, ("Martyrs' Monument"), in the grounds of the school, in commemoration of those who died in the Bengali Language Movement struggle on 21st February 1952.

In this way the school will meet several demands from the local community which have been outstanding for many years. The only cloud hanging over the horizon, however, is the possibility that ILEA may be abolished with unforeseen consequences for local children.



Erection of Shoheed Minar within school ground.

Fieldgate Street

The London Fire Brigade has said that the St. Mary's Ward constitutes part of the second highest fire risk area in the capital, because of the age and condition of the buildings and lack of services available at present. However, during the past year, after a thorough search, it became apparent that the only site available for the urgently needed new fire station is beside the East London Mosque in Fieldgate Street.

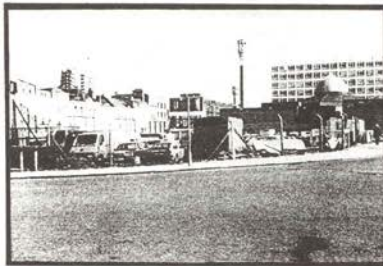
Following the consultation carried out by the Stepney Neighbourhood Committee, in 1986 the priorities according to the public response were: facilities linked to the mosque, housing, light industry and other 'community facilities'. Accordingly, the

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Fire Brigade decided that a third of the site area could be made available for the provision of various community facilities, although the London Residuary Body, which owns the land, has not finally agreed a price and disposed of it yet.

The St. Mary's Centre has contacted ASRA, the housing association which provides sheltered accommodation for Asian pensioners, who have subsequently confirmed that the site is a high priority for them in East London as it is so near to the Mosque. Elderly muslims at present have to travel long distances to attend prayers, often late at night and through racially hostile areas where they are vulnerable to physical attacks. A small block of flats on this site would be a great advantage to those whose need for accommodation are greatest.

There is also a substantial amount of planning gain money which has resulted from an office development not far from this site on



Fieldgate St. Site adjacent to the East London Mosque for Fire Station development & Community facilities.

Commercial Road, and the St. Mary's Centre is presently engaged in drawing up plans for a pensioners' drop-in centre, with additional sheltered housing, to be built on this site. We hope that the Stepney Neighbourhood will be able to look favourably on our request to use the planning gain in this way.

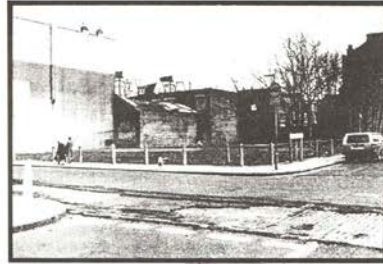
Latest News — The site has almost certainly been acquired by an office developer, who wants to use it as a bargaining counter to try and increase the amount of offices that he wants to build in the Whitechurch Lane area. The future of the site has been made totally uncertain, but we hope that the Stepney Neighbourhood Committee will do its utmost to ensure that local peoples' needs are met as far as possible.

Cavell Street

More than a year ago the St. Mary's Centre looked at vacant sites in the ward with ASRA to assess the possibility of providing as much urgently needed sheltered accommodation as possible, because the more traditional housing associations operating in the area have failed to cater for the religious and cultural need of the elderly Bengali Muslims.

As a result of this original move, ASRA is due to exchange contracts at any moment now for a vacant site in Cavell Street, just within walking distance of the East London Mosque, where ten self-contained flats are to be provided. There will be a residential warden to provide any assistance required by the residents; a communal living room so that residents can meet together in comfort; and a guest room so that anyone visiting a resident will be able to stay overnight. Work should begin in September this year, and the flats should be finished one year afterwards. If any of these

projects are successful it will mean that ASRA, for the first time, will be serving the Bengali section of the Asian community.



Proposed site for Family Housing in Sidney St.

Family Housing in Sidney Street

Following an initial approach 18 months ago from the St. Mary's Centre, a dozen large family houses are to be built during the coming year at the corner of Sidney Street and Cavell Street by the Bethnal Green and East London Housing Association.

By far the longest waiting lists in the Borough are for large units of accommodation, and there should accordingly be a comprehensive building programme so that those families in greatest need — mainly Bengali — are not forced to live for years and years in totally unsatisfactory temporary housing. The Stepney Neighbourhood Committee has prioritised the various categories of housing in this way, but the overall response from the authorities has, thus far, not been sufficient.

Mixed Housing in Newark Street

The last large plot of vacant space in the St. Mary's Ward is to be used to provide a variety of housing by three different organisations working together and funded by the Housing Corporation. The Samuel Lewis Housing Trust (SLHT), The Sylhet Housing Co-operative and the Bethnal Green and East London Housing Association made a joint bid to the Corporation, and have heard that the scheme will be phased over several years.

SLHT are to receive the first amount of finance for the 88/89 year, and will build over twenty one-bedroom flats. The



Newark St. Site for joint development between Samuel Lewis HT, Sylhet HCL & Bethnal Green & ELHA

Introduction

following year, the two other organisations will start building fourteen large family houses. It is intended that there should be four 5-bedroom houses; six 4-bedroom houses and four 3-bedroom houses.

Fieldgate Mansions Tenants' and Residents' Association (FMTARA)

The Samuel Lewis Housing Trust (SLHT) acquired the Fieldgate Mansions victorian tenement estate in November 1982 and began a phased programme of renovation using money from the Housing Corporation. Approximately half the households consist of extended Bengali families whose renovated flats may cover several floors, and the other half being mainly single white people, who live predominantly on the upper floors.

The FMTARA was set up in response to the new circumstances resulting from the renovations scheme, but residents became increasingly frustrated due to the spoiling tactics employed by the Trust, and the Association — which in any case was not properly representative — gradually fragmented and ceased to function in any meaningful fashion. The Trust was able to capitalise on this state of affairs and forced through policies, but consistently failed to consult residents properly at all.

As a result of this, the St. Mary's Centre, together with the Tower Hamlets Federation of Tenants, called a meeting of all residents in March 1987, at which the FMTARA was formally reconstituted and a committee of a dozen residents elected. Since this time the Association has been constantly involved in increasingly fraught negotiations with the SLHT, culminating most recently in a meeting with the Housing Manager from the Trust's Head Office, brought about by a sharp increase in dissatisfaction with the general level of service from the local Tower Hamlets Area Office in Fieldgate Street.

Residents' complaints are too numerous to list here, but the main issues of contention stem from the autocratic style of management whereby decisions are taken within the confines of an office to which residents are often denied proper access, and where they often encounter an offhand response to enquiries which they raise.

Residents have also repeatedly asked that bilingual caretakers be recruited (perhaps even from the estate itself) so that urgent problems that occur outside office hours might be dealt with, but the Trust has said that the money is not available and residents would have to pay themselves for any extra services of this kind.

It has long been argued that the rules and regulations that the Trust applies to other estates under its control in other parts of the country, such as Dover, are not at all relevant to the problems experienced on the Fieldgate Estate, where the needs of the residents are so obviously, exceptionally extreme. However, this point has also tended to be ignored by staff at the local office, who tend instead to repeat simply that the organisation cannot afford any more money.

The Trust has since accepted that tenants should be fully consulted about all significant developments on the estate in the future. But it has been a hard struggle, and it could not have been achieved without an effective organisation of tenants and residents working together.

The Parfett Street Housing Action Area

During the past year the Council's Area Improvement and Modernisation (AIM) team of the Council officers in Myrdle Street have completed the enveloping of the external fabric of those houses needing renovation within the HAA, and following a survey, it was confirmed that the vast majority of residents felt that this had been carried out in a satisfactory and sympathetic manner.

There can be no doubt that these works significantly improved living conditions for a large number of people within the area, but it is a fact that there still remain many, many people who continue to live in chronically overcrowded accommodation, which is cold and damp, resulting in constant ill health, and where the most basic amenities are lacking. The most obvious instances are the Centre Block of the Fieldgate Mansions in Romford Street, which the Samuel Lewis Housing Trust will renovate in the next 2/3 years; the properties owned by the Sylhet Housing Co-operative, where renovation work has only recently begun; and, most worrying of all, the block of tenements at 10—28 Settles Street, which is privately owned, and where the residents' future is still very uncertain indeed.

10 - 28 Settles Street

For many years the landlord has been content to collect the rent and ignore the atrocious conditions in which the residents have been living. As a result, last year the AIM office served the landlord with a notice requiring fire escapes to be provided, and following a court appeal, which the landlord lost, AIM will now be carrying out the works in default, probably beginning April 1988.

The landlord will have to bear the cost of these works, and will be forced to pay for the cost of the temporary rehousing of the residents as well. It is hoped that a tenants' and residents' association will be formed so that the people who actually live in the flats will have some influence over the future developments, and the St. Mary's Centre will be contacting residents about this in coming weeks.

The St. Mary's Centre has arranged several meetings with residents to discuss the problems which they face, and we intend in the near future to call another meeting, when the possibility of setting up a tenants' and residents' association will be debated.

The Samuel Lewis Housing Trust applied to the Housing Corporation for funding to buy the block but did not receive any money. The future of the block is therefore very uncertain and we believe that the residents should have more control over their future than has hitherto been a case. A tenants' and residents' association might well be of benefit, but ofcourse this will need the support of the residents if it is to be successful.

South Parfett Street Tenants' Association

Within the HAA at the south end of the Parfett Street the Bethnal Green and East London Housing Association has recently finished renovating two rows of houses, mainly inhabited by Bengali families.

During the first month of 1988 residents became increasingly dissatisfied with conditions in the new flats and considered the possibility of setting up a tenants' association to tackle the problems. The St. Mary's Centre, working with the Tower Hamlets Tenants' Federation, organised two meetings, at the end of which a constitution was agreed and a Committee of eight residents was elected.

The three main problems at present appear to be the inefficient repairs service; condensation and mould; and a sporadic caretaker service but these and many other issues will be taken up with the landlord over the coming year.

The Spitalfields Task Force – a positive development for St. Mary's Ward?

Following a huge blast of publicity during the latter part of 1987 the Task Force was set up and it was announced that the Government had allocated one million pounds to be spent on job creation schemes within three of the most deprived areas in Tower Hamlets — the St. Mary's, Spitalfields and Weavers Wards.

The first point to be made is that £1 million pound split between three wards is not very much money (especially when the salaries of the staff are deducted from the total) and certainly insufficient to provide the impetus required to resuscitate one of the most deprived inner-city areas in the country. The Government must be aware of this, and the motives behind the setting up of the Task Force is therefore instantly brought into question.

Secondly, the stated aim is to create additional employment, which is of course a vital issue requiring very serious attention. But whilst the Task Force is busy contacting local businesses and community groups in an attempt to come to grips with the appallingly high rates of local unemployment, the Government is doing next to nothing to redress the even more appalling crisis in housing in precisely the same areas. In fact, it can even be argued that the Government is carrying out policies which it knows will make the housing crisis even worse for those whose need is greatest, and for the Bengali community, in particular.

In circumstances like these, it is no wonder that local residents and workers are suspicious of any intervention by the Government which professes to be serious about improving the lot of the local people, and that they sometimes tend to the view that the Task Force is more in the way of a public relations exercise.

Hitherto, though, the residents of the St. Mary's Ward have even more reasons to doubt the validity of the exercise, because it has recently come to light that most of the money allocated so far has gone to the Spitalfields Ward. This is despite repeated assertions from the Task Force that the money was to be shared equally throughout the three wards.

There can be no doubt that the Task Force is capable of achieving some positive advances in combating unemployment in the St. Mary's Ward, but we feel that it requires a more constructive approach from them before the full potential can be realised. The St. Mary's Centre will, of

course, attempt to contribute as much as it possibly can to the forthcoming developments, but there can be no denying the fact that, as things stand, we are not in an ideal position to act as effectively as we might. So far there has been publicity about the visits by dignitaries to combat problems confronting the Bengali community but the Bengalis do not seem to have any benefit yet.

Tower House

In the summer of 1987 the Council Housing Sub-committee decided that the large victorian hostel for single men in Fieldgate Street should close by March 1989, and said that the Stepney Neighbourhood Committee should have full control over the future of the building after its closure.

Local Councillors and the St. Mary's Centre have since maintained that the hostel should not be finally shut down until a full resettlement programme has been agreed, and a working party which was set up to oversee the administration of the scheme has suggested likewise.

There can be no doubt that the ageing hostel is thoroughly unsuitable in its present form, and the residents should be adequately rehoused in accommodation much more suited to their individual needs. However, there is widespread concern that the timetable allowed for the resettlement of residents will not allow for this to be considered.

Another disturbing aspect of the decision to close the hostel was the absence of any recognition that there will always be a demand for housing for the single homeless in this area, and that merely to ignore this need will be to force many single homeless men and women into dangerously vulnerable situations both in the immediate vicinity and across the Borough whilst they search for urgently needed accommodation.

It has been suggested that the building might best be used in the future to meet just this need, but there would have to be a full renovation of the interior to provide adequate space and amenities which are now sorely lacking. This will cost a lot of money, but once the Housing Sub-committee has reached a final decision on whether to accept the recommendations of the working party, it may then be possible to start planning in more details for the future.

Proposals for Action

In order to help achieve a significant rise in living standards in the St. Mary's Ward, we propose that the relevant authorities should:

1. Identify areas of vacant land and maximise the development of large family dwellings for cheap and affordable rent, or workshops for local workers and small businesses.
2. Carry out a comprehensive survey to determine the ethnic make-up of each estate, and initiate allocations procedures to redress any imbalances discovered.
3. Determine ways in which to provide effective support to ethnic minority families who are subject to racial harassment, including a clause in each tenancy agreement which would render the perpetrators of such harassment liable to eviction.
4. Bring a halt to the policy of declaring families intentionally homeless when a member of that family can be seen to have been settled in the Borough previously,

PENSIONERS' LUNCHEON CLUB

The St. Mary's Centre introduced the Pensioners' Luncheon Club in July, 1987 due to the pressing needs of the local pensioners, particularly of Asian origin. The Pensioners' Luncheon Club was the only appropriate method to facilitate some of the untold miseries and burdens from the home exiled Asian pensioners. Indeed the idea of a Pensioners' Luncheon Club has been widely appreciated by its participants and the pensioners provisions available at the St. Mary's Centre have been utilised adequately. As a result, the number of participants are growing day by day. Moreover, various pensioners' activities have been carried out since its formation and are striving hard for its future accomplishment.

A number of trips were organised during the past year, including a trip to Margate coast, Windsor Safari Park and Wimbledon and many others are in progress for next summer. The most delightful cultural events were the Eid parties and celebrations for most of the pensioners, especially the Muslim elderly who were overwhelmingly pleased.

The advice sessions and discussions, which take place at the Luncheon Club have great impact on the Asian pensioners who actually do not understand the complete system of the welfare state, immigration laws, housing etc. This helps the local elderly enormously to ease their legal and technical problems. However, it is essential to highlight that it could have been more difficult to attain such an upsurging success within a very short time without the zealous and enthusiastic effort of the St. Mary's Centre. Despite transport problems, the pensioners participation ascended optimistically and successfully, throughout the year.

The Pensioners' Luncheon Club is part of a package organised by groups in the voluntary sector, because the statutory provisions are not available for the Asian/Bengali Muslim elderly. Our thanks are also due to the co-organisers Dame Colet House and St. Hilda's Community Centre.



Pensioners' Group during their Luncheon Club at the St Mary's Centre.

Proposals of Action for Social Services (Stepney Neighbourhood)

The Authority should prioritise the needs of Old Age Pensioners in order to alleviate ongoing problems faced by them, in particular, Asian and other ethnic minority pensioners.

The following proposals for action will redress the imbalance and tackle the needs of the Asian and other ethnic pensioners living in the Stepney area of Tower Hamlets :

1. Day Care Centre for pensioners
2. Sheltered housing with provision for worshipping for Asian ethnic pensioners.(e.g. muslim etc).
3. Adequate transport with escort provision for pensioners.

The emphasis should be on their linguistic, cultural and religious needs.

YOUTH WORK AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

There is accumulating evidence that the St. Mary's Ward has an acute absence of facilities — particularly recreational facilities, open spaces, youth clubs and other youth related activities in the area. Although a large number of young people living in the narrow densely populated streets in the south western part of the Ward where housing conditions are both squalid and appalling and also severely overcrowded. These facilities are non-existent. The authorities have made no real attempt to tackle the lack of youth services.

Youth work and activities with young children did not begin with the St. Mary's Ward until the St. Mary's Centre started developing in April 1987. Although Shapla Shangha is the first group originally aimed into these aspects of activities, but failed due to lack of resources. However, the level of facilities in this locality is very limited. As a result of this, young children are bound to play in the streets which are strewn with refuse, dangerous objects and fouled by animals. This kind of hazardous environmental conditions have a detrimental effect on health and growth. Furthermore, the young people residing in the south western part of the Ward have a great deal of enthusiasm and determination to



Pensioners relaxing in the beach during their outing to the Brighton sea front

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

contribute in the development of their needs in various aspects of youth activities, but this depends on statutory help and support provided by the authorities.

In order to make youth provision available, we recently were able to set up a youth club in the basement of TOC H (a community building at the 38, Newark Street, London E1). This is the only space available in the area which is of temporary benefit to the young children living in the area. The club is initially operating on four evenings per week and is open to youth and teenagers regardless of colour, creed or race. Finally, the activities of the club are very limited for obvious reasons of space and the scope of operating activities are inflexible and limited by the virtue of having residents and accommodation at the top of the TOC H.

Furthermore, the St. Mary's Centre has been giving equal importance to sports and recreational activities of children in this locality. As a result, we have successfully developed two football teams jointly with Shapla Shanga & with local youth participation.

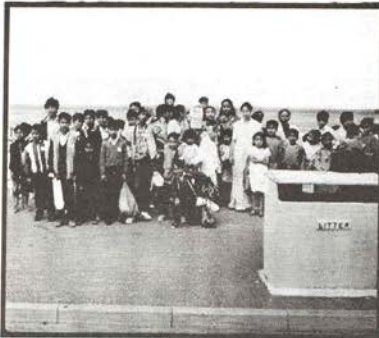
The full complement teams are now taking part in various football tournaments up and down the country.

Proposals for Action

- The Council (Stepney SNC) should examine ways to provide youth club facilities.
- The Council (Stepney SNC) should make efforts to prioritise various young peoples related needs to the south western part of the St. Mary's Ward.
- ILEA should give high priority to building a youth club to cater for the social and recreational activities of young people.

Holiday Projects and Play Schemes

Since the establishment of the St. Mary's Centre, we have emphasised on the importance and needs of the children in the Ward. This was also primarily to help young children keep off the streets during school holidays by encouraging children with eventful activities. The scheme, organised in the summer of 1987, was a huge success with a very high turnout.



Day trip to Margate during Summer Project



Participants at the Summer Project

The St. Mary's Centre undertakes the organisational responsibilities for both Easter and Summer projects in conjunction with other groups operating in the vicinity. The activities range from outings and trips to historical places, games, educational and cultural, crafts, dressmaking, painting etc. which involves hundreds of local children.

(A separate report is produced with exclusive composition and evaluation of the summer project available at the Centre). The projects were jointly organised with the Asha Women's Group.



Day trip to the Thorpe Park during Easter Project

Camping and Trips Abroad

Camping and youth exchange is equally important for young people. Apart from day trips and outings, the St. Mary's Centre first made an impact by organising a trip abroad to Belgium during the summer of 1987 for a group of local youth and secondary school pupils. This was an opportunity for learning about other countries in an informal setting with a view close to real life. Many youth have used this educational opportunity as a holiday as well.

As this was an educational tour, a separate report has been compiled by both group leaders and participants with aims and achievements of the visit. This report is available at the Centre.

Introduction

Martyr's Day (Shoheed Dibosh)

For the last three years, the St. Mary's Centre, in conjunction with other organisations, commemorated the anniversary functions to pay respectful tribute to the Martyrs of the Bengali language movement in 1952 (21st February). The 21st February is distinctively marked to the Bengali speaking people living around the world today. Such a remembrance events, acts as a reminder to us of the struggles that inspired us to achieve the rightful status of the Bengali language in the world.

At the Martyr's observation day in 1986, it was unanimously resolved by a packed house meeting that the St. Mary's Centre should work towards establishing a permanent Martyr's monument (Shoheed Minar), a replica of a national monument in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Accordingly, the proposal has been submitted to the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) for inclusion in a primary school package for Settles Street, London E1. The ILEA has accepted our proposal. The St. Mary's Centre has also approached the Bangladesh High Commission for both moral and financial assistance. This request has been passed on to the Bangladesh Government's Cultural Affairs Committee for assistance. We are still waiting to hear from them. However, we are hoping that the project will be a great success and the fullest co-operation will be sought from the community at large, as well as the relevant authorities.

Victory And Independence Day

The Liberation struggle until the 16th of December, 1971, and the country's official independence on the 26th of March, 1972, was celebrated by the St. Mary's Centre last year by organising a discussion seminar followed by cultural events, many distinguished guests were present at both the celebrations.



Cltr. Jan Alam speaking at the Victory Day Celebration



Eminent Nazrul Geeti vocalist Khaled Hussain singing at the Victory Day Celebration

The Berner Festival

The original initiative of St. Mary's separate festival was not possible due to acute shortage of ideal open space and to avoid duplication. Hence, we were happy to participate in the joint initiative to organise the Berner Festival.

Last year, the St. Mary's Centre, in conjunction with the Bangladesh Youth Movement, and other groups, jointly sponsored the annual Berner Festival which, as usual, was a huge success.

The East End Festival (TEEF)

The St. Mary's Centre, for the first time, participated in the TEEF this year. The festival activities consisted of various activities including cultural aspects, an exhibition on Bangladeshi heritage and it was a full day event for the whole family. The festival was very successful and attracted a large audience of local people.



Participants at the East End Festival '87

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Christmas And New Year Gathering

At the St. Mary's Centre, we made a relentless effort and attempted to go beyond both cultural and religious boundaries. The objective was to achieve harmony.

As in the past, Christmas and New Year festivities were jointly organised by The St. Mary's Centre and Asha Women's Group. Local children and mothers participated in the gathering in their hundreds.



Participants at the Christmas & New Year gathering



A section of the audience at the Nazrul Festival '87

It was a week long programme, (Sunday, 28th November to Saturday, 5th December 1987) - a very eventful Festival concerned solely with Nazrul's life and works and covered various aspects of his works through seminars, songs, dance, dance-drama, poetry recitation, books and portrait exhibitions.

The Festival celebration was held at a set venue - The Devenant Centre, Whitechapel, except the openings, at the Bow Theatre, and attracted hundreds of multi-racial audiences from all over Great Britain.

Amongst other distinguished guests of honour included His Excellency Mr. K. M. Safiullah, High Commissioner for the Republic of Bangladesh in the UK, and Kobi Mafuz Ullah, a

NAZRUL FESTIVAL '87

Special aim of the festival was to introduce the life and works of poet (Kobi) Kazi Nazrul Islam to a wider audience outside both Bangladesh and South Asia. He was acclaimed as the epoch-making rebel poet of Bengali literature and regarded as the most outstanding non-communal poet of the Bengali nationalism. Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899—1976) was an enchanting lyricist and composer of outstanding genius. This was the first of this kind of Festival celebrating his pioneering works outside the Indian sub-continent. The tasks of the festival were entrusted by a special committee of interested persons with propogative knowledge and understanding relevant to the works of Kobi Kazi Nazrul Islam. It was a unique and significant event as it was organised in the heart of East End which has the largest Bengali speaking people, not only in the United Kingdom but any where outside South Asian Sub-continent.



A section of the Dance Drama at the Nazrul Festival '87



Eminent Nazrul Geeti vocalist Fatematur Zohura singing at the Nazrul Festival '87

leading researcher in the field of Nazrul's life and works, from the Nazrul Institute in Dhaka.

With the help and co-operation of the Bangladesh High Commission, a group of twelve artists, including eminent vocalists, distinctive dancers and tabla players, travelled from Bangladesh to participate in the Festival in UK.

The artists group was led by the team leader, Kobi Mafuz Ullah, and managed by Omar Farooq Khan, Manager. It is notable that the travelling expenses of the artists was borne by the Bangladesh High Commission in UK.

The Nazrul Festival was enthusiastically sponsored and administered by the St. Mary's Centre with the financial help of the Tower Hamlets Arts Committee, Tower Hamlets Entertainment Department, Wapping Neighbourhood, Greater London Arts, Arts Council of Great Britain and the Tower Hamlets Adult Education Institute.



Late Ahmed Fakhruddin with Prof. Rafiqul Islam during the initial planning of the Nazrul Festival (June '86)

BANGLADESHIS IN STEPNEY

Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Equality (THARE) prepared evidence in January 1986 and submitted to the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee on Race and Immigration about the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets, and broadly in Great Britain. The St. Mary's Centre actively participated in the process.

The submission detailed the issues and problems confronted by the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets. The report submitted made serious impact on the following issues listed below:—

- Immigration and divided families
- Housing
- Homelessness
- Housing co-operatives
- Education
- Media and broadcasting
- DHSS and Welfare Benefit
- Employment and training
- Health needs of the Bangladeshi community
- Section 11 — local government action in Tower Hamlets
- Racial harassment in Tower Hamlets
- Local authority services and Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets

The government have now published a report called "Bangladeshis in Britain".

Following the publication of the Government's report about Bangladeshis in Britain, the Chief Executive of the Stepney Standing Neighbourhood Committee (SSNC) in the Autumn of 1987, prepared a brief summary about meeting the needs of Bangladeshis in Stepney, and a number of recommendations below is the brief extraction of the St. Mary's Centre's response to meeting the needs of Bangladeshis in Stepney. We welcome this positive initiative.

We have presented our own recommendations, because our main concern was the Stepney Neighbourhood's proposals are only tinkering with the problem when what is needed is a complete and radical change in direction. The St. Mary's proposals for action are based on the experience of Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets, and in particular, the St. Mary's Ward, over the last 10 years, and in particular the experiences of the people using our services.

The St. Mary's response is in 3 parts :

- Part one looks at some of the changes necessary in the overall structure and operations of the Council and the Neighbourhood.
- Part two focuses on the 2 key issues, employment and housing, that we feel we have most to contribute on.
- Part three looks at the needs of the different groups within the community — women, under 5's, elderly, youth and people with disabilities.

The report is available from : The St. Mary's Centre.

WOMENS NEEDS IN ST. MARY'S WARD

- A community centre to cater for the needs of women to be set up in St. Mary's Ward where women can enjoy a welcome break from poor and dilapidated housing conditions and pursue new interests.

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street



Introduction



Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street



Introduction



Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Project Launch

Project Launch

3 July 2019

Kobi Nazrul Primary School

After the funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund was confirmed, East End Connection (EEC) organised a project launch to introduce the new initiative to the public, provide details, receive feedback and invite people to join either as volunteer community participants.

STRUGGLES OF BANGLADESHI SQUATTERS OF MYRDLE STREET AND PARFETT STREET (1975-1995)
An East End Connection Project

The project will engage community volunteers to help reveal the struggles for decent housing by Bangladeshi squatters living in Myrdle Street and Parfett Street, the establishment of the Sylhet Housing Co-op in 1985, the transfer of thirty-four properties to the Co-op through Greater London Council funding, and the vote to transfer its assets to two local housing associations in 1994.



Do you want to learn about the experiences of Bangladeshi squatters living in Myrdle Street/Parfett Street?

Do you want to be involved in researching and documenting the lives of these people?

Are you interested in sharing the stories with the wider public?

If the answers are yes, then please come to the project launch to find out more about the initiative and how you can get involved.

PROJECT LAUNCH

Wednesday, 3 July 2019, 6.30pm-8.30pm
Kobi Nazrul Primary School
Settles Street, London E1 1JP

PROGRAMME

1. Project Information
2. Presentations:
Soyful Alam (housing campaigner and a founder member of Sylhet Housing Co-op)
Jon Hems (a founder member of Sylhet Housing Co-op)
Terry Fitzpatrick (squadding organiser)
Halima Khanom (Heritage Officer, Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives)
Maureen Roberts (Senior Development Officer, London Metropolitan Archives)
3. Refreshment

ALL WELCOME!

For more details and to book a place for the project launch, please contact East End Connection (EEC) by email: office@eastendconnection.org.uk



Supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund. East End Connection thanks the people that fund Britain's diverse heritage.

The event attracted a diverse range of people, including some previous squatters and activists. The edited version of the transcripts of the presentations are provided below.

M Ahmedullah

Project coordinator

My name is Muhammad Ahmedullah, and I am helping with the project. I will first take you through my slides very quickly, which will provide some overview on the project, and then pass the podium on to the speakers. They will talk about their experiences and provide some more detail about the struggles of that period - what it was like squatting and struggling for decent homes.



This is a Heritage Lottery funded project. It is a very small project. We could have applied for a bigger project, but we went for a small project and got the funding. The purpose of the project is to generate interest in the topic, and heritage in general. Bringing out hidden or less known heritage to the fore, so that other people will take an interest and take the work further. We are trying to be a catalyst, to introduce, bring out and show the way so that other people will take the work forward.

It is a one-year initiative that will look at interviewing people, but it is not a full oral history project. We will interview people and record voices and try to understand their experiences, and then work out how to best present and preserve their stories.

A bigger project may come in the future, but there is a lovely lady in the audience, who is undertaking a PhD at the Queen Mary College

Project Launch

on the topic. So, she will be the one who will do all the real and detailed work over the next couple of years. Then we will know more fully the stories of the housing struggles. She might say something later.

Now, I will take you through my slides, and then pass the podium on to the speakers. In the publicity, we said we want to learn about the experiences of Bangladeshi squatters in Myrdle and Parfett Street, but this project is not confined to just these two streets. It will cover this locality including New Road, Commercial Road, different histories between the two roads and this road and Fieldgate Street. We got a lot of interest, a lot of interest, and had communication by email and phone. Many people wanted to contribute and a few even started to share some of their experiences by email.

Just to repeat what I have said before, we want to generate in people a love of our history and heritage. In the past, I, for example, was not very interested in heritage and history. And then I realised how damaging it was not to know your roots and not understanding how things happened in the past. It is not possible to explain the present without an understanding and knowledge of the past; it is not possible to learn lessons from history. We will keep on making the same mistakes again and again. When you study history and heritage, obviously you enjoy that too, but you also understand your present better. And then you learn a lot of lessons which you can use to influence developments, dynamics and plans for the future. And you can also protect yourself, by learning from strategies adopted by people in the past when fighting and struggling; how people achieved success and won against powerful forces. So, there are lots of lessons to be learned from learning history.

You know, like this society - the English society and European societies - have a good tradition of keeping records. Recently, I was reading the journals of the first voyage of the East India Company. In 1601, they left London. And when you read these journals, you get access to the captains, and other people who were on board who experienced various things and wrote them down. They were dealing with new things and how they were trading, engaging with other people, and their relationships with their peers. They kept information on navigation, including latitude and longitude recordings, and the observations that they made during their journey. But if we did not

have these records, then that whole world of experience would have been lost and unknown to us. So, that is why we want to encourage, especially the Bangladeshi community, to become more interested in recording, editing and preserving. This way, they can also participate in the whole process of heritage preservation, generation and interpretation.

This project invites people to join as community volunteers, who will be provided with training on archival research, researching community history and oral history. Maureen Roberts, who is present here, will talk about London Metropolitan Archives, what they have in their records, and how they will support the project. Similarly, Halima Khanom, from the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, will say something about their resources and what kind of help they will be giving us.

As stated before, this is a small project that involves interviewing fifteen people – nine Bangladeshi squatters from that period, three men, three women and three children of squatters; six others, some people who helped the Bangladeshi community in their struggles and supported the setting up of the Sylhet Housing Co-Op. The Project Coordinator will supervise volunteers and arrange the training; keep records of the project as it develops and collect materials from the archives. I was speaking to Maureen earlier, a few days ago, and she told me that one of her colleagues is familiar with a lot of the GLC (Greater London Council) materials that are relevant to this project, which is in the London Metropolitan Archives. So, that will give us a lot of material, which we can have a look at, regarding what the GLC was doing concerning the housing struggles of the local communities.

The oral history training will be provided by the Oral History Society. The purpose of the oral history training, although this is not an oral history project, is to enable the participants to gain more insights into how you can approach the topic and how you bring out the best in the people that you interview. The methods that you can use to gain more understanding, the ethics involved and all kinds of useful things.

One other thing to point out is that we also want to train five squatters from that period, to help us run some guided walks of the area. We will produce materials for guided walks, and Soyful, this gentleman here, who will speak, is in a YouTube video, where he took

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Prince Charles for a walk in 1987 to show him around the dilapidated housing conditions. I watched the video and saw how Prince Charles was taken through the roads around here.

So, we want to create a walk, where the squatters from that period will help us run guided walks for a month, as part of the project completion. For the interviews that we do, we will produce a written account of the interviews in addition to the recordings as well. And we will put them together, plus any materials that we generate from the research, archives, and so on, into a PDF publication. Because this is a small project, there is not enough money to produce a printed book. We will also produce an exhibition. We are keeping records of all the things related to some people on video, and whoever is interested we can interview them, and then put together a short video documentary. Any materials that we generate, which may be suitable to be deposited with the London archives, we will do so, and we will be in constant communication with them to make sure that we generate suitable material and data in terms of the required quality.

We invite people to join the project. Those who are interested can send us an email to request an application. We will send them some information with an application form and then they can decide whether they want to join the project. The submission date is 22nd July 2019. People who want to join must let us know by that date. And then in August, we will organise an induction for those who join and then the project will start.

I would like to invite Soyful Alom, who was a housing campaigner, and a founder member of the Sylhet Housing Co-op, in addition to many other things, to speak about this topic today.

Soyful Alom

Previous squatter and a member of Sylhet Housing Co-op

Why squatting? In the early or middle 70s, Bengali families started to come to the UK and there was a housing shortage. Most of the Bengali people in London worked on low-income jobs and could not afford to buy a house. There was a long waiting list in local council housing. There were also other issues like no go areas, racism, racial attacks and racial harassment. Bengalis also had linguistic problems,

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as they were mostly recently arrivals to the UK. Coupled with low income and being in the UK for a short period meant that, by then, they were not able to adequately pursue learning of English.



Most of the properties in this area, in the East End, were dilapidated and they lacked facilities, such as inside toilets and bath. And there were certain areas in which no Bengalis or newly arrived immigrants could go and live because of the fear of attack by their neighbours. Also, because of racial harassment, racism and poor employment prospects elsewhere in the country, people from other areas started to come to the East End to live. Obviously, because of the council's waiting list, people could not go straight to the council for housing, so they approached the Homeless Persons Unit. People living in Tower Hamlets could not get housing, and those from elsewhere that wanted to live in the East End, because of safety and employment reasons, faced further difficulties. The Council used to place them somewhere else, in Southend, Finsbury Park, Camden and so on.

Many council officers and the council were very abusive towards us in many respects. To address the issue of homelessness, they even thought about placing homeless people on a boat, in the River Thames. Some of the councillors even took up anti-immigration campaigns and went to campaign at the Home Office to stop immigration. They even went as far as Bangladesh, where they went to the British High Commission to stop encouraging them from issuing visas because they cannot re-house the Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets.

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Here, I am not talking about squatting. Others will talk about it. But there were some people involved in the squatting movement at that time that we need to remember. They were Terry Fitzpatrick, Mala Dhondy, Farrukh Dhondy, Gedu Miah, Khosru Miah, Kazi Karim, Rahim Bakth and many others that have helped thousands of families to squat and make their lives comfortable in whatever accommodation they had.

Obviously, I did a few things as well but that was during 1980-81. In addition to squatting issues, we were also involved with many associations or voluntary organisations like the Homeless Families Campaign, Sylhet Housing Co-op, and so on, dealing with many other issues. We took our campaigns to the GLC and they helped set up many self-help projects like co-operatives, housing associations, and so on. They also encouraged many housing associations to invest money and provided generous grants to develop the houses that were closed or boarded up.

In addition to housing and homelessness, schooling was also an important issue. There was a shortage of school places as the planning authority failed to build new high schools that were needed, according to the population. As such, we worked to help build seven new primary schools, a proper college and a secondary school in Tower Hamlets. At the same time, we also had to campaign against racism and the BNP. Their attacks were a regular feature of our life; however, we overcame them.

About our housing campaigns, the Tower Hamlets Council were completely non-cooperative. We campaigned through our MPs, who took up the issues at the House of Commons and the relevant select committees. We lobbied political parties and attended a great number of political party conferences to lobby leaders to convince them that housing was an issue. On many occasions, we faced abuse and were shouted at. However, we took our campaigns to the people who were making the decisions.

The Eastern Housing Company attracted visitors include people like Ken Livingstone. His cabinet came quite a few times to Tower Hamlets and tried to change the policies. We had several cabinet ministers that visited the area. People like Sir George Young, David Waddington, His Royal Highness Prince Charles, also came to Tower Hamlets. They visited squatted housing, saw the poor housing

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conditions and business properties in the area.

Prince Charles, as the president of River Conference, raised this issue. There was a debate between staff at number 10 and the River Conference regarding Prince Charles getting involved in politics by raising the issue. He told them that ‘it’s my country, I have every right to involve and campaign for better housing and better human life.’



Rampart Street

Images taken from a Youtube video called Prince Charles visiting East End

But we remember how the media were completely negative. They linked up this story from East London to refuse collection in Kolkata (Calcutta). I still have a video recording of that. What a nasty right-wing media they were, portraying us in this way.

In the end, because of our campaigns and the needs of the East End

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was presented well, we saw regeneration companies being set up, like Bethnal Green City Challenge and Spitalfield's Task Force, and the Housing Corporation providing extra grants to housing associations. Later, changes in administrations also resulted in improvements in Tower Hamlets.

Now, I wanted to come back to this area. Jon Hems, myself and many other people that lived in the area. Our streets were declared a Housing Action Area by the GLC. They set up a steering committee with partners and residents and provided generous grants to housing associations to improve and convert single units to two-bedroom or three-bedroom units in Fieldgate Mansions. Most of the properties there had no basic facilities like indoor toilets and no bath facilities. For the private housing, they provided improvement grants.

We encouraged the GLC to set up a master plan for the area and created a housing cooperative, even though the local authority was very non-cooperative. They did not do anything to help us but the GLC provided funding to set up the housing cooperative. We attracted additional funds to improve the properties. It was an exceptionally long struggle.

Most of the properties had no proper foundations, which we discovered halfway through our improvement efforts. So, we had to go to the Department of Environment, and the GLC, and to other people to the campaign for additional support. We attracted extra money and used scaffoldings to keep the buildings standing while developed the foundations underneath. The area also attracted environmental improvement grants.

We set up this primary school, Kobi Nazrul, because the people living in this area had to travel using the busy Commercial Road to take their children to school. There was a rubbish vehicle depot here. We had to fight and struggle with Tower Hamlets Council to relocate it to build a primary school on the site.

Then, in 1986, there was a change of administration, and the Liberal Party took over the council, which was a bloody nightmare. There followed a bloody struggle. The Liberal Focus (as they were known in Tower Hamlets) that ran the council were fascist, in my view, and failed to listen to their national leader. We (first) went to see David Steel and then to see Paddy Ashdown (when he became the leader). They told us that because they called themselves Liberal

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Focus, they had nothing to do with the Liberal Party. So, they (the Liberal Focus) started torturing the Bengalis, right, left and centre.

They considered the proposal to get homeless people to live in boats on the River Thames. In 1994, the progressive local community and the Bengali community joined hands together and campaigned for better and improved facilities, and we managed to get rid of the Liberal Focus. Since '94, the Labour Party – including myself being a Labour Party member – started to address the issues.

I remember over the last 20 years we attracted over a billion pounds of regeneration money into this borough. But of course, we have had to give up a lot of things. For example, most of the local housing stock had been transferred to new housing companies, because that was part and parcel of the regeneration funding. We see the changes in East London. We have seen the change in Tower Hamlets. We have seen the changes in this area.

The young people were going through a worse time. According to Queen Mary's Professor Fish, based on his research, there was hardly anybody coming out with a degree from Tower Hamlets. We had two or three university campuses in Tower Hamlets, but hardly anybody from our community. Now, we can see how the environment has changed.



We have hundreds and thousands of people coming out of universities with degrees. I am not only talking about Bengalis, but I am also talking about the local population in general. They are coming out with good degrees, taking employment in Canary Wharf, in Bank and so on.

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I will just give one example and finish. The City and East London College had three sites. In Bunhill Row, they delivered A-Level English language, literature and so on. In another site in Islington, they also delivered good education. We had two sites in Tower Hamlet, and you know what they were doing? Dressmaking and hair cutting. That was the ideological development of the local authority and the ILEA. People like us campaigned and we managed to get a tertiary college. Tower Hamlets College was one of the best colleges in Greater London at the time, but I am not sure about it now. So, things have changed, things have improved. We managed to get rid of both political and non-political forces from East London. If you look at what the liberals did, where are they now? They have been completely wiped out. It is now Labour, but it does not mean they are doing brilliantly. They must do better. With this note, I will end my discussion. Thank you.

John Hems

Previous squatter and a member of Sylhet Housing Co-op

Good evening. Thank you for inviting me to this event. What happened in Parfett Street in the years 1982 to 1985 was a dramatic and significant battle against eviction. It resulted in a rare victory for all concerned. It changed my life for the better. It benefited hundreds of people immediately, and possibly over the years, thousands of people. It is a story, which has never been recorded properly.



This was before the camera phone, before social media, and the internet was a future dream. So, this project is important, and well done on getting it funded. When I was asked to attend and speak at today's event, I asked, do you want the long story or the short one. They said how long is the long story. I said well it would take three days and several trips to the pub. They said you have got 10 minutes.

The housing battle that took place in Parfett Street was complex, and it involved a lot of different actors over several years. In ten minutes, I cannot do any justice to that. So, this evening, I am just going to recall a couple of glimpses of what I have witnessed and what particularly happened to me.

Heritage is the sum total of individual experiences and memories of very many different people. Very often their recall is conflicting and contradictory. I am sure this project is going to have a lot of fun with that. My first glimpse is very personal. How did I come to call Parfett Street home?

In 1982, I was homeless again. In the few years I had been in London, without money, contacts or employment, I had been homeless more often than not. And here I was again with a rucksack on my back, my worldly possession in it, wandering the streets looking for somewhere, anywhere to live. And I got lucky. A friend of a friend told me about an empty room. Something that I was to later learn was a rare thing in Parfett Street in 1982. As early as I could the next morning, I found my way to Parfett Street for the first time, and I knocked on the door of number twenty-five. The man who answered, Charlie Langford, seemed a bit confused about me being there. He was drunk the previous night. But I went up the stairs and found that empty room, unpacked my bags and moved in before he had a chance to change his mind.

I had arrived in Parfett Street. I was dead tired and went to sleep in my new room. The next morning, I felt much refreshed. I woke up, open the window of my second-floor bedroom and looked out. I realised then that by some kind of magic, I, the previous day, had gotten on a number 253 London bus in Dalston, and I had travelled 5,000 miles to another land. I was now living in Bangladesh.

In the next few weeks, I got a job in an all-night garage. I settled in well with my housemates and made friends with the neighbours, and Parfett Street quickly became a happy home for me, my first

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real home in London. Two months later, we received a bombshell, a letter arrived. Firstly, it gave us the good news. The area had been declared a housing action area. This meant investment was going to be made in what The Sun newspaper recently called 'the worst slum in Europe'. Then they gave us the bad news. It was not for us. We were not included. We were all going to get evicted.

There are moments in life when you realise that you have no choice but to fight. And for me, this was one of them. At long last I had found a home and I was not going to give that up willingly. I decided that they would have to drag me out of number five, and I would fight them all the way. Looking back now, I realised that I was privileged to witness and take part in what happened next. The community came together. We were driven by desperation. Everyone realised we were going to be made homeless. And against all the odds, we won. What we did not know at that time was just how hard a fight it was going to become.

Another glimpse. One year later, one day, I think it was in 1983, that a white van came down the road with four thugs in it followed by a rubbish truck. The men have been hired by a well-known Housing Association still current today, on behalf of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. They attacked one of the houses, broke off the front door, dragged and bullied the family out of their house. They backed the rubbish truck up and threw the family's possessions from the first-floor window into the truck. They then used sledgehammers to smash up the bathroom, the kitchen and the toilet, and for good measure on the way out, ripped out windows and the door, and breeze blocked them up. They then left.

They left that family in a state of great distress, in a gutter. This was a turning point for us. We rallied round, got a taxi fare together and helped the family to get to a hotel in Finsbury Park. The Co-op was, by then, getting organised. In the next week, we re-entered that house, we repaired everything, and we declared the house Co-op property. We allocated it to a family that was living in a terrible condition in one basement, and they took it. Many people said we would be arrested for what we had done.

The next time the thugs arrived, they were accompanied by the police. On that day, over 100 people turned out to confront that eviction. The police realised that a whole community was going to

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fight, and they left that street without undertaking the eviction, and never came back. What we did not realise at that time was that we were standing on the shoulders of others.

Ten years before another battle of Parfett Street had taken place. One which scored a great victory, the forcing of Tower Hamlets Council to issue the UK's first squatting licences. Now, it just goes to show how the past, even if you are entirely ignorant of it, informs the present and that is a good justification for this project.

So, the result, we got a deal. The Co-op purchased 34 houses in need of repair in a forced sale from the London Borough of Tower Hamlets for the total sum of 77,000 pounds, with 100% mortgage from the GLC. A year or so later, with the help of Solon Housing Cooperative Service, we applied and gained the £5 million plus repair grant from the Housing Corporation. Later, the Co-op had problems and the men in suits arrived to take transfer of the properties. But the fundamental victory was secure. The vast majority of the squatters in Parfett Street became secured tenants in improved properties at affordable rent.



It is sobering to recognise that today in quite different circumstances, the Co-op would have never happened. Squatting is now a criminal act. Most councils in London have now sold off surplus properties. If you are under twenty-five in London, an affordable rent is an absurd dream. The story of Parfett Street is about a community that took a united action to achieve what everyone has a right to, a home, security of tenure at a price they can afford. And that is a story well worth

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telling. This time we do have social media to help us. So, good luck with this project and I wish you very well. Thank you very much.

Terry Fitzpatrick

Previous squatter and squatter activist

My unfinished memoir is called *How it all Began*, which I will finish because there is now such renewed interest.

In 1974, I moved to East London and was not homeless. I was working. I was bricklaying, which is more or less what I am doing now. But there was a big squatting movement, and it was very exciting. A lot of homeless people and being a squatter, being an activist at the time, the 1970s was the era that changed this country.



At the beginning of it, the miners could bring down Edward Heath's government, but at the end of it, Margaret Thatcher was in power. We still essentially live in a Thatcherite era, whether people like it or not.

I squatted in Aston Street, in Stepney, where there was also some Bangladeshis squatting. They got in themselves. Some of them paid somebody to move in. And there would be a knock on the door, can you help somebody? Eventually, at the end of 1974, I gave up full-time work. I had a van, (and if you have got a van and some building skills in London, you will always make a living) and became more or

less a full-time squatting organiser.

At the time we were contacted by a group called the Race Today Collective, which comprised Darcus Howe, who was very famous, Farrukh Dhondy, who has been mentioned as a writer, Mala Sen, his wife, who is now dead. They have made films and wrote books that are very well known in their own field. Working with them, we began an overtly political campaign. I stopped working with white squatters, not deliberately, but my time was taken up with Bangladeshis.

I found that Bangladeshis would act collectively, there was no fear of squatting, there was no fear of taking over properties once it had started. Abbas will tell you in a moment about Nelson Street and Varden Street. There was this little area around here where people had moved into properties. Nobody was doing anything. Everybody had a relation, and everyone knew somebody. So, it just spiralled from there and we started breaking into houses here, there and everywhere.

In January of 1976 on a Saturday morning, we booked a room at the Montefiore Centre where we formed the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG). The heads of 50 families came together at the meeting. At the back of the Montefiore Centre, there was a building with sixty flats but almost empty. It was called Pelham Buildings.

On the Easter Saturday of 1976, I, Farrukh Dhondy and five families, the first five, broke into some empty flats at Pelham Buildings. We picked the August bank holiday weekend because the GLC workers would not be around.

Within six weeks, there were 300 Bangladeshis in the building, and by the end of the summer, we were overcrowded. That gave the spur, and everybody was just squatting themselves. We gave them a leaflet in Bengali, a legal warning in English, and put that on the front door, telling them they are your rights, and gave them a telephone number to call for legal help.

In 1977, the GLC changed hands and the conservatives got control of it. We thought they were going to move against the squatters. By the end of the following year in 1978, 2,000 Bangladeshi squatters were living in GLC buildings alone. We thought that the GLC under the Tories would move against us. In fact, what we came up against was the first inklings of Thatcherism. The guy, who was the housing chief, called George Tremlett, pushed through something called a special exercise, which sounded quite ominous. What it was, was that

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every squatter in the GLC property in London would be given one offer of accommodation and given the rent book. The Bangladeshis got re-housed overnight.

The Tories were pragmatic. It was the Labour Party that hated the squatters because the Labour Party was the biggest landlord in London. In Tower Hamlets the biggest concentration of publicly owned or state-owned property outside of the Iron Curtain was owned by the state. It was owned by the London borough of Tower Hamlets and the GLC.

We went up to a meeting – me and three Bangladeshis - in Vauxhall Bridge Road, where we expected an argument and to be presented with an ultimatum. But they said we will offer your members one unit of accommodation and a rent book for where you are or in any area of your choice. George Tremlett had admitted that there was a problem with racial attacks, why ... there were so many Bangladeshi squatters and many of them were tenants who had given up existing tenancies, handed their rent books back, and gone. Do not want it.

I bailed families out in the old J4 van from Council estates in Poplar, where women were having their saris ripped off, excrement was being pushed through the letterboxes. They were living in appalling accommodations. Women that were traumatised, the guys could not go to work, the children could not go to school. These are areas, which are now almost entirely Bangladeshi. Forty years ago, thirty-five years ago, it was a different ballgame.

We went back to the basis of the Bengali housing action, which is the Pelham Buildings, Nelson Street, Varden Street, and Ashton Street. We selected fourteen estates where no reasonable offer of accommodation would be refused. These all happened to be in the Spitalfields, this area, down to Cannon Street Road.

There was of course a huge uproar that the GLC was planning ghettos. This was complete nonsense; it was stirred up by the left who played no part in the squatting movement whatsoever. But the GLC to their credit, because they did not care less, just went ahead with the re-housing anyway.

As far as I am concerned, at the beginning of 1974, the Bangladeshi community was unrecognisable to what it was five years later. By 1978-79, it had concentrated and more importantly, it had said that we refuse to live in areas where we are under racial attack. We do not

want to live there, and we are not going to live there. There was an alternative called squatting, and they took absolute advantage of that option.

My unfinished memoir is *How it all Began*.

For me, the change in the Bangladeshi community as it is now came out of the squatting movement. I then get into the resistance to racial attacks, the vigilante groups. Then we started getting into attacks on pubs where the National Front were drinking, petrol bombs of places, by us, not them. And then you start to talk about illegality. And, you know, 40 years on, it is something that people are still alive who were involved in some quite violent actions. That was my involvement in it. The Bangladeshis did it themselves.

The worst housing in Tower Hamlets was in the Spitalfields Ward and the wards down towards Wapping and Shadwell. That is where the concentration of private accommodation was. But during the late 1960s into the 1970s, there were Labour councils all over the country. To understand the situation locally, you must understand the mentality of labour councils at the time. There were people in their forties and fifties, who were being brought up in appalling conditions. As far as they were concerned, the thing to do was to flatten the old housing stocks and build new ones. Harold Wilson's government of 1964 to 1969-70 bought up whole swathes of inner cities, to knock them down, clear people out and build new, but they ran out of money.

It is called 'planning blight.' They would go in, they would rip the windows out, smash the toilets, put in over the windows. For any enterprising squatter, all you got to do is put the windows back in and fix the toilet, the water, the gas and electricity. That is what happened around here. You had Pelham Buildings, loads of old houses in Ashton Street, Varden Street, Nelson Street and Parfett Street. If you are that desperate for housing, the fact that someone pulled the windows out and someone smashed the toilet is not going to deter you. So, it was all there.

There is now a listed housing estate, Mercer's Estate, in Stepney. And it is now all highly desirable. We squatted it, mostly white squatters, there were some Bangladeshis. Labour Party were going to flatten them. This is the GLC, and Livingston was a counsellor, why he was up there I do not know because he actually voted to evict squatters. The Labour Party were going to demolish the whole of the

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Mercer's estates, which is now a desirable place. It has all been sold off, you will not get in there for under 900k. We are going to flatten it and build concrete tablets, which of course would then be flattened again.

The squatting movement was able to prevent the demolition of the Mercer's Estate. There were properties all over London, loads and loads, mostly Council owned government, state-owned property that had been bought up and left empty for redevelopment. But as money ran out, the redevelopment never took place. Parfett Street was still largely Jewish owned by a company called Epracent, which still got a shop up in Brick Lane.



Helal Uddin Abbas

Previous squatter, activist and local politician

I think squatting was the best way for us to secure our basic needs. The conditions were extremely poor. I was a squatter, and it is a novelty to me to talk about it. We broke the law. And you know, some people are embarrassed to talk about it, as successful Bangladeshis, to talk about our past. I do not think we were squatting out of choice. Out of desperation, a very good friend of mine, David Robins, wrote a manual for squatting. One of the reasons for the desperation was because of the racial discrimination that existed

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and was implemented through the institutions. In implementing the solutions in David Robins manual, some of us who took part were trying to bring change. The quality of housing that we squatted in was not fit for human habitation.



I remember when Prince Charles came to visit Brick Lane, they immediately slapped dangerous notice structure on every building and charged the poor landlords. They did not want our future King to see how appalling and decaying the conditions of people living in the area were.

I was living as a student in a squat in Varden Street. One of the good things was that there was a lot of comradeship between the squatters, between the communities. We saw a common need, a common need to help each other. I do not know how people did not die, thank God. I was part of the occupation in Camden, in 1984, which was due to a sad death of a family. That has not changed, and we are reminded by the disaster, the criminal disasters we saw in Grenfell. So, I think safety is a big issue for us.

I think social housing is still an issue. One of the things that we need to look at is how do we show our communities to ask for necessities from this housing association. I was involved in the housing action group, then became very closely involved with the Sylhet Housing Co-operative, which became a housing association - one of the very few BAME housing associations that have not yet been eaten up by the bigger sharks. I think it is especially important that we use this organisation and the housing associations within the oral history project. I hope this will all complement some of the work and history

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of the Bangladeshi struggles of how we got here, recorded for future generations. Thank You.

Halima Khanom

Heritage Officer (Learning & Participation), Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives

Hello, my name is Halima. I am the heritage officer based at Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives. I am here to explain a little bit about what the archives will be doing to support the project. What has been interesting is listening to rich accounts from Soyful, John, Terry and others from their first-hand testimonies and perspectives. From our perspective, we have a historical collection of the history of Tower Hamlets. I have been trying to go through and see what elements of it can support this project. So, some of what you see now is reflective of what we have heard, but [we have] a few visual accounts and some newspaper cuttings that reflect what has been said or written.



For those of you who have never visited us, we are in Bancroft Road, next to Queen Mary University. We are the repository for the history of Tower Hamlets, our geographical boundary. That is why the materials connected via the project will be hosted there for the use of residents and future researchers and anyone interested in this vital history.

There has been a long history of housing activism in Tower

Hamlets and, you know, things like rent strikes and the Poplar Rates Rebellion. All of these have been happening since the First World War. That was when the first pressures on housing began with a lack of housing and an increasing population. So, it is important to set that context. That is pretty much what we will be doing, using the collections for the volunteers who come through this project. The context of the project in terms of the history of housing activism in the area is particularly important.

I am going to go through the history of the Poplar Tenants Defence League, and the roles of Reverend Walsh in 1938. Rent strikes were happening well before then and examples of tenants coming together putting pressures on landlords well before then as well, since the end of the first world war. Lots of people have said that we could have several books on this history, which is still the case here. I am going to slip through to the area that we are talking about. Of course, the next pressure that came up on housing in Tower Hamlets Area was during the Second World War, which left massive bombed damaged areas. This caused shortage of housing as people who had left the area during the Second World War came back and had to be housed. Many of the previous housing in the area was no longer there.

In terms of Parfett Street, we have a few photographs. We have had a history of people, including residents, donating things to us. We have a couple of other photographs reflecting later years. Some of the years we are not entirely sure of. We have often read these materials alongside testimonies that you have shared with us today. That is why the question that is coming up repeatedly is how we are going to record this history. Our records are in no way complete. You cannot read this in isolation. I am looking forward to seeing what materials are collected within this project. I think someone talked about this as well.

Of course, all of this was happening within the context of racial violence and a lot of policies that were being imposed onto the Bangladeshi community. That is reflected quite strongly in our newspaper cuttings collection. So, this is just a real tiny snapshot, adding to some of what Terry was talking about.

The battle really between the squatters and the police and the bailiffs over the several years reflected the racialised nature of battles of the Bangladeshi community. We are particularly interested in

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supporting a project like this because it is focusing on the Bangladeshi experience of squatting in the area.

So, on something like this, for example, if you are reading it on its own, it might show that things were imposed on the community? I think what is so vital and so exciting about this project is chronicling the history of resistance. This is what is coming through strongly, and that is what we are very interested in recording and reflecting on. I thought this was a great, funny picture.

Our whole remit within this project will be to give access to the collections to all the volunteers, support them in archival research into the collections, support them in framing some of the questions for the oral history interviews, though we will not be running the oral history training itself. We are hopeful that this project will help enrich the existing collection.

Maureen Roberts

Senior Engagement and Learning Officer, London Metropolitan Archives

Good evening, everyone. Unfortunately, I must apologise because my stick thing will not work because it has been encrypted. So, I cannot show you the slides, which had nice pictures.



I am from London Metropolitan Archives, and our role in this project is as a partner where you can research the materials that we have. We are the largest publicly funded local authority run archive repository in the United Kingdom. It is the City of London

Corporation, that is our council. We have over 100 kilometres of records and have just under 50,000 visitors a year with 20,000 written inquiries annually. We take in about 200 new collections every year. Unfortunately, this is not one of the collections that we can take in because it is specific to the area. Our remit is London wide, and we try to tell the story and history of London - we think of ourselves as London's story box.

We do that through a lot of different types of collections. We do that through London's public organisations, such as local governments, courts records, hospital records, prison records, churches records, church organisations, non-Anglican religious bodies, private institutions, clubs, schools, charities, associations and pressure groups.

We do it through businesses and industries, through families and individuals, and collections can be of any size. They can be literally a paper bag full of materials, or it can be rows and rows and metres and metres of boxes that get brought in from an organisation or an individual. Our process is to catalogue those items and to preserve them for posterity.

Our earliest document dates from 1067, the William the first charter, shortly after 66, when he conquered, and all the way through to the present. We have a large Conservation Studio, where the conservation of items is done. People have talked about photographs and other things that they might have. If you have paper materials that got damp or have moulds or bits chewed around the edges, it is possible to conserve them, which will last another 100 or 200 or even 1000 years. So, do not throw away anything that you have relating to this project. Please see if they can do conservation on it first.

I am going to go straight to some of the records most relevant to this project. Part of our remit is to document the capital's diverse and unique communities. So, we collect as much as we can from different communities. One of our huge collections is the Greater London Council, the GLC records. You are the people side of everything that happened during that time. We have the government part of it because the council was responsible for the services, which considered best dealt with on a London wide basis, and we have all those records. The housing policy committee was responsible for all housing policy matters relating to the acquisition, purchase, and development of housing by all agencies; rehabilitation and improvement of

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housing owned by the Council; home loans; matters relating to the management, maintenance and disposal of council dwellings; the planning and development of Thamesmead; matters relating to new and expanding towns. You can access our collections online, although you cannot see the real thing until you come to the archive. There is a lot of information online.

I have had a person on work experience, one of our work experience students, researched through the collections to see what she can find on this topic. We have found quite a lot of materials that I think will be of interest to this project. Perhaps some of which material you will be refuting.



One of our officers, an archivist, has been undertaking a lot of research, as it happens, about exactly this, the struggles of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street. What he discovered was that we had a lot of un-catalogued materials, so those will not be available to the public. They are not in any shape or form for public use, but they are there for your information. So, when you come into London Metropolitan archives, we will be able to show you that material, and I am sure that would be of interest also.

Somebody mentioned Darkus Howe and Race Today. We have information on Race Today and Darkus Howe as part of some of our collections. Also, if it is of interest, we have the bomb damage maps of the whole of London. So, if you want to look up and see what that was and where things were affected, then you can do that also.

That's it. We are looking forward to having everybody come along.

Bodrul Alom

Son of a squatter and community activist

Thank you very much. Just before waiting at the venue at six, I was thinking about how I have seen Tower Hamlets changing in terms of politics, in terms of racism, in terms of fascism. Racism has changed but not fascism. The reason I say this is because I had a frustration that I want to share. I deliberately left it to right at the end.



Just before six o'clock, I had a call from the head of this school. She received a call from the Mayor's office informing her that it was a political event, so she wanted to cancel it. The head was very kind and kindly agreed with Ahmedullah and I that it was too late to call the event off and that it would be unreasonable.

I want to ask the audience a question. Do you think this event was in any kind of shape political in nature? It is a pure heritage project and we wanted to discuss issues that are not easily and proudly spoken about. I want to share one more thing before we end tonight.

Regarding the Kobi Nazrul Primary School, I was the first chair of the governing body. I had struggled with the head and many people regarding the name Kobi Nazrul. They wanted to call it something else, a different name for the primary school. Believe me, we had to struggle with the head and many of my political colleagues. My brother was on the governing body, along with me, and we managed

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at the end, by fighting tooth and nail, to get the school named Kobi Nazrul to reflect the community. And we did achieve that after struggling hard. But believe me, it was not an easy fight. We had to put up a long and unreasonable fight concerning this.

Before I conclude, I would like to take this opportunity to record my special thanks and appreciation to the head of this school, who could have, if she wanted, kind of pulled the plug at that last minute. But she did not. She believed me and my colleague and told us that, if we can ensure that it is non-political, then they would have no problem. She was willing to take the risk.

I would like to put on record our thanks and appreciation to the head, and especially [to] all of you who have made the effort to come to participate in this heritage project event. On behalf of the trustees of East End Connections - I happen to be one of the founder trustees and someone who developed the idea of this project - I take this opportunity to thank you.



Kobi Nazrul Primary School in Settle Street

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Activists

Activists

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

How it all Began

How it All

Terry Fitzpatrick

Interviewed on 24 February 2020

At Stepney Community Trust

By M Ahmedullah (Project Co-ordinator)

After the original interview was transcribed verbatim, further discussion was held with Terry to ensure accuracy. Terry edited the document and added more details. The original recording and the verbatim transcript will be handed over to the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives (THLHLA).

My name is Terry Fitzpatrick. I was born in Liverpool in 1946, which makes me 74 this year. My family were themselves immigrants, all of them. They came from Ireland. Liverpool had a huge Irish immigrant community, very, very Catholic and very religious. I was brought up in a quite strict Irish Catholic family, which is very different from now. We had to go to church on Sundays and had to go to mass. Everybody went to mass. I didn't like it personally, the kind of restrictions that there were those days.



When I was 15, I joined the British Army, which you could do in those days as a boy soldier. I spent two years in the British army and came out. I didn't like it, once again, the restrictive atmosphere in the army.

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The 1960s was a new beginning. There was a lot more freedom around. There were various kinds of music and social movements. So, I moved to the south of England to a place called Hayward Heath in Sussex. I got [into] the building trade and got myself a job as an apprentice bricklayer.

While living and working in Sussex I knew people who lived in London and met them socially, and one of them was squatting. So, I came up to see them and then I thought well, this is much more exciting than what I'm doing. So, I moved into a squat in Poplar, which I had opened up myself. I just broke into this house, connected up the electricity and the gas, decorated it and lived there for a few months. Then, I went to the squatters' movement in Poplar and squatters' movements were very big at the time. But the centre of the squatter movement activity in East London was around Stepney. So, I moved and opened up another house that was bricked up by the GLC - these properties were pretty much council-owned.

I attended squatters' meetings in 1974. There, I first met Bangladeshis who were squatting and were having trouble. The GLC was trying to throw them out. What originally happened was that there were many criminal elements around Cable Street. They were West Indians, some Somalis and some Maltese people. They would break into a squat and sell it to the Bangladeshis and give them a rent book. And the Bangladeshis would think, well, this is it. I've got a rent book. And the GLC would come around and say, well, you're a squatter. Then the squatting movement got involved. I became involved with them, saying, well, they're squatters, they're the same as us, so they then got the protection of the squatting movement.

In early 1975, I met some activists from something called the Race Today Collective, which had come out of the Black Power movements of the 1960s. In particular, two people called Farrukh Dhondy and Mala Sen. Mala is now dead. She has written two incredible books about women in India. Farrukh, as anybody who knows the media, was for 20 years one of the commissioning editors of Channel Four television. They were very serious activists.



Farrukh Dhondy



Darcus Howe



Mala Sen

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We started to meet other Bangladeshis who squatted, some of whom had relations who were homeless. So, we then started to help them break into other places. We also came to know that Bangladeshis, GLC tenants in Tower Hamlets - in Poplar and the Isle of Dogs - were being harassed and they wanted to get out of those areas. So, we would then help them get out of there.

They were legitimate tenants, but women were having their saris pulled off in the streets, they were having s**t pushed through their letterboxes, terrible f****g times. They just gave the rent books up and moved into squats in Varden Street and Nelson Street, breaking into empty council flats. Some of these council flats had been empty for two years. The council just left them as they were. They were bad managers and negligent.

This movement, not a formal movement, gradually developed. In January 1976, we brought together the heads of about 50 families, 50 squatters, to the Montefiore Centre. We formed the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG). While sitting there at the meeting, I saw these blocks of flats out through the windows, block of old tenements. When the meeting finished, I walked around and saw that the Pelham buildings were nearly empty, on the bottom of Woodseer Street. So, with Farrukh and six families - Mala Sen was in India at that time for a while, on Easter Saturday 1976, we broke into that building, ripped it off, and within, I suppose six or eight weeks, there were 300 Bangladeshi men, women and children living at Pelham House.

It all started from there. There were 300 Bangladeshi men, women and children concentrated in one block of tenements. When I look back on it, I still wonder how we got away with it. Why didn't the state come in? Why didn't the police come in? And I think the answer is, nobody wanted to be seen. Nobody wanted to authorise kicking 300 immigrants out on to the streets. The publicity would have been just too dangerous. Nobody was going to sign their names to that. So basically, we ended up with a very strong organisation.

Splits arrived then. Because it's Bangladeshi politics, there will always be splits. Somebody wants to be the leader. Then in 1977, the Tories came to power at GLC. The Tories had always been against squatting. We thought that we were going to have trouble. We were invited to a meeting in a GLC office in Vauxhall Bridge Road and I went there with three representatives. We went in expecting, you know, you are gonna have to get out. But they just said to us that you are all going to have one offer of accommodation. They said that they knew that the Bangladeshis were different from white squatters. They said that if we can tell them the estates that they want to be re-housed, they will put them on those estates. And it was agreed.

Then we made a list of thirteen estates, and later added one more which

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made a total of fourteen. They included starting from the Highway to Cannon Street Road, Farnham Street, St Jubilee Street, and right the way up to the Shoreditch area. I could go on about how this happened. It was a Tory administration in 1977, who at a meeting with an immigrant group told them that, essentially, they were illegally occupying their properties, but that they will offer accommodation to where they want to live. That means they just gave up.



A conservative administration of the GLC said you tell us where you want to live. We'll put you there and your community can grow from there. As far as I know, it's the only time any immigrant community has forced a national government or a city government to change their minds by saying we're not moving. There were by then 2,000 of them, 2,000 and me. How are you going to evict 2,000 people? The answer is, you can't. You've got to negotiate. And that's what they did. From that one decision by a guy called George Tremlett, the Conservative member for Twickenham on the GLC, it made a lot of difference. Re-housing started and in December of 1978 Pelham buildings was knocked down. To me, in 1978-79, the squatting movement wound down.

It took a lot a long time for the Bangladeshi tenants to get rent books because that was Tower Hamlets. It took a while for Varden Street and Nelson Street squatters to be rehoused, but there were no evictions. And the important thing to remember is that 2,000 Bangladeshis occupied state-owned properties and there was not one single eviction because the government, the state, whether it was labour or whether it was conservative, were frightened of the consequences.

The local council at the time had 60 councillors and they were all

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Labour. They were the old white working class who, to be fair to them, had fought against private landlords and fought for State Housing. But they were running a family business. Everybody was related to everybody else. If you were related to this Councillor, you went to the top of the housing queue. It was the usual municipal corruption. They didn't like Bangladeshis and they didn't like squatters.

But the national government, which was also Labour - Callaghan and Wilson governments - weren't prepared to change the law and kick the squatters out. When the Tories came to control the Greater London Council, in the May of 1977, they started to negotiate and there was nothing that Tower Hamlets could do.

At that time, there were different freeholds. Tower Hamlets Council owned a lot, like the big old blocks, all the stuff around that was built in the 1930s and 40s, particularly 30s, was GLC owned, because the GLC had built them. They were then called the London County Council, changed to the GLC in 1965.

It was a mix, the freeholds were. Some were Tower Hamlets, but what you did, the GLC didn't have its housing list. What you do is you apply to the borough, which is Tower Hamlets, and they would nominate you to the GLC. Or their own, but their properties they saved for themselves. You have to be white, Irish, Jewish.

The joke was, it was run by the kosher nostra, which were the Jews, to play on the mafia, and the Murfia, which were the Irish, and they ran the council between them. But they'd been through tough times in the 20s, 30s, and 40s. They'd suffered the bombing. And they thought, well, we fought against the private landlords. I understand where they were coming from because I had long conversations with them. And they said, yeah, we fought for this, our kids. And all these Bangladeshis come in and they want somewhere to live. And it's a similar thing now. I know Bangladeshis are saying we've got to stop all this immigration. There are too many people in the country. And you'll never solve the housing problem until you've [done it]. There are too many people in the country. There are too many people on the planet. And there's nowhere to build property. So, when politicians say I'm going to solve the housing problem, I just say you're lying, mate. You haven't got the money, and there is no land to build it on. So, to answer your question, we go back to a statistic.

Something like 85% in 1974, something like 85% of the residential property in the London borough of Tower Hamlets was owned by the state, either the Council, LBTH or the GLC. It was the biggest proportion of state-owned property outside of Eastern Europe. It was run by a small group, 85% of the housing was run by the Housing Committee. And if they didn't like you, you didn't get anywhere to live or you got the crap.

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In terms of the Isle of Dogs, we're talking about the decline of the docks. Because the docks, from Tower Bridge, down to Silver Town, the Isle of Dogs, was a driving force of employment. The first docks closed at St Catherine's by the Tower in 1968. Eight years later, every dock in Tower Hamlets had gone. Warehouses were closed. There was no employment and unemployment had rocketed.

You had all these rundown council estates and there was no investment in housing. In all these rundown council estates in Poplar or the Isle of Dogs where people had moved out, there were flats left empty, about 25% of some of the total number of flats. So, where do we put the Bangladeshis? Where do we put the Somalis? We put them down there, you put them into a white community that is itself being rundown and is resentful of it?

They can't take it out on the council. The Council is too powerful. So, they take it out on Mrs Uddin, Shanara Begum, (or whatever the name is), and pull her sari off in the street. Some of the women we took out were absolutely catatonic; they're on the verge of a nervous breakdown. People used to push s**t through the letterboxes, 'get out Pakis, get out'. Kids couldn't go to school? It was a different time.

My squatting life came to an end when the thing wound down. Don't forget, those are the centralists. I'm a builder and a property developer. I used to earn a living from a van that I had and certain bricklayers tools. I would always go and do work, build a back extension out in Chingford for somebody, for example. I'd always make money. But it was stressful because, particularly in terms of Pelham Buildings, because we had gone to people, me particularly, and said, come and squat here, it's going to be all right.

What about if it wasn't all right? What if the police and the bailiffs come in and they throw everybody out on to the street? That was always at the back of my mind.

The left would pick up an issue and walk away and leave it. I got myself into a situation where I invited these people to come and squat and told them that it was going to be alright. That means that I have got to stick with them through thick and thin. So, I was there right till the end. And yeah, it was great. They were the best years of my life.

I had nothing to do with the Sylhet Housing Co-op, but I knew it was going on. I helped to set up the Spitalfields Housing Co-op. But by the time the Sylhet Housing Co-op was set up in 1983, I was buying property and underpinning buildings. I had a skip company and was making some money.

There were loads of white squatters around here and they knew the rules. There had been evictions of white squatters in Parfett Street and the private landlords put dogs in and then left, and the squatters broke in again. The squatters made the dogs into pets. So, most of the Perfect Street was

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occupied by squatters and there were squats all over Fieldgate Mansions.



So, when Bangladeshis started moving in, they had a ready-made support base. Nobody was going to kick out the Bangladeshis because all the white squatters would have come out to help. The white squatters were left-wingers, anarchists, libertarians, that kind of person. All of them are gone and a lot of them are dead. So really, you were moving into an established little squatting community? How many properties have you got?



There is no Sylhet Housing Co-op anymore. I think it was in 1994 that they decided to disband, and the properties went to two housing associations.

Finally, looking back, your community came into a hostile environment. It was hostile. Most people couldn't speak English. Could they? I mean, the women certainly couldn't, which is why I'd learnt to learn Bengali in

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Pelham Buildings, otherwise you couldn't get through to the women. When something broke down, the plumbing, there's a leak ... 'fanifore'. What's fanifore? Does it mean it's raining, or does it mean the plumbing is leaking? It can mean either one, couldn't it? Fani phuri gache, ok fanivore, so I'll bring my plumbers tools. I'll fix the plumbing of whatever is wrong with it.

I watched women who've been brought out of a flat on the Isle of Dogs and put down into Pelham Buildings completely change. I mean had they stayed down there they would have had a nervous breakdown. Because don't forget a woman, she comes from a village in Sylhet, gone to Dhaka airport, come to London, down to the Isle of Dogs and people are putting shit in her letterbox.

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Bangladeshi Squatters

Bangladeshi Squatters

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Got into a lot of skirmishes with other youths

Got into a lot of skirmishes with other youths

Ala Uddin

My name is Allaudin, and I was born in Sylhet, present day Bangladesh, on 25 November 1971. I moved to the UK when I was an infant in 1975. In the winter of 1979, on 11th of December, when I was eight years old, I came to live in Fieldgate Street in the East End. I remember celebrating my birthday in November.

I came with my father, who had been to the UK on and off since the early 1960s. My mum and some of my other siblings were in Bangladesh. My elder brother was here working and my teenage brother, Mueen, was studying at school. They both lived separately but were near to each other. My eldest brother lived in Settle Street and Mueen lived in Myrdle Street, where we stayed after arriving from Bangladesh.



An example of a bedroom in a house in Parfett Street. © Daniele Lamarche

My mum came with my younger sister, about three years after I came. I wanted to go to school, that's why I came early. As I didn't want to miss out on school, my father and I made the journey. So, at

first, we stayed with our relatives, living at 1 Myrdle Street. He was my great-uncle who passed away several years ago. We would have our meals there and come back and sleep at 35 Myrdle Street.

I started school in January or February 1980 at Harry Gosling Primary. Then went to secondary school.

My younger sister, Nasima, must have been between four and six when she came. She was very young. I had to go pick them up at Aldgate Station because my mother made the journey using an airmail envelope address. She embarked on the plane in Sylhet, landed at Heathrow and showed people the address. They directed her and she made it all the way to Aldgate with my youngest sister.

The first few years of my life without my mum wasn't too bad. We used to have our meals at my great-uncle's place. It was easy for us to come back to our flat every evening. I was without mum for about three to four years.

At school, I used to have school meals during the day. Then, as I got older, I used to help prepare food for Abba [father] to eat when he came back from work at British Rail.

Initially, we didn't even have a stove in our flat and had to borrow one. Then we started cooking at our neighbour's place, who used to live in Romford Street, and bring the food to our house to eat. And later, we got a stove, an electric one. That's how we lived at that time.

When my mum came, I was about twelve years old. It wasn't easy to bond again with mum after the separation. I was also the sixth child out of eight children. She had older children and, I suppose, they related more to her than myself. I used to look out for my younger siblings.

My parents had five other children before me and the two younger ones. We were all jammed in one room. My other sister was in there as well. She was married, but after getting a divorce she came back to us because of health issues. My parents allowed her to come.

I was trying to do my GCSEs with my mother, my sister and me sharing one room. There was about three of us in that room, and my sister, my father, my younger sister and brother shared another room. My brother Mueen had his own room at that time. Then, my older brother and his wife expanded to next door by breaking through. So, there was about nine of us in four rooms.

The property was in a very, very, very bad condition. The windows

Got into a lot of skirmishes with other youths

wouldn't open because the curtain railings were broken, and the window had a hole in it. I suffered from asthma. I think the exhaust fumes from cars used to come through to the house. I suffered from Asma and often had a chest infection because of the cold. I suffered a lot then.



© Daniele Lamarche

(An example of a family living in one room, Parfett Street)

You know the East End is renowned for violence and being a hard place. I got into a lot of skirmishes with other youths. My wrists broke twice from fights. This happened once at school, and then, within a month, I got ambushed in another fight. I was trying to help my friend and they all jumped me at once.

This happened when I was about thirteen or fourteen while studying at secondary school. I couldn't play the guitar afterwards, after my injury. I used to play the guitar at school and never brought the instrument home because there was not enough space. And, also, Abba wouldn't approve of that, so I didn't want to disappoint him. He was very religious and very spiritual.

We had a lot of fun - the youths of our generation - socialising and enjoying entertainment. There was a lot of young Bengali children at that time living around here. Because of all the bombings and the poor quality housing in the area, there were lots of squats and empty buildings.

Some of the bomb-damaged buildings were demolished, which

created derelict sites where we used to play as children. We made camps and explored. Unlike today with its video games and things, in those days there was a lot more open space and outdoor activities.

There were also a few English kids around here playing on the derelict sites and open spaces. One English family that lived in 14 Myrdle Street was on the opposite side of us. They were known as the Smiths. We knew another called Andy Barker who lived in Settle Street. We used to play football and kicking around.

There were very few English people around here because it was so run down, and they didn't want to live around here. Eventually, they all moved out within a few years after we moved in. By the time I was 11 or 12, Andy Barker and they decided to go to Barking. Because we had a large community here and there were a lot of us, we didn't face much racism in the area.

When it came to school and when we interacted with members of the host community - the English or white kids - there was a lot of friction and fighting. The positive side to this was that the racist hostility we faced helped us develop a sense of community. This is still valued, within our generation anyway. It was a nice childhood. Overall, I'd say, 80% of it was happiness and about 20% was bad.

I saw a lot of businesses changing hands. All along there were fashionable clothes shops. Asil Nadir was there, one time. He became a multi-millionaire, now worth 140 million. He was a Cypriot who ran a bridal shop on New Road. I was about ten then.

It was very fashionable to shop in those fashion outlets, they were very trendy. The whole area around here used to be full of garments factories. A lot of people worked in the garments trade, which included cottage industries and people working at home.

Initially, everybody used to work in a factory because there was no electricity or facilities at home to work on sewing machines. But later, the women joined in and started working at home. People used to come around and deliver piecework and drop off garments for sewing.

Most people used to do lining of jackets for leather garments and coats. They would come and drop off the cut pieces and pick up the finished items. That's how women got involved in the garments industry. The demand was so huge, even our family, my sister, used to do sewing at home. My mum did some sewing to get me my first bike. It was a red BMX, which I used to go around. We had a lot of

Got into a lot of skirmishes with other youths

fun and I have a lot of happy, sunny memories.

I knew I didn't want to be in a factory at an early age and wanted to do well in school, despite the lack of environment and facilities and everything else that was stacked against getting an education. I wanted to get a degree or whatever because I knew, which I heard from my uncles, how important education was to avoid working in the factory.

My father was educated so he could have done much better, but he wanted to be within the community. He could have done well for himself.

I wanted to get a degree. I knew I wanted to do economics or whatever because I wanted to be rich. I wanted to work in the city and so economics was going to get me there. That's why I studied economics.

I used to come to 46 Myrdle Street, which used to be owned by a great-uncle. They used to live upstairs and later sold it to St Mary's Centre. That's how this became a community centre, called St Marys Centre. From here you could see the Natwest Tower those days. That's what I was focused on, you know, towards that [Natwest Tower] was my goal.

My older and younger brothers both studied computer science and they are doing well. But I got let down because of the lack of good housing. I performed poorly at GCSE. This was because we were still living in a squat in 1987 when I was due to take my GCSEs. Because of the lack of good housing, I had little choice - what I was going to do at A' Level or afterwards. I could have re-sat them all, but I didn't want to waste a year. I managed to undertake a B-Tec National, which was equivalent to two A' Levels, in business. As I studied science at school, I thought I would focus on business, which would provide me with a better knowledge base to achieve my dream. After that I went to study for a degree course at Greenwich.

We moved into a squatted property in the first instance. Many years later, I met Joe, who was working in Curries, an electrical store in Mile End. He said he used to like breaking the doors of empty houses for people to squat. In those days, he used to make money out of that. That's a bit of a general story.

The first thing I remember when I came in December '79 was that the roads were two-way streets, which later became one-way.

I remember all the drunks strewn in front of Tower House because that's where all the bosses used to go, like, you know, hibernate and sleep it off. So, there was a lot of them, and I felt sorry for these people. I remember broken glasses on the floor, and one had to be careful. Smashed alcohol and whiskey bottles all over the place. The alcoholic thing was an important feature of the area and one had to tread carefully to avoid the danger of being falling on broken glasses.

As a young child, I knew that I was living in a squat. In 1981, we went to Bradford to visit my Uncle who was living there. I think we passed through Harrogate in Leeds. In those days, I saw electric advertising and signs changing, which was quite a contrast from where we lived in London. Harrogate was the richest part of Leeds. I knew we were living in a squat because the control of the property went from the GLC to Samuel Lewis and then Southern Housing, and so on.

The property had two rooms and a kitchen. There was a sink with a square sink basin, which is now fashionable in many properties, but at that time it was not in fashion. There was a toilet, which we converted into a shower and had it plastered. Baba had a shower put in, had it plumbed and everything else so that we can have showers. There was no bath. We just went to the public baths in Whitechapel and Aldgate.

That was before mum and sister came along. We had baths next door when our neighbours moved out. They were Chinese. We knocked the properties together and there was a bathtub next door. My older brother and his wife lived there, along with my middle brother. At night, most of us lived in the two rooms at number 35 Myrdle Street. They lived in number 36.

I don't exactly remember what happened. But when we used to bang on the door, they were never there and one day we realised that they finally left. At one time, when we went inside after they left, we found suitcases full of clothes and other things. There were a lot of flares, you know, it was the late '70s or early '80s. I think they were from Hong Kong, and they never seemed to manage life here well. We never met or knew them. Only on one or two occasions, we sensed that they were there, but they were very discreet. I don't remember exactly what happened to them. We put together, numbers 35 and 36 Myrdle Street by knocking through the passage door. My

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brother moved from Settle Street, then he got married and he lived here with his wife.

It was so freezing living there. I had to leave the property and try and find somewhere else to go to get some heat. It was so cold. I'd go to my neighbours or my uncle's. It was so freezing, I tried finding some warmth in many places, like, for example, sitting in a shop. But sometimes we had heating from paraffin heaters. I don't think the gas heater ever worked. Paraffin carts used to come once or twice a week and they used to sell paraffin in jugs.

The first flat that we were in was painted red. The rooms were painted red and the windows never opened. All the time that we were there, we never managed to open the window. There was a hole in the window and the curtain rails were broken. The curtains were greeny and heavy drapes. You know we used to cover the window with a cloth. We could never open the windows in the front room.

At the back, there were no windows. You could open the back door and go to the back of the house, but it was full of open drains. Open drainpipes leading off to the yard, which was like a concrete surface. In the second property, we eventually put on wallpapers. My father bought wallpapers with an image of a man, but then he painted it with green paint. He didn't want the images of the man on the wall because he didn't want any kind of idol worship, which he instilled in us.

By the time my brother moved next door, I think there was a cooker or something that allowed us to cook. I don't remember exactly what it was like because I didn't pay much attention. All I wanted to do was to escape from the place, it was horrible.

My mum used to cook. Two of my sisters lived with us, and one of them was divorced, they used to cook. My sister-in-law also cooked occasionally while minding her children. The women took turns to cook, I think. That was before we moved. I used to do what I used to do. As I mentioned earlier, I used to prepare rice and things for Abba to eat when he came back from work. I was around ten years old then.

My mum and sisters worked at home when we moved to Romford Street. We were no longer squatting. We had been housed. We had two machines. They worked on lining and sewing belts - you know, finishing off belts and things like that.

We used to go and play in the car park, which was part of the

hospital. That location has been rebuilt. It is no longer recognisable. It could easily fit 30 cars but on weekends the cars wouldn't be there. So, we would go there to play football, which was a significant part of my upbringing.

We also played hide and seek, hanged out, climbed the hospital properties and the car park. We also picked blackberries during the summer. During the winters we mostly stayed indoors, or at the YMO (Young Muslim Organisation), at 54 Fieldgate Street, where we played table tennis, carrom board and other board games. They helped me a lot.

You know, although people took divergent paths in their lives, everybody reverted to that core belief that had been instilled in them, and their upbringing, YMO and so on. The last time I saw some of the people they were no longer with the YMO. Everybody's hair had turned silver.

There were fruit trees around the area but now the places where fruit trees grew have been built on. We used to go looking for fruit picking, to pick fruit and things like that. But usually, we'd just want to go rambling and things like that, as children do.

There were some projects, which I came across. At number eighty-two or eighty-three there was a young Bangladeshi lady, called Miss Angie, and she used to take us during the summer holidays to a playground in Hackney. I used to go play around with other kids and we all used to go there to play. There were day trips to the seaside as well. We went to Walton-on-the-Naze, where we used to have things like treasure hunts. We had to find treasures, which was very fun.

There were many dumps around the area overgrown with plants and trees. Wherever there were bushes, there were usually blackberries and other things, like nettles. We used to go to these places to pick blackberries. We never took any home to wash or add salt or anything like that. We just used to pick and eat them. Some people used to tell us not to have them.

There was one guy, who was always drunk, named Paddy. He used to drink and be racially abusive to all the Indians around in the area. He used to keep telling everyone: 'Don't want you' and 'Go home', and 'What're you doing here?' things like that. It was very foul and there was no way of reaching him. He used to live in Tower House, and many years later they found him dead somewhere in the Docklands.

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He was probably the most significant racial abuser. I personally got mugged once.

I think living in the East End, as you grow up, you start to feel like an East Ender. I think everyone else also felt like that. There were different forms of racism, which were more, I would say, in outer areas of Tower Hamlets. As the community grew and Bangladeshi people moved to other location in the borough, they started to have more nasty neighbours and things like that. Personally, because I've lived in this area so long and there's been a large Bangladeshi community, my experience of racism has been limited.

Our property was taken over by Samuel Lewis Housing Trust from the GLC. They were a charitable trust, and then after a few years Southern Housing took over, that's what happened.

I hear Soyful Alom and others were trying to get their house in Parfett Street refurbished and assume that's what Sylhet Housing Co-Op did. The St Marys Centre got started and I remember them coming to see us in Myrdle Street, which I think must have been around 1987 or something. They told us about the project. My father brought them into the front room. I was so ashamed for them to see our house in that condition, you know, such an unfit place to live. I complained to my father why he brought them in, which wasn't fit for human habitation. He said you have to live among the community and that everybody else was living like that.



Fieldgate Mansions in Romford Street. Now (above), before(below)

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© David Hoffman

The property in Romford Street was quite a contrast because they gave us a purpose-built maisonette. One of my sisters came to the UK in 1987 they didn't accommodate her. I had become 16 and almost a legal adult. My older siblings had grown up. So, they gave us a four-bedroom House for nine of us. It was still overcrowded but the environment was clean, and the surrounding made us feel like we were human again. I said to baba that this is what we should have deserved as we was educated. But he was religious so he didn't want to outdo each other. Religion played a big part in our lives, at least, in his life anyway.

Before moving to the four bedrooms maisonette in Romford Street I lived eight years as a squatter.

The thing is education, the lack of being able to, because I had to go all the way to Stepney and Aldgate and walk there every day. Nowadays, there's a school run, and people take their children to school. There was none of that for me and I had to walk all the way over. So, the first year in school was a bit patchy and that's what I regret sometimes but other than that life is such, isn't it?

Got into a lot of skirmishes with other youths

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We slowly became a force for change

We slowly became a force for change

Helal Uddin Abbas

Written interview response received on 30 March 2021

My name is Helal Uddin Abbas, I was born in Sylhet, Bangladesh. My family lived in Tower Hamlets since 1972. I went to a local school in the borough and worked in both voluntary & statutory establishments. I have been an active member of many local organisations, including the Labour Party.



When I first came to Tower Hamlets, there were many visible barriers for the BAME communities. For example, most of the public services were inaccessible for our community, which included racist housing policies and young Bangladeshi people not being able to access youth provisions etc. Racist attacks were a part of everyday life for many of us as the police and locals failed to offer protection, hence a local police station was opened in Brick Lane, to encourage reporting.

In 1976, my family had no choice but to squat a house in Nelson Street. It was a boarded-up house with no services (water, electricity or gas). The quality of the living conditions were poor. We were often harassed and threatened with evictions. Responsible authorities provided very little or no protection. I left our squatted house in 1978/79 and moved to a shared short-life house owned by a co-operative in Spelman Street.

There were some non-Bangladeshi white squatters around. But they rarely experienced anything like the poor housing conditions of migrant communities. The Bangladeshi community was leading a parallel life. This was due to racial discrimination and inadequate connection with mainstream services. One of the reasons our community faced barriers in accessing local services, I believe, was due to a lack of political representations.

The East End at the time was very much an unequal place with denial of rights for the BAME community and privileged services for the white community. The legitimate rights of our communities were denied until Bangladeshi youth groups started to get organised. We slowly became a force for change, from the mid-1980s onward. Both the former GLC and the local council operated racist housing policies. Many families, including my own, were denied access to safe public housing. We lived in overcrowded, poor quality private sector housing.

Some of the families were attacked by white racists. We faced a lot of hostilities and resentment from the host community. Often, our community had to organise patrols to protect families and children from racist attacks as the police took little or no interest in taking action against perpetrators of racist attacks on our people. The local authorities, at a local level, were disinterested in the housing challenges the Bangladeshi community faced. There was a great deal of mutual support between squatters, with assistance from some of our white anti-racist colleagues. A number of self-help groups were set up in Spitalfields, Parfett Street, Nelson Street, Varden Street, Adelina Grove and Commercial Street.

I started as a volunteer with a youth & community project soon after leaving school and later trained as a youth worker. In the early '80s I became a youth & community worker, followed by my appointment as a youth officer with the former ILEA, and then

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director of a national leadership training programme. Now, I work as a grants manager with an award winning anti-poverty and equality charitable trust.

In terms of voluntary work, I served on the committees of a number voluntary organisations, including being the secretary of Bengali Housing Action Group and the secretary, and later, chair of Spitalfields Housing Association.

It was our community organising and the collective voice that got the GLC to start talking to the squatters, followed by Tower Hamlets Council and then the police, who started to respond to the needs of the Bangladeshi community in the East End.

I think squatting was the best way for us to secure our basic housing needs at the time. The conditions were extremely poor. I was a squatter. We broke the law. Some people are embarrassed to talk about the past struggles and discrimination our people faced as they are now successful. In the past, we were squatting not out of choice, but out of desperation. The quality of housing that we squatted in was not fit for human habitation.

I remember when Prince Charles came to visit Brick Lane, they immediately slapped 'dangerous structure' notices on every building and charged the poor Asian and Jewish landlords. They did not want our future King to see how appalling and decaying the conditions of the people living in the area were.



One of the good things about squatting at Nelson Street was the comradeship that existed between squatters and the communities.

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We saw a common need and the common need to help each other. Our unity won us many demands and eventually resulted in much fairer housing policies. However, it is still not an even playing field when it comes to social housing for BAME communities, we only have to remember the Grenfell Tower fire of 2017.

I think social housing is still an issue. One of the things that we need to do is to show our communities how to ask for the necessities from the housing associations. I was involved in the Bengali Housing Action Group then I became very closely involved with the Sylhet Housing Co-operative. This was one of the very few BAME housing associations that were not eaten by the bigger sharks. It is especially important that we use this organisation and the housing associations within the oral history project. I hope this will complement some of the work and history of the Bangladesh struggles of how we got to here, recorded for future generations.

The lived experience of poor housing, education and anti-racist activities encouraged me to get involved in politics. I was elected in 1985 as one of the young councillors in Tower Hamlets and I eventually became Leader of Tower Hamlets Council in 2001.



We slowly became a force for change

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We found some peace

We found some peace

Md Kala Miah

Interviewed on 9 March 2020

At Stepney Community Trust

By Kamrul Islam, Community Participant

My name is Muhammad Kola Miah. I was born in Golapganj Thana, Sylhet, Bangladesh. I first came to England in 1963 through an employment voucher issued by the British government. When I first came to this country, for us Bangladeshis, the country was very cold. The people of Bangladesh here suffered a great deal. Although it was impossible to handle the cold, we had to cope.

We faced many other problems. White racists tried to attack us a lot and used to beat us up. Two or four of us used to be together, and we could not go out after 4 or 5 pm. The white kids used to attack us, so we used to live and go about our ways very carefully.

I came to this country alone at the age of eighteen or nineteen. At that time, I was not married. When I first came to England, I lived in East London in the Brick Lane area. I forgot the name of the road, but it was off Princelet Street.

After staying there for a while, I went to live in North London. I lived there for five or six years working in an engineering factory. They made parts for planes and ships.

I used to visit and socialise in Aldgate and East London, where I knew many people. After a few years in north London, I came back to live in Aldgate. Then I got a job at the Ford Motor Company, where I worked for eighteen years. On the day when I went for the interview, there were twenty-seven others. Only two of us got the job, me and someone else.

After I left my employment at Ford Motor Company, I went into business in the Brick Lane area. I established my own factory with sixty-machines and set up a cash and carry business. At that time,

people suffered a lot and faced lots of problems. They had very little cash and could not find safe places to live.

There were a lot of empty houses and many people squatted in them. I myself got into squatting first in the same road as I used to live. We also helped a lot of people with housing needs. There used to be people who had the knowledge and could speak well, so we used to seek their help.

Many of the squatted properties came into our hands, which we tried to control. Then we realised that it was no use just squatting. So, we explored developing a community cooperative to manage our housing needs. At that time Soyful Alom, a brother of Bodrul Alom, was there. He tried very hard and invited a lot of people to join, and there were also many people with me. Many of them are no longer around, like Azhar Ali who passed away.

We got together and founded the Sylhet Housing Co-operative. The first chair of the body was Soyful Alom. After that, they made me the chair and we made further developments. We prepared about thirty-seven houses, distributed the properties and started to live in them.

We improved the properties, had regular meetings to address the needs of everyone. I also got a house myself. Soyful Alom got a house and his father also got a house. It's a long story – onek diner kotha - and remembering them is very difficult.

After establishing the Sylhet Housing Co-operative, we found some peace and much-needed facilities. But after a while, we realised that it was not possible for us to effectively maintain and operate the Co-op. We then merged it with the CDS Co-operative, and we are still together as a merged body.

We suffered a lot before the Sylhet Co-operative was set up, which is a very long story. It is not possible to remember them all, but we surely suffered a lot.

The house that we lived in was a 'bhanga ghor' - broken house - and rainwater used to slip through. We had to live in that condition and repaired damages as much as we could. We had to suffer. It's a long history.

When your life becomes comfortable, you can forget the period of your suffering. As for myself, because now my life is more comfortable, I have forgotten about the sorrows of my past. I cannot tell you

We found some peace

everything because I have forgotten many things. We suffered a lot.

We could not go out after 4 or 5 in the afternoon due to white racists. When we did go out, we used to go in groups of four or five of us. Then the whites could not attack us.

I fought many wars with the whites and made cases against them. I was the first Asian person advertised in the media that fought wars against the whites and even went to the court. I beat eight people at one time, and the police made a court case against me. But they could not do anything to me as the court could not see how one person could beat up so many.

When the white racists used to find us alone, they would attack us. At that time, I used to work at Ford Motor Company. They used to call us Paki. They would say there is a Paki going, stop the Paki, beat the Paki, and start fights in that way. At that time, our people did not want to engage in any trouble. They wanted to save their lives and get safely home. The white racists used to come and surround us.

I used to take the train from Stepney Green Station to go to work. One day, while I was inside the house, there was a hit on our window. I remember [it] was a strong one. I came out, but no one else from the house came out due to fear. When I opened the door, they threw bricks at me, but the bricks did not hit me. There were some empty bottles near some small children. I took one in my hand and started to fight. I hit one of them very strongly, and the bottle broke. We fought a moving battle towards the station. I beat about eight people that day. But if they had managed to beat me, I wouldn't have had any bones left in my body that day.

But they couldn't beat me as I hit them, and the bottle broke. But when we got outside the station, still fighting, I regained my consciousness and tried to see if there was anyone with me. No one was there, and they didn't come out of the house out of fear. Then I realised that someone had called the police. The police surrounded the guy that I beat and said, to me, you beat that guy. I told the police, no sir, they came drunk and started on us.

The police didn't listen to me and took me and kept me for one night. Then they let me go, but I had to attend court on another day. When I went to court, many wondered what would happen to me. The judge asked me why I beat them. I told the judge I did not beat them. They fought each other with bottles. The judge asked whether

it was believable that one person beat up eight people. He thought that was not possible. That's what the judge said at that time. He said that we couldn't believe that one person can beat up eight people and not take that into account.

I started squatting around 1968. We did not need anyone to tell us about squatting. When you use your brains, you know about squatting. When you see houses closed and the windows boarded up and no one lives there, then you know they can be squatted. Others were squatting. Ten to twenty houses in a street were being squatted. Like Parfett Street, Myrdle Street, Romford Street, they had many closed and boarded up properties. Whoever got a chance, they broke open the properties, moved in and started to live there. That's how it happened.

When I started squatting, there were already people squatting. Quite a lot of people were squatting but they were not the majority. Some people were squatting, and everybody could see that, so we thought, so what if we did the same? Let's go and stay in the squats as well. That's how it started, and a lot of people did it.

We developed the co-operative by coming together in a united way, that's how we started the co-operative. When I started squatting in 1968, I was not married then, but there were families that we helped to become established.

The houses that we squatted in were in very bad condition. In Romford Street, where Samuel Lewis Housing Trust took over, all the properties there were squatted. In Parfett Street, many houses were squatted.

Most of the efforts to set up the Sylhet Housing Co-op was made by Soyful. I don't know everything and couldn't do everything. I was with him. After that, they also made me chair of Sylhet Housing Co-op. The houses were in very bad condition and had a lot of damp everywhere. No one used to live there before the squatters moved in. People squatted in those properties and worked and modernised them. They painted them, made them beautiful and did all kinds of things so they could live in them.

We found some peace

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Our Broken House was Better

Our Broken House was Better

Kazi Hurmotjan Begum (Shafia)

*Interviewed on 18 March 2021
At Stepney Community Trust
By Bodrul Alom*

My name is Kazi Hurmotjan Begum, known as Shafia. I was born in Bangladesh. I belong to the Kazi clan (Khandani Bangsha). There was a bil (a fishing lake) owned by my paternal grandfather, known as Hatim Kazir Boro Bil. We heard that during the British rule they took it away.



We were nine sisters and four brothers. After dying not many of us are left. There are only one sister and me still alive, the rest are all dead. I have my children and there are also many children of my siblings. We were from a top clan family background.

I got married in 1972 at a very early age, so could not undertake much studies. I came to this country in 1975 with my husband and one child. In London, I first stayed in my sister's house in Rampart Street, near Cannon Street Road for 2-3 months. They had one room and a kitchen. We stayed in a single bed, three of us. Then we squatted in a house in Varden Street.

As a child in Bangladesh, I did a lot and enjoyed many things. I got married at an early age and my husband was an older man. He was really good, peaceful and a man of fairness. He understood me and always showed kindness. Alhamdulillah, he was a good man.

When I first came to this country, I did not understand much or asked to find out. I went upstairs to the bathroom, got some water and went to the garden to wash. My husband told me, what are you doing, you can't wash in the garden in this country. He took me to the bathroom, turned the tap on and got me to wash there.

My first experience in London was very bad. The white people used to look at us in a bad way. One day, I went out with my child and they threw bottles at us, which just missed their target. This was around 1978 or 1979. It was the time when Altab Ali got killed.

There are so many stories, so many bad things happened, oh Allah. That's why I could not go out to study. My husband was scared to let me go out, he thought they would kill us. They used to beat us up so much and our people used to run away with their children. My child had to fight. I got in the middle of racism and fought hard and got a council house in 1992.

Terry Fitzpatrick gave us the squat in number twelve Varden Street in 1975. I don't remember whether he took any money in return. I don't know anything about it. The property was in a very bad state. My girl was born at that time. After that, we had to admit her to the hospital. There was no electricity and gas in the house. Terry helped us get connected to electricity and gas. My daughter got ill suffering from the cold. At that time, we didn't even know the name of central heating. There used to be paraffin heaters.

Number twelve Varden Street property was very cold, everything was broken and draught came in all the time. My daughter was in a

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serious condition in hospital, and they kept her there until she got better. My eldest son also got ill from the condition of the house. He still suffers from Asthma. The hospital never cared about why my children got ill. They didn't use to value the Bengalis.



The Bengali boys fought back and helped change the situation. The racists used to come to our houses to beat us up. Why do you think some of our children have become thieves and robbers? By engaging with them they have become like them. Why are there drug addicts in the community? When our young boys saw how the racists used to come inside the house to beat us up, they could not tolerate the torture of their parents in front of them. That's why some Bengali boys have become like them.

I don't think about my life as a squatter much. Whatever happened it was Allah's blessings. Now he is keeping us in a nice house. I give thanks to Allah. One time, I didn't even see a dining table. Didn't see a sofa in the sitting room. There was no central heating. Allah has given us so many blessings. Do people ever think about the bad old days? Most people forget the bad and difficult days, but I don't forget.

We were very close to some other squatters. Together, we did many things and made many changes. We lived well with our neighbours. We demonstrated together and campaigned for a housing association. But, later, we lost contact with them.

There are some people whose name I cannot remember anymore. But one was Jalal and another was Shiraj Bhai. There was another one with long hair. He used to go to meetings sometimes and I used to

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like that person. I don't remember his name. It could be Muhammad Huq. There were others too, whose names I don't remember. There was a councillor, and he was a good man. Many people struggled to change things. The racists didn't use to treat us as human beings. They used to think we are not human beings. This was clear from the way they treated us and their behaviour towards us. Some white people were very good, and they helped us a lot. If they could, I am sure they would have cooked for us.

In my squat, there was one room. I used to mix with everyone. Guests and travellers used to often come around. We all sat on the double bed in our room. Those days things were freer, so people would come and pop in more often. Everyone used to go to each other's houses to visit. We were a family, there were also single people. People used to visit each other.

We suffered a lot. We had to entertain guests in the bedroom, who sat on the bed. I had three children. We made a bunk bed for them, two daughters and one son. After my son was ill, my daughter also became ill, so we used to keep her in the cot. We could hardly find any space for praying, there was no space even for worshipping. At most, there were 2 or 3 feet of free space in the room. We used to pray in that space.



Once we got attacked in Vallance Road in 1979. I and another woman went there to go to a health clinic, which was in Underwood Road. We went there to get milk for the children. My friend had

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a baby so the two of us went there together. Hers was a daughter and mine, a son. I didn't use to go anywhere alone due to fear but sometimes used to go outside with at least one other person. People used to be scared to go outside even during the day. When two of us were going, they threw bricks and bottles at us from the other side of the road. They were white skinheads. The target missed us by the grace of Allah and we survived.

Terry and a few others convinced us to get our names registered with Tower Hamlets Council. They helped us with that to enable us to vote. Where we stayed in Varden Street, the house had four rooms. In each room, lived separate groups of people. There was just one quite large kitchen, which we had to share between us. This, often, caused disagreeable feelings but nobody expressed them openly. We all used the kitchen to cook but nobody bothered to clean up the cooker afterwards. It felt dirty but we never got into any arguments.

I was a squatter there for nine years, from 1975 to 1984. There were two families, and the other occupants were single people. Beside us, a husband and wife took one room, a single person took another and Sulaiman, who lived with two of his nephews, stayed in the largest room. We were on the ground floor and in the next room to us lived a single guy. Mina and her husband and Suleman with two of his nephews lived upstairs. The kitchen was in the basement.

We did everything to ensure that no conflict developed. So, when one family was cooking in the kitchen in the basement we didn't go there. When we were cooking, they didn't use to come to the kitchen. There was a mutual understanding about how to use the common facilities but no formal agreement. We developed and followed a routine.

Mina's husband, Salek, the poor guy used to get up at five in the morning to go to work at Ford Motor Company. He used to come back at 4 pm and used to finish eating by 5 pm. We used to go to the kitchen at 6 pm and finish our eating by 7 pm. By 9 pm we are all in our respective bedrooms. We didn't see a TV for seven years. There was no telephone either.

Our toilet was outside. All the time, it was cold. We used paraffin heaters for heating indoor, which gave a paraffin smell. The electric heaters were too expensive. In Mina's room, they couldn't turn on the paraffin heater as it made her sick. She was all the time taking tablets for vomiting. Her child was very small. She used an electric heater

instead.

Sometimes, people at our squat accused each other of doing this or that with respect to the use of electric heaters. But nothing serious ever happened in this regard. Most of us never used electric heaters but she used electric heaters because she couldn't handle the smell of paraffin heaters.

In terms of getting involved in local politics at that time, I did not go to any council meetings. But my husband definitely did, otherwise, how could he have got his membership card. I looked after the children. My husband went to the council several times. He told me many times that there was a council meeting and he had to go there.

There are still friendships between some of us. We all go to each other family's weddings and have our friendship. They also came to our children's weddings. They spend money and we also spend money.

When I had three children, the Council rehoused us in Jubilee Street. From Vardan Street to Jubilee Street, Sambrook House. We got a three-bedroom, one sitting room property in Jubilee Street.

Some people may think the move was from 'Kosto to Rokkha' (from suffering to protection). But the attitudes of people we faced in the Jubilee Street area was bad. Sometimes I felt Varden Street was better.

At one time they set fire to some blankets outside our property. My children used to cry, and we used to come together in one room, I think around 1984. It's better not to remember the times when we were in Jubilee Street. That place gave us so much suffering.

They also broke my window at Jubilee Street. We went to many demonstrations. Don't remember the name. Fatima and Parvin and Mrs Matin also lived there.

I stayed there for about 7 years. The Bengali population in the area was very small at first but more moved in later. It was because of racism that we left that place. Our broken house in Vardan Street was better for us. I used to cry for Vardan Street. Even though it was a broken house, I had a lot of 'maya' (affection) for the place. Tears flow down my eyes when I go through that road. Vardan Street was very peaceful.

When I was a squatter, I worked in a school for 2-3 years from 1982 or '83. Between 9.30 am and 12 noon, in the nursery as a classroom assistant, and between 12 noon to 2 pm as a dinner lady. My work as a classroom assistant involved playing with the children and looking

Our Broken House was Better

after them when others went to meetings.

The teachers and staff in the school were very good. They showed real affection towards me. They were not racists. At one time I made a mistake when I went to a school party for a teacher who was leaving. I went and sat in a space at the back usually reserved for the cleaners. A teacher came to me and said why are you sitting here. I said what's wrong with this? The teacher said this is not your chair; it's reserved for cleaners. You sit with the teachers. Then I realized that they were showing me the respect of a teacher. After my husband died, I became sick so could not work anymore due to ill health.



Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Houses in Parfett Street were not Good

Sharof Uddin

*Interviewed on 9 March 2020, at Stepney Community Trust
By Kamrul Islam, Community Participant*

In 1969 at the age of 14, I arrived in the UK from Bangladesh. I came to stay in East London. I got married in Bangladesh in my 20s and my family joined me here 1980.

I attended school for two years before starting to work in tailoring. I experienced financial difficulties. I came to live in 54 Parfett Street in 1983 with my wife at a 2-bedroom house with my parents and siblings. Before I had lived in Hanbury Street. Later, I moved to 24 Parfett Street.

I wasn't aware of the place before moving in but found the majority of the people on the street were squatters. Around 55% of people were Bengalis and the rest white.

The conditions of all the houses in Parfett Street were not good. Most houses were old and damaged. People thought they will not live there for long, hence they were not willing to do any repair. Most of the people were friendly and I am still on good terms with some of them. My children attended Swanlea School and Canon Barnett School in Tower Hamlets.

Among the squatters, there were two white men, Terry and Steven, who suggested creating a co-op titled Sylhet Housing Co-op and I got involved. There were many empty houses, but most of them were filled by squatters. There were around 30-40 houses at that time. They held regular meetings. Once we agreed on how much rent we wanted to pay, the Co-op submitted an application to the council in 1985 for funding to rebuild the area. They responded positively and offered a grant. We used it to rebuild the houses.

My squatting life came to an end after we started paying rent. We

were widely connected with other organisations in East London and had good relations with the people of other religions.

I had one daughter and two sons while squatting. They had some difficulties in their studies because of the squatting. But they were able to complete their education and are working now. I worked in the tailoring sector at that time.

One incident that I remember well is that one day while I was at work my son got injured outside our house. Workmen put up scaffolding to undertake some work on houses in front of our house. A part of the scaffolding fell down and my son got hurt on his head. This was very shocking for me.

We used to buy our groceries from Bengali shops in Brick Lane. At that time, there were few supermarkets. The Ramadan or Eid was not like now. There were not many mosques like we have now in Tower Hamlets. The Bengali people couldn't fast in Ramadan because they used to work long hours. Compared to that time, people are more religiously conscious now.

People used to work a lot during those times. But now, not many people work. There were no drug issues before.

Houses in Parfett Street were not Good

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

The Sylhet Housing Co-op Definitely Helped

The Sylhet Housing Co-op Definitely Helped

Soyful Alom

Interviewed on 9 March 2020

At Stepney Community Trust

By M Ahmedullah, Project Co-ordinator

My Name is Soyful Alom, and I was born in Sylhet, Bangladesh. I came to the UK at the age of 18, in 1977, and lived in a basement flat in Nelson Street. Then we moved to John Scar House, near the Rotherhithe Tunnel. It was a workhouse that we shared with another family. I attended classes after work at the Whitechapel Centre.



I became a member of the Bangladeshi Youth Forum known as Bangladesh Youth Front at the Brady Centre. I used to visit them and talk to those who came to socialise.

Housing was a major problem for us at our first address but soon we found a better place in Commercial Road. Later, we paid 'key money' for half of a house in Parfett Street. It was still overcrowded

but was better than the previous one. This was also what was possible to get.

My father tried to get another house in the winter but dealing with the council was very lengthy and laborious. They probably could not have offered us a safe place anyway. I saw people living in far worse housing conditions than us, and they were unable to find better quality accommodations.

In a nutshell, in this particular area, there were about 2,000 public housing properties. They were owned partly by the GLC, partly by the Samuel Lewis Housing Trust and partly by Tower Hamlets Council. There were also private landlords and some of the properties were in mixed-use. The mixed-use properties were divided into separate work and living parts. Working parts consisted of small workshop units.

When we came to live in Parfett Street, we saw how people suffered in mixed-use properties. The main issue for everyone was, where do we find somewhere to live? It was not only our problem it was everyone's.

The GLC and Tower Hamlets Council wanted to demolish and rebuild. One by one, properties were boarded-up, but people moved in and started squatting. Some paid money to existing squatting occupants, called 'key money', and became the new squatters. That's how the entire area was occupied and squatted by people. This was also our story.

The properties were overcrowded and not suitable for people who had to share. There was only one choice, either live there or find somewhere else to go. We had no choice but to live there and share with another family.

My childhood was spent as a student in Bangladesh. I aimed high and made efforts to get to further education. But while I was studying, my father came to London with a work permit. Later, due to a change in the immigration act, people like my dad were allowed to bring their families to join them in the UK. We were also lucky that my parents applied for a family reunion before I reached the age of 16.

In Bangladesh, where I was living, I attended a village school. The education system in Bangladesh wasn't very good at that time. They were not capable of enlightening people. Whatever education we had, we had to accept it. I enjoyed my village life with friends, family and relatives around.

After I finished my secondary education, I went to college for a

The Sylhet Housing Co-op Definitely Helped

year. While studying there, we were granted visas to come to the UK. So, I came with my mother, brother and sister to join our father in the UK.

Apart from education in Bangladesh, as a child, we used to play football, Hadudo and badminton. We used to visit relatives, go to the bazaar in a group, have food and chat a lot. But my main focus was on education. I also supported our family farm. My uncle, grandfather and the employees worked in the field. I would go and see them, support them or supply food. My main focus was education and playing games and sports.

In the mid-1970s, to get a passport in Bangladesh one needed a photograph. That involved travelling seventeen to eighteen miles from my village to the town. Because we were five or six people, we invited a photographer to come to our home to take our pictures. We then went to the passport office and submitted our applications for passports. It was also necessary to get permission from the civil servants. We sent our passport details to our father in London. He then made a visa application to the British High Commission in Dhaka for us to join him in London.

At the visa application interview, due to some translation issues, they were not willing to issue us visas. We had to come back a second visit. Again, they were not happy, so our father had to appeal. This time, they did a blood test - took DNA - which proved that we were all family members of our father. They issued the visas around mid-1977 and we came to the UK in December of that year.

The idea of coming to join my father in London was very exciting. For us, the UK was one of the best countries in the world. But when we physically arrived here, we saw a different situation. There was a lack of proper housing and dilapidation was everywhere. Many people experienced exploitation, and racism was widespread. Support and facilities for people were poor. We experienced a lot of difficulties during the first six months after coming to the UK. I seriously considered whether I should stay here or go back.

We travelled by Bangladesh Biman. It was a new airline established after the independence of the country in 1971. I don't think the airline was very supportive, and its customer services were horrible. The journey from Bangladesh to London felt very long and not very comfortable.

When we came out of the plane in London, we went through the

immigration process and [had] a medical check-up. When we came out my father was waiting at the exit. He came to the airport with my uncle and took us home by taxi.

When I came to London in December 1977, it was snowing and, obviously, very cold. It was very difficult, initially, to make an assessment about life in London. But after a couple of months, when the weather improved, I started to go and walk around with my friends. I also took up small jobs in the sewing industry.

But when I went slightly out of my immediate area, I saw different kinds of living conditions, accommodation and levels of cleanliness. When I went further towards the east of the East End, I saw that most of the houses were dilapidated, falling apart and boarded up. I saw an entire block boarded up. The area looked very poor.

We came to realise that this was due to a lack of investment by the authorities. It was clear to us that the GLC and Tower Hamlets Council didn't invest to keep the properties at a good standard. Legally or illegally, this was also an industrial area and people used to work sewing on the machines. They set up small workshops in the old houses, either in squatted or rented properties.

People used to work flat out. As a result, a lot of trash and rubbish used to pile up. The council was unable to clean the rubbish on time, which created more problems. Obviously, at that time, we used to always blame the government, any government, either labour or Tory, and the lack of investment and the poor leadership of the council. They had a different focus that resulted in inadequate investment.

Slowly, slowly, I started to meet non-Bangladeshis. The first were at nearby shops. They were Jewish people, and the shop owners were Jewish. Despite the difficulties in communication, I tried to make them understand and they tried to make me understand. At work, I met different people. Many were Pakistanis and other non-Bengalis. I also got to meet many different people when I attended English classes at Whitechapel Centre. They were young, males, females, Indians, Bangladeshis, and so on. Our English teacher was a non-Bengali, an English woman.

Gradually, I went to various places and to community meetings, where I found some non-Bangladeshi males and females helping us. People like Caroline Adams, Peter East, Joan Newbiggin, Terry Fitzpatrick, Claire Murphy, Dan Jones and many others.

I mention 'buying key' earlier. So, what was 'buying key'? I will

The Sylhet Housing Co-op Definitely Helped

illustrate with a typical example. In Fieldgate Mansions, there were over 200 plus flats. They were for students who went to university, medical students or x, y, z. The flats were allocated through some GLC and hospital schemes. When the students finished their education, they used to leave Fieldgate Mansions. This was because the area was difficult, dirty and overcrowded. Some properties were also boarded up. In such circumstances, some people used to approach the students and say, if you leave, we will give you a few hundred quid and you give me the key. That's how keys were swapped for cash and new squatters moved [and] started occupying.

On this side of Fieldgate Mansion, Myrdle Street and Parfett Street, there were two or three complicated people. They were persuaded to leave, and they asked double the amount of money they had invested, for example, £1000, £500 or x, y, z. So quite a lot of touts were there, because people who knew each other communicated and so on.

When some decent people used to give keys back to the GLC or Tower Hamlets Council, their duty was to secure the building until demolition. They could not demolish mid-terraced houses until all the properties were empty. So, they boarded up the property when someone left. They used to destroy the toilet, bath and kitchen, and disconnect services.

So, when people were encouraged or had nowhere to go, they used to go into empty properties with their friends, take the boards down, enter and occupy. The first thing they used to do was to call the electricity board to connect. They didn't ask whether you were legal or illegal, they just connected the service. As squatting became a tradition in the area, they turned a blind eye and provided the connection. The water and gas connections were the same. Later, the council used to start collecting rates and license fees from the squatters.

I think it was 1981 when we came to live in Parfett Street. Luckily, our house wasn't really vandalised. Someone managed to persuade someone who sold two units to give him the keys. As two people wanted to buy, we shared. He took the upper part [and] we lived in the lower level. We shared the gas, electricity, and water bill. We stayed there until 1986, when we managed to get to number 1 [on the list] of a house or maisonette in this building,

After we moved in, we saw that everybody was suffering. We thought we must do something to improve the conditions. So, we

started campaigning. We set up a small housing cooperative at that time. The GLC used to support self-help projects. So, we set up and surveyed to find out to whom the houses belonged. We found a total of thirty-four properties. They all belonged to the GLC, which the GLC passed onto Tower Hamlets Council. But Tower Hamlets Council was not prepared to do anything to improve the situation. Any property that became empty, the GLC passed them on to the local authority. So, we started setting up a housing cooperative.

There were bodies like Solon Co-Operative Housing Development Agency that provided professional consultancy to help us progress. They came to our meetings, provided all the support and communicated with the GLC about the properties in the area. They were the professional people who found out which property belonged to whom. They also advised us on how to set up a housing co-op. They provided our plan to the Housing Corporation and the GLC supported it.

Later, we discovered that the housing conditions in this area were so bad and dilapidated that the GLC wanted to declare it an 'emergency housing action area'. GLC wanted the area redeveloped into mixed residential and commercial units. There was some vested interest in the properties in the area. So, they set up a committee comprising of all the bodies involved, like Samuel Lewis Housing Trust, Bethnal Green & Victoria Park Housing Association and Tower Hamlets Council. But initially, Tower Hamlets did not cooperate at all. They set up a housing action area and encouraged local people to take part through representatives rather than everyone directly involved. As such, they prepared a master plan to spend within five years £23-£25 million to improve the area. Plus, they would encourage more investment from outside.

In the master plan, Samuel Lewis wanted to build one-bedroom flats, but our needs were for two, three, four, five, six-bedroom properties. The GLC Housing Action Area Steering Committee stipulated conditions for the redevelopment of three blocks. They will have to address the issue of environment, prayer facility and ratio. So, they converted some two to three-bedrooms together to make larger units. GLC provided cash (financial) support through housing improvement grants. Where there was space available they built new houses. The steering committee encouraged them to be 2 to 3 bedroom unit maisonettes. The GLC encouraged us to setup up a

The Sylhet Housing Co-op Definitely Helped

housing cooperative and forced Tower Hamlets Council to support it.

Houses in the area were mixed-use properties, mixed commercial and residential. Some parts of the building had factory units (machinist workshops). In other parts people lived. This set-up lacked basic facilities. Many properties didn't have a bath and the toilets were outside in the garden. People had to go through quite a long way into the garden to use the toilet. It was not very nice.

The steering committee encouraged converting the factory units into larger residential properties. We provided grants to landlords and factory owners to convert their factory units into houses and make general improvements. Similarly, we provided grants to private landlords to improve the conditions of their properties. This included basic facilities like kitchens and bath and bringing toilets within the building. That's how we managed to do it.

The last building was the Tower House, the GLC single person hostel. GLC was very keen to improve the building but lacked funding so they couldn't take forward any improvement initiative. In the end, they sold it to a private developer, and the building is currently used as a single person hostel. The homeless people [with] nowhere to go can go and live there by paying 50p. So, that's how the area got improved.

The Whitechapel Centre wasn't as accessible as needed for community purposes. So we suggested and worked to establish a small community centre in the area. We managed to buy 46 Myrdle Street and converted it into a community centre. The local housing action office was based there and provided services to the community. We had meetings and get-together events. The Sylhet Housing Co-op office was also based at 46 Myrdle Street.

We surveyed the needs of the community and discussed the issues they faced. From our interactions with the local community, we realised that there was an urgent need for a primary school in the area. The Commercial Road was known to be one of the busiest streets in the whole of East End. Local children used to cross the main, busy road to go to schools elsewhere. The parents had to give up their jobs to take their children to school and bring them back.

We demanded that Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) build a local primary school. At that time, education matters were the responsibility of ILEA. At that time, there was a need for seven new primary schools in Tower Hamlets due to the number of children of

that age. Through our networking efforts, we persuaded them of the need for a new local primary school.

In Settle Street, there was a depot (a cleansing depot) where the council's refuse collection used to keep their equipment, cars and lorries. We demanded that ILEA relocate the depot elsewhere and empty the site for a primary school. The ILEA agreed to the demand but Tower Hamlets Council weren't very happy. They had a deposition from the union, challenging the ILEA's willingness to accept community demands. But the ILEA and GLC were very supportive. They forced the council to relocate the depot to Toby Lane, off Harford Street, in Stepney, and vacate the site for the primary school.

The same with the location of the London Muslim Centre (LMC), which was a fire brigade site. Obviously, the GLC kept it empty for donkeys' years because they wanted to relocate the Aldgate East Fire Brigade there. This was to enable them to turn their fire brigade lorries quickly. In the end, with the break-up of the GLC, that plan got shelved. Ballymore, a national developer, acquired the site from LRB and we managed to persuade Ballymore and Tower Hamlets Council to give this particular land to East London Mosque, to meet the growing needs. So, that's how and what we did.

About 80-90% of the people in this immediate area were squatters. They occupied residential units, not commercial ones. Some of the commercial units had leather factories, sweatshops and other manufacturing setups. Easily, I think about 80-90% of the local residents were squatters. Some of the properties were also owned by private landlords. These were known as rented accommodation.

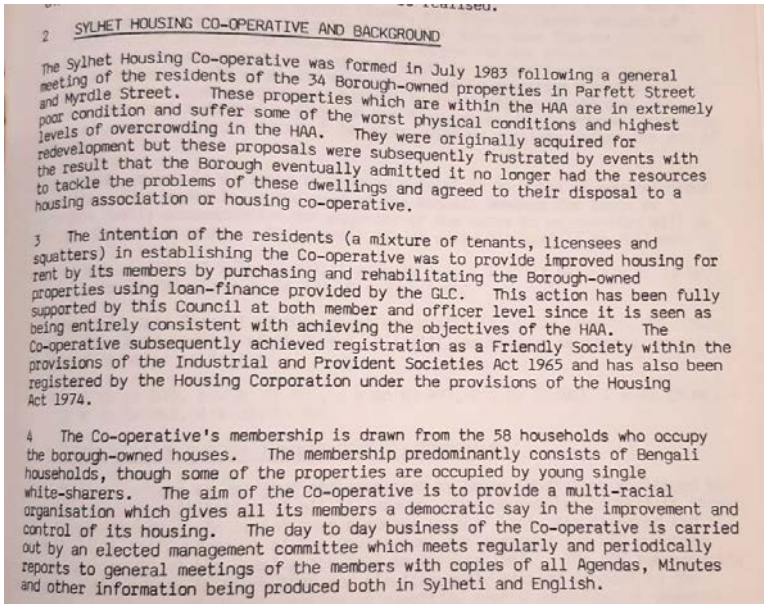
Facilities were very scarce. The utilities needed weren't properly available. This was particularly in relation to the tenanted properties, owned and managed by private companies. There were other properties that people used to get lease of or rent from private landlords. The GLC supported our efforts to improve the area's housing to provide basic facilities, such as a toilet, bath and safe electricity.

About five or six residents of the Sylhet Housing Coop were non-Bangladeshis. I knew everyone one of the names. Many Bengali families also lived in non-Sylhet Housing Co-op properties. Besides being squatters, some Bengalis were also private landlords and even full owners.

Why were there only thirty-four properties that came under the Sylhet Housing Co-op? This was because they were under GLC

The Sylhet Housing Co-op Definitely Helped

and Tower Hamlets Council control/ownership. In Parfett Street alone, half of the street belonged to Bethnal Green and Victoria Park Housing Association. There were also some factory units on the road. Some properties in Parfett Street belonged to private freeholders, who purchased them in full.



From a GLC document, 1986

The thirty-four properties belonged to the GLC. After their demise in 1986, they transferred them to Tower Hamlets Council. But these properties were squatted. So, the day before the GLC ceased to exist, they provided us a grant to purchase them from Tower Hamlets Council. So, we acquired them.

I remember quite a few other families that came under the structure of the Sylhet Housing Co-op. Some properties owned by private individuals who did not live in them but rented them out. One of the Bengali families from a privately owned rented property got evicted, so we helped them get re-housed. Many such people were either re-housed or taken to a hotel to stay.

The GLC officers were very supportive of the 'housing action area'. The GLC was quite big. So, they supported anyone who came under the threat of eviction. Our staff used to approach the GLC to help re-house evicted people as, otherwise, they would be homeless. On

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

many occasions, many people claimed more than one family in one or two units. The Tower Hamlets Council directly or indirectly rehoused them.

Our steering committee was chaired by Lesley Hammond. She was from the GLC, chair of housing and chief whip. She chaired the steering committee, where most of the senior officers of Tower Hamlets and GLC used to attend. Her direction was always taken seriously.

People like Nora Connolly and Jon Hems lived in Sylhet Housing Co-op properties. Jon Hems, Bodrul Alom and myself were part of the Sylhet Housing Co-op and we employed staff to run the organisation. They were Oona Hickson, Bodor Uddin, late Shabuddin Belal, Lukman Uddin, and others. We were all parts of a small gang.

I used to chair the housing co-op, Parfett Street Housing Action Area Committee and the Housing Action Area committee. The prominent people who used to be a part [of it] included Jon Hems. He also made regular contributions at the steering committee meetings.

It was their specialised advice, regarding how to deal with the GLC, that was invaluable. Jon used to know quite a lot about housing, so he used to argue a lot. Luckily our campaigns attracted three big national figures. Sir George Young, the Environment Secretary, visited Settle Street. We persuaded him to invest to address our needs. David Waddington, the Home Secretary visited the area. Our local MP Peter Shaw also supported us in many ways. His Royal Highness, Prince Charles, came to the area with many business people to see for himself what the area was like. He was very annoyed seeing the conditions of the area.



Sir George Young, the Environment Secretary

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Prince Charles was the founder of Business in the Community (BiC), based in Old Street. The negative publicity of the East End housing conditions went to a national level. This was thanks to our good media who focused on this issue. Prince Charles wanted to visit the East End in 1987 to see for himself what it was like. He wanted to bring some city business leaders to show them around and encourage them to invest.

Business in the Community arranged with us to show Prince Charles around. He wanted to visit some of the houses, meet local people and understand their living and working conditions. He knew the potentials of the insurance and banking industry in the wealthy City of London. He wanted to convince them that, as good neighbours, they needed to invest in their neighbourhoods. So, he brought with him a hundred businessmen, including big bankers and big insurance companies.

The itinerary included a visit to Rampart Street, which was on the other side of Commercial Road and off Cannon Street Road. At that time, it was in a state of real dilapidation. On one side people lived upstairs with factories downstairs. There was rubbish everywhere. Some were industrial units and most of the properties were planned for demolition.

On his way to Rampart, he came to the Parfett Street area. He said that the initiative that he had taken was to help to address the issue of housing improvement. Prince Charles had visited one of these houses. He looked around, shook hands with some people and spoke to them. He was astonished and surprised at what he saw.

He then went to some properties and workshop units of Spitalfields Small Business Association (SSBA) in Princelet Street and Fournier Street. Obviously, they were also very dilapidated, with health and safety risks. His visit ended with a meeting at the Montefiore Centre with businessmen who came with him, members of the local communities and councillors.

He expressed his anger at what he saw and urged everyone not to relinquish their responsibility because they lived or worked in a very nice environment in the city. These people were their neighbours [and they were] suffering. But the bloody media twisted this story. They got a story from Calcutta of some people picking food from the rubbish and suggested that the Asians in the UK lived in similar squalor conditions.

Farrukh Dondhy and Mala Sen played an important role in the East End Bengal housing activism. At that time, they knew the struggles of the Bengalis in the East End and how they were being attacked on the streets. So, as they were students, they understood the situation. They used to come and see what can be done and what needs to be done.

Many socialist types of people used to come to the East End to see Brick Lane, talk to people and encourage them to fight for their rights. Farrukh Dondhy and Mala Sen, together with some others like Terry Fitzpatrick, used to congregate in the area and discuss issues. Then, they started supporting the squatter movement, helping people to squat at night and support them.

They managed to get Terry with them, who had multiple skills in electric, water and gas works. They all got together and helped people squat houses. They supported the people to identify and occupy the boarded-up houses they liked. They took off the boards and provided security, safety, and services like gas, electricity, [and] water to cook.

The movement became stronger when the squatters took over seventy-six flats in Pelham Buildings. Situated in Woodseer Street, behind the Montefiore Centre, most of the flats were boarded up. Overnight, the entire block became occupied by Bangladeshi squatters. Farrukh and Terry helped establish basic facilities like toilets, gas, electricity and water.

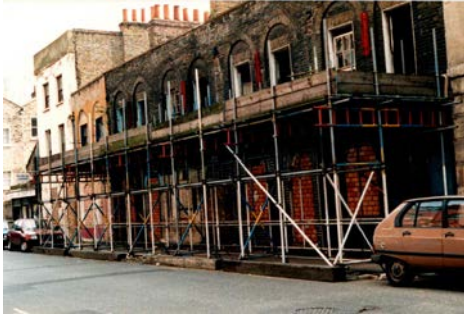
Then, they started campaigning with the squatting movement to get the squatting houses or squalor conditions to be improved. Mala Sen was one of them at that time. She used to encourage both women and men - we are talking about around '75, '76, '78, '79 - to go to the Town Hall to picket and campaign, displaying placards. Mala Sen was instrumental in this but many other people were also a part and parcel of the whole campaign.

The Sylhet Housing Co-op operated from July 1983 to May 1994. Due to the management skills issue, the whole thing collapsed. In 1994, it voted to transfer its assets to the CDS Co-operatives. Later, the thirty-four properties, formerly under the Sylhet Housing Co-op were divided between the Bethnal Green and Victoria Park Housing Association and CDS Co-operatives.

But the process of establishing a housing co-op by local Bangladeshi definitely enabled about 40 families to live in a very peaceful manner, improved houses, and their children went to local school and so on.

The Sylhet Housing Co-op Definitely Helped

So, it definitely helped a lot of people.



Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Non-Bangladeshi Squatters

Non-Bangladeshi Squatters

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Hot as an Oven in Summer and I Froze in the Winter

Hot as an Oven in Summer and I Froze in the Winter

David Hoffman

My name is David Hoffman, and I was born in Stamford Hill in London on 4 June 1946. My father, his family and his grandparents were 19th century Jewish immigrants from, what is now, Ukraine. They moved around the East End, Whitechapel, Hackney & Walthamstow.



© David Hoffman

We moved to Stanmore soon after my birth, then to Berkshire when I was three and then to south London from when I was seven until I left home at seventeen. My most memorable experiences were the horror of Tiffin School and the London smogs that made it impossible to see your hand in front of your face or feet on the pavement.

The East End was filthy and crumbling when I arrived in 1970. The docks were on their last legs and it was the end of the road for many people. When things went wrong you sank and sank but by the time

you got to Whitechapel there was nowhere further to sink. There was a street population of alcoholics with occasional wild people shouting and raving in an atmosphere of hopelessness and dereliction.

A bonfire always burned in Spitalfields Market with broken ragged people around it, drinking cider or meth. There was frequent violence between the Maltese gangs on their way out and newer contenders. The police were authoritarian and aggressive because they knew that we were powerless.

Moving around, sleeping on floors, I landed a rickety Whitechapel slum of my own in Chicksand Street. After six months or so, someone who was living in nearby Black Lion Yard moved out and I took their room.

Black Lion Yard had been known as the 'Hatton Garden of the East End' because of its many jewellers' shops. Now one side was partly demolished and there were West Indian cafés, a hairdresser, a butcher's shop and maybe four or five jewellers' shops left. Solly Grannatt, our landlord, was a seemingly ancient diamond dealer. Sometimes he'd have hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of jewels in his pockets and, sensibly paranoid, he'd grab onto my arm and make me walk him to the Tube.

Most of Old Montague Street was falling apart, crumbling terraces overfilled with impoverished Bengalis, single men crowded together sharing damp beds. Brick Lane curry was either the Sheba or the New Bombay. The New Bombay was our regular. A random selection of chipped plates and cockroaches running on the walls - but only 3/6d for a meat curry. Outside, prostitutes hung out on the street and in Black Lion Yard the dope dealers would flick a deal up through your window if you whistled.

I left London for university in the 1960s and towards the end of that period I was squatting in York for about a year before returning to London. I rented places then until 1973 when LBTH demolished our home in Black Lion Yard, Whitechapel. That was when I moved to Fieldgate Mansions and squatted a top floor flat at 144 Romford Street.

I had been mixing photography with driving jobs until I started college in 1973. When I left in 1976 I took up press photography full time and have worked in that business since.

The people I lived with, in Black Lion Yard, were far more politically

Hot as an Oven in Summer and I Froze in the Winter

aware than me and active in the squatting movement. We would get a van, pull on overalls like council workers, turn up at newly vacated house at seven in the morning, jemmy the tin off the doors and fit new locks. The people who moved into these squats spread the word to others who needed homes and shared similar ideas. There were drug dealers, prostitutes, architects, jewellers, silversmiths, motorcycle mechanics and me, a photographer. There was a guy, dealing heroin a couple of blocks down from me, and a guy making beautifully crafted hurdy-gurdies in the flat opposite. Artists and feckless layabouts, it was a lively mix. The empty streets filled up with kids playing, with people fixing old vans or heaving 'salvaged' building materials along, with Bengali families, friends of friends, and random people who needed homes. Corner shops and cafés came back to life. There is a world view that goes with squatting, it brings people together and creates a sense of community.



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Fieldgate Mansions were well-built nineteenth century tenements with beautiful brickwork. I was in a top flat. The roof was slate, and the ceiling was plasterboard, so it was as hot as an oven in summer, and I froze in the winter. When I moved in there were still some council tenants. I got on well with Maria, a cheerful Cypriot woman who lived next door, and when she left, she gave me her keys, so we immediately put someone new in her flat. We had to be quick because

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

as soon as a flat was empty council workers would go in, smash the lavatories and pour cement down the pan, take out the windows, knock off the doors and rip out the wiring. After they had finished, we had to go in and put it all back again.

We may have been swimming against the tide, but we were winning. As fast as the council decanted tenants we squatted the flats. Mine had a front room which became my darkroom, a back room as my office and bedroom plus a tiny kitchen and a lavatory.

There was no bathroom. In my first winter, I found an old Ascot water heater in a skip and managed to get it working late on New Year's Eve. My first hot water arrived to, the sound of the ships on the Thames blasting their hooters in celebration.

Fortunately, no-one was in a hurry to demolish Fieldgate Mansions. They knew that if they threw us out, others would move in and squat instead. In the early eighties, just to be rid of them, Tower Hamlets Council sold the buildings for one pound to the Samuel Lewis Housing Association. If we had not squatted, the place would have been demolished by the council in the seventies. Squatting did save Fieldgate Mansions, yet when we moved in, it was owned by the community, and now it is a hundred-million pound asset on the books of a rich corporation. There is no stopping capitalism.



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I was working as a photographer in the area and so I came into contact with many local people, groups and organisation. My social life

Hot as an Oven in Summer and I Froze in the Winter

was mainly visiting friends, going to local events such as productions at the Half Moon or getting involved with arts and media projects.

The Bengalis were very welcome. They added to the economic viability of the area with shops, cafés and restaurants reopening or expanding. The food was new to us and we loved the variety of new tastes that the Bengalis brought. Children filled the streets and that too raised our spirits in what had been a grey, decaying, hopeless sort of place. As more Bengali families joined us in Fieldgate Mansions it became harder for the council to try to remove us and we felt more secure in our tenancy of the squats. We'd have liked to have more social contact with the Bengali families, but the cultural differences were a brake on that.

I had been squatting in York in the late 1960s but rented when I came to London in 1969. When Black Lion Yard was compulsorily purchased by LBTH and the landlord left in early 1973, we stayed on and squatted in the building we had previously rented. In September 1973 I opened up my squat in Fieldgate Mansions and I stayed there until October 1984 when I moved to a derelict house in Bow that I had been restoring. I've lived in that house ever since.

I was a photographer, and it was squatting and the freedom from having to take other jobs to pay the rent that enabled me to work in that field and build what became a successful career when, at the start, I was earning next to nothing.

That Sparked a Rage

That Sparked a Rage

Jon Hems

Interviewed on 22 February 2020

At Account 3

By Cherifa Atoussi, Community Participant

After the original interview was transcribed verbatim, further discussion was held with Jon to ensure accuracy. Jon edited the document and added more details. The original recording and the verbatim transcript will be handed over to the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives (THLHLA).

I was born in Romford. After my dad got a promotion, we moved to rural Somerset when I was fifteen. The company my father worked for transferred him to manage a store there. I really did not want to leave London because at the age of fifteen I had just starting to explore the city properly. I had played truant a lot and much preferred to gamble shillings in Luciano's Billiard Hall, above Burtons in South Street, Ro



I was judged too young to stay in London on my own, so I had to go with my parents to a very rural Somerset. It was different and I missed Romford, but I made lifelong friends in Somerset. I left home, as soon as I could. At the age of sixteen, I found myself broke and homeless for the first time. I lived around Somerset and the South West for five years, getting into trouble, working in dozens of different jobs to survive, before returning to London, via Amsterdam, when I was twenty-one, in October 1978.

I was not in a good place or frame of mind at the time and my first few years back in London were very difficult. I ended up in 25 Parfett Street a year later on 25 October 1981. Before that I was homeless.

When I arrived in London, I had no money, no job, nowhere to go. I did not know anybody. So, I took my chances. I was street-homeless for a while. I made several temporary homes out of derelict properties, slept on other people's floors, and then lived happily on a Council Estate in Hackney, for 18 months. In 1981 I was sharing a temporarily empty house, from which I was evicted (yet again). Walking about, with a rucksack with all my worldly goods, looking for a new squat, I went to a party I had heard about. There, I met a man called Charlie. He said he had a room spare and I was on his doorstep the next morning! That is how I got to Parfett Street. Just like that, out of the blue. What I did not know, as I said in my presentation in the meeting, was to have a 'room spare' in Parfett Street in 1982 was ridiculous. I was very lucky. Parfett Street was then one of the most overcrowded locations in London. When later we undertook our surveys, we found one house had 34 people living in it!

I knew number 25 Parfett Street was a squat when I walked through the front door, as was most of the street. So, I knew we had no legal rights. It was a communal household, consisting of me, Charlie, who I knew, Caroline, and her boyfriend, Clive, one other and an ancient cat named Rosa Luxemburg. There were only four houses in the street that were occupied as white households, all the rest were Bangladeshi, a community that I knew very little about. The Bangladeshi houses seemed all very overcrowded.

Each of the white occupied houses had a distinct character. Over the road, a house was exclusively occupied by women, who were all arts and cultural creatives, who were great fun, and down the street, another house was the 'band house', occupied by some cool young

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musicians. Our house, no 25, in this context, had a 'politics tag' as Caroline and Clive were Local Labour Party members and Charlie, a smart guy, was an early 'techie' and political activist.

So, I moved into number 25, settled down and got to know my housemates quickly. Finding them to all to be lovely people; friendly, accommodating, and supportive. After years of insecurity, it was a great relief to find a relatively secure home and new friends to share it with. They were organised. I remember we used to each contribute five pounds per week into a tin. And from that tin, all the basic household stuff was bought, there was no rent, no rates or water bill. We cooked communally and for the first time, I learnt how to cook a proper meal, from scratch. I 'contributed' to the menu, by regularly stealing bags of veg in the middle of the night from the back of lorries queuing



Despite the leaking roof, total lack of heating and general dilapidation, it very quickly became a happy home for me. My life stabilised.

Gradually I became aware of the previous history of the street. In which the cat, Rosa Luxemburg had played a headline role! In about 1971/2, Parfett Street was the scene of a housing battle between white-led squatters and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

The empty houses in the street had been occupied by squatters and the Council decided to evict them. In typical style, the Council approached the task with heavy hands, and after several eviction/re-occupation battles, the Council decided to end the confrontation

once and for all - by bricking up the doors and windows and sealing into each empty house a guard dog, that they planned to feed by throwing food through a hole left in the brickwork!

Now, the great British public (back in 1972, as now) may not get too hot under the collar about homelessness, but cruelty to animals was another matter entirely. The squatter leaders of the time were smart and media-savvy and contacted the national press. They came to the street on masse and took pictures of the Council's goons, in the act of bricking the dogs into each empty house. Media gold dust! The incident led to total victory for the squatters as the London Borough of Tower Hamlets were forced to find a 'legal solution' to the mess and the first-ever Squatting Licenses were issued in the UK as a result. And Rosa Luxemburg? She had her moment of fame by appearing on the front page of several newspapers as a 'Participant in the battle of Parfett Street'.

This was the history of confrontation that we inherited in our own battle with the London Borough of Tower Hamlets ten years later. We did not really know it at the time, but as with many things, we were unknowingly standing on the shoulders of giants, fighting the same old enemy, behaving in the same heavy-handed manner. By the time I got to Parfett street in 1982, most of the white squatters were long gone (off to buy cheap houses in Hackney and Islington, I fancy?!) and most of the houses were unlawfully 'sold' on to Bangladeshi families. The rumoured rate was about £5,000, a lot of money back then.

The conditions of our house were not good at all. The roof leaked badly, the walls bowed, there was no heating, the electricity was dodgy, everything was generally falling apart. (No 25 and several other houses had to be demolished and completely rebuilt in the major works that took place much later). We did constant emergency DIY to stay dry and secure.

Later, in researching the conditions, ahead of the refurbishment, we found that there were no foundations! At the time when Parfett Street was first constructed, in about 1866-7 terraced housing of this type was highly speculative, being built rapidly to meet demand. These were not the classic 'Solid Victorian Villas.'

It was common at the time for a small builder to undertake a part of a terrace of housing, by buying model plans through the post and

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the materials needed to build say, 8 or 10 houses at a time. To start they would level the ground, tamp it down and pour a layer of tar about 1 or 2 inches, directly on the earth. And then start building. They were built to the plan they were looking at, but, of course, each one was slightly different. What we found later was if you took a window out of one house and tried to put it in another house to repair it, it would not fit because it was always a couple of inches different. They were each built individually by a craft team, from the same plan. These were fast, spec. and up for rent the moment they are finished.

Another consequence of this approach was for the builder to start running out of materials, purchased prior before they had finished. This is why some of the terrace division walls are 'finished' with found rubble, as they rise to the apex, the real bricks having all been used up. Each house was held up by the one next door to it. If you took one out in the middle, the entire terrace would probably collapse inwards.

Something that I got used to in Somerset was waking up on a cold winter's morning and having to chip the ice off the windows (on the inside!) to be able to look out. Parfett Street was similar. It was an urban slum by any description. But it did not matter. It was home. I had my own room. It was cheap, I could afford to live there. You had secure control over your door. No one was going to come to hurt you or steal all your stuff. So, security, affordability, and happiness with the people who I lived with. It was a dream. It was absolute dream come true for me.

When I moved in there, I did not have a job and I was in quite a lot of debt, that some nasty people were chasing me for. I had no exams, I was semi-literate, I had completely messed up education, I took whatever rubbish temporary work I could, just to survive. I had been in that circular trap: No home, No job, No benefits. No way out. Squatting saved people's lives back in the 70s and 80s, when it was still possible to squat a long-empty house, without 'breaking the law'. I do not know how I would have got out of that trap, without squatting.

So as soon as I had somewhere stable to live, I was able to get proper work and got a full-time garage job. A ten-hour night shift in a Taxi garage. So, from then on it was fine. I was getting a real wage for the first time. I paid off all my debts and was even able to save money. I bought a bicycle to get to work. Later, a car!

We did not really associate much, between streets in the area. Apart from the parties! (there were some great parties that took place at the time). It was a very intense environment. Fieldgate Mansions, which was next door had its own scene. And up the road there was Adelina Coop, that was getting going. But there was not a sense of we were working together in how to secure housing for ourselves. They had different routes and had completely different organisations to how they were going to achieve that and did stay quite separate from Parfett Street itself. Round the corner, we knew about the squatting activist, Terry Fitzpatrick. Which got us talking about what to do? We had a slow realisation that we were going to have to do something to carry on living there was very much self-growing in each Street. I think a neighbour just sort of talked to the neighbour and started getting organised from there.

I did not know Terry Fitzpatrick well. We knew him as a squatting activist. Left-wing politics at that time was fractious and separatist in every possible way (still is?). So, if you were in x party, then you certainly did not talk to anyone in y party. They were the enemy! That old bane of the left in Britain, they much prefer to fight each other, more than any common enemy.

The vast majority of the people living in Parfett Street were Bangladeshi. White and Bangladeshi activists were working together in the wider area. But not really in Parfett Street, when I moved in there. Being faced with eviction changed all that. The area was also famous for 'the spike', Tower House on Fieldgate Street. A Victorian hangover, still going strong in 1981. Tower House was a temporary home to 200-300 hundred homeless men, one of London's 'Rowton Houses', a chain of homeless hostels built around the turn of the Century. It partly shaped the scene in Parfett Street. I remember being told (on going shopping for the first time) to check if the 'tide was in, or out', and did not know what it meant. It was when, each day, the homeless men were all turned out of the hostel, in one go, so they could clean the place. Two hundred plus almost exclusively white, elderly, mostly alcoholic men would suddenly appear on the street. An issue developed, involving these men and the surrounding Bangladeshi community. Some of the Labour Party local Councillors at the time were blatantly racist and sought to make an issue of the

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fact that Parfett Street was a hotbed of TB infection. They blamed the Bangladeshi community for 'importing' TB to the area.

This was not true. The truth as usual was more complicated. The men in Tower House had a high incidence of untreated TB. The twice a day tide of men from Tower House meant that the streets were suddenly crowded with people, drinking, spitting, and fighting in amongst an equally crowded close community of Bangladeshi people, for whom, back then, spitting on the streets was also common practice. The inevitable result was that TB spread like wildfire in the area.

With the free-ball nature of right-wing politics at the time and racial prejudice, I remember it became a hot little issue in the area, which reactionary local politicians sought to exploit.

The area had been previously a Jewish ghetto. And there were residual traces still left of that era. The Synagogue at the top of the road, right next door to the expanding Mosque.

Later, I was personally involved in an odd story, which illustrated the change. A few years after the Sylhet Housing Co-op got going, we had 'decant rights' to help sort out the overwhelmingly crowded housing situation. Every space was precious and if we could offer alternative housing outside of the area to those who would accept it and gain empty accommodation in the co-op, that was worth doing. With the (then) GLC's help, we were empowered to make such offers, to almost anywhere in London, including Golders Green, the most sought-after location in London for people of Jewish origin. There was a house in Myrdle Street, that the co-op had rights to, which looked completely empty, but Council records showed it to be occupied by unknown people. I was tasked with finding out who was in it. I monitored the house for a couple of weeks but saw no one coming or going. But I noticed that at night there was a light coming from the basement and one night, I knocked on the door until it was opened.

I explained I was 'here on behalf of the co-op' and asked if I could come in. The lady that let me in looked elderly, frail and scared. She led me down into the basement rooms, in the otherwise completely bare-boards empty house. There, I was introduced to 'abba', a chronically sick and aged father and the 'boys', two mature men in their mid-30's, one of whom I think had learning difficulties.

After assuring them of my good intentions, they told me that, as a Jewish family, they had been offered the tenancy of the two small basement rooms, in 1971 by the Council, for the sum of 12 shillings and sixpence per week. They produced an old yellowing rent book to prove it. I asked about the completely empty house above them and they told me that each floor had been separately let and the tenants had both moved out before 1980, leaving them in the two basement rooms, which were, dark, damp, crowded and tiny.

As the conversation continued, I realised that the parents slept in the front room (also used as the living room and kitchen) and the 'two boys' slept in the back room. I asked the obvious question – of why, on earth, had they not moved upstairs to occupy the empty rooms, after it became apparent, after so many years, that the Council was not going to re-let them?

Their answer was immediate – 'we did not have permission; our tenancy was for just the basement rooms'. I also asked them why they did not go out much? And how did they live? They explained that one of the boys had a local job, that single wage was what the whole family lived on, and also, after they moved in, there was a rapid change in demography in the streets around them, with all other Jewish families moving out, leaving them feeling isolated and fearful of the new Muslim community growing around them.

I was shocked by this and went to see what decant we could make happen for them. The co-op had some power by this time and we quickly secured a decant offer to Golders Green, through the GLC, a three-bed family flat. In return, I was able to make that offer to them. It took some convincing to assure them that this was for real- and not some cruel joke, which they felt, such an offer, must inevitably be.

Once the wheels started to turn and the offer was confirmed in writing, their disbelief turned to unmitigated joy. It was emotional. It struck me then how far we had all come. Just eighteen months ago, we all faced seemingly certain eviction, now the co-op had the real power to secure social housing for those who really needed it. They moved, very soon afterwards, and I never saw them again. Parfett Street was like living in a kaleidoscope of history, the physical infrastructure, the people, the communities, the call to Mosque each day, a living reflection of East End stories of migration, desperate poverty, hard work, aspiration, and fulfilment. It was, overwhelming

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at times. You did not know which Century you were living in - it was the lived-in circumstances and conditions of the 19th Century in a cultural/political car crash with a 20th Century Local Authority.

With respect to interacting with the Bangladeshi, initially, not at all in the sense of first moving into number 25. Finally getting a room of my own, meeting my housemates, you know. But, within a few weeks, it was sort of like, who is on the other side of the front door? I met people in the community quickly in the next few months, as individuals, got to know a few households and some of the local characters. Then we explored some of the cultural delights of the area, the wonderful Bengali Canteen on Fieldgate Street, the first time I had tasted a 'proper' curry. The Nags Head (Now the White Hart) pub, on the corner of Cambridge Heath Road and Whitechapel, used to put down sawdust in the public bar to mop up the spilt beer, blood and the spit! After hours I sometimes witnessed organised bare-knuckle boxing matches outside the pub, on the Whitechapel Wastes, with men gambling on the result. More 19th Century living.

In terms of national level and the local level politics Thatcher had come to power in '79. I became involved in the late 70s, in left politics. I was not an educated politico, but I was angry at what I saw around me and sought to change it. Thatcher's election changed everything. I remember standing in a room in Islington, with fifty-odd people in it, looking at a television screen of Thatcher winning. And I remember them saying, 'one term', we'll soon reverse this'. I knew at that time, that wasn't going to happen. This was a moment when British politics changed rapidly. I realised that this was going to be a Class war. Thatcher was going to carry out a right-wing revolution in Britain, fundamentally, socially, economically and politically. And so, it proved.

I was involved in the uprisings of '81 and '82, particularly in Dalston, where I witnessed Police violence, which led to the death of several people. Later, after I had left Parfett Street, I became involved in the Miner's strike of 1984/5, where I witnessed the army being used (in no-badge police uniforms) to break up picket lines. From that point on, the country had changed from the 1970s Britain I had grown up in, where social mobility was still a genuine thing, certainly outside London anyway, to one that was market-led, with social and community values dismissed as irrelevant. Thatcher's famous line: 'There is no such thing as 'society. We all know what

happened next.

But Parfett Street was not 'political'. This was just as Bangladeshi activists got involved in the local Labour Party. Brick Lane was the focus of that. I remember our own little bureaucratic 'village struggle' we had in St Mary's Ward trying to get Bangladeshi young men into the Labour Party, who were deeply resistant to them joining.

It was the time that the ward was controlled by Cllr Ashkettle and Cllr Saunders. I think it is fair to say, by anybody's view, that the Council, which existed up until '86, in its old Labour form, had become a rotten borough. It had been divided up politically into sort of fiefdoms. With Councillors Ashkettle and Saunders in control of St Marys ward.

We were official members of the Labour Party. But as Militant supporters of the Youth wing, the Young Socialists. We had received enquiries from young Bangladeshi men to join the local Labour Party and the task was to help officiate this. In pursuit of this, the local ward meetings took on an almost Monty Python atmosphere. Each month we would (again) present the names of the new prospective members and ask for them to be agreed upon. But this could only be done through 'issuing a party card' to each fellow. At first the 'printer had lost the template', then it was 'the card needed to be re-designed', then it was, they were 'all lost in the post'. We were awaiting 'the dog ate them!' It took many months to force the issue.

To help control any votes needed, Cllr Ashkettle had his 'knitters'. A group of old ladies, many of whom had been housed as Union widows in Council accommodation, that he controlled, who would sit in the front row of the meeting and vote, on direction by the Councillor, in the way he told them to. In one meeting they got it wrong by mistake, and a furious Cllr Ashkettle had to undo the original vote, propose a new vote, and start all over again. By the end of it, some of the ladies were very confused and near to tears. It was not all comedic. As 'bad' members we sat in the back row and behind us on most occasions, two or three large, muscly chaps, in string vests, stood, breathing down our necks in an attempt at intimidation.

It all came down in flames in 1986, with the shock victory of the Liberal Democrats in Tower Hamlets and the radical decentralisation policies associated with 'the Neighbourhoods'. It was no surprise.

With regard to the impact of the 'right-wing politics coming

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out of Westminster', it did not really affect us locally, not directly anyway. We were living in a bit of a microcosm, in Parfett Street. What was happening in Brick Lane, although very close to us, was separate. Most of the local community was not engaged in national British politics, as such. Then, as now the politics of Bangladesh, from 'back home' seemed more important. It did translate into local politics, in the push to get Bangladeshi men into the local ward Labour Party. Perhaps most people did not see any relevance or the ability to participate in National politics, whereas local politics offered a better chance to gain influence and effect change. There was a background of political street action, with what had been happening at the top of Brick Lane, for several years. The National Front turning up each Sunday, to sell their vile newspaper, protected by the Police.

This was another and bigger story altogether, well known in its consequences, as young Bangladeshi men organised themselves into groups to defend the area and communities from attack. I was not involved in any organisational way, that was above my head, but I did go along a few times, just for the fight! We used to creep up on a National Front newspaper seller, without the Police seeing us, grab them and give them a good kicking before we ran for it. It was most satisfying!

The racist murder of Altab Ali in 1978 had been a catalyst for local Bangladeshi politics in the area. The campaign that came after that was significant in organisational local politics, it woke everyone up. And from there local Bangladeshi leaders emerged to found and lead new organisations.

Regarding the Sylhet Housing Co-op, it all started with 'the Letter!' There must be a copy of it somewhere? It was from the GLC. It stated that the area had been chosen as a 'Housing Action Area' and this would lead to investment to refurbish the housing stock. Sounded great, until you read on and realised that it did not include 'illegal occupiers', who would be evicted. i.e., All of us! I was devastated. I was very happy to be living in Parfett Street and now it seemed I would be evicted again. Then I got angry. I thought "I'm going to fight; they will have to drag me out of here and I'll fight for every inch". I had nothing to lose.

Many years later (when I was a Housing officer in Tower Hamlets!)

I heard an 'inside' story, from someone who had worked at the GLC, at the time. I do not really know if this was 'true' as I didn't witness it directly. But I was told that how the Housing Action Area had come about was from a single meeting between two people in the staff canteen of the 'Island Block' of the GLC, the one which used to be in the middle of the roundabout.

They said they had witnessed a lunch meeting between a politician, Leslie Hammond and a GLC Officer, Mike Yuki. They discussed their failing careers and tried to work out how to boost their chances. Their attention was drawn towards a scheme in Liverpool that had some recent press. It was called 'Enveloping'. The concept was to refurbish the exteriors of a terrace of houses in 'one go' by mounting a movable scaffold over the whole terrace and gradually moving down the street, rebuilding the roofs, windows, gutters etc., in one go.

There had also been a recent press article in, I think, The Sun, which had featured Parfett Street as 'The worst housing conditions in Europe!' Housing Action Areas (HAAs) were a new concept, as well.

Over lunch, Leslie and Mike apparently hatched a plan. 'Declare an HHA for the 'worst housing in Europe' and use the new technique of Enveloping to undertake it. That should put them back on the map! A few weeks later, the letter dropped through the doors of Parfett Street.

The letter caused confusion and much discussion in the street. Some individual families had 'bought' their house from the previous squatters. They thought that buying from a leaving squatter meant they owned the house. As such, the planned eviction would not affect them. For them, the Housing Action Areas (HAAs) would be a great benefit: a free refurbishment!

Of course, all the 'purchases' had been illegal, either deliberate and knowingly or a genuine misunderstanding. There were rumours at the time that certain people (who had 'bought' their house), were turning up at London airports, to meet new families coming in from Bangladesh and were posing as 'landlords', offering 'rooms' to each family for weekly rent. I think the 'going rate' was about £10 per room per week.

Others thought that there was nothing we could do about it and we would have to move out if the 'authorities' told us to, and we would all be arrested if we did not.

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Yet others thought that they had a 'tenancy' (that had been 'sold' to them) and rights to stay in the house, which they did not. An open debate followed as we all tried to work out what to do? The concept of forming a co-op came initially from No 25. Charlie and Caroline were both capable and organised and I had some experience of housing co-ops from friends in the Grand Union Co-op, near Victoria Park.

The co-op concept became the vehicle by which we could all try to defend our housing. It took a lot of convincing and some critical 'events' to get everyone on board.

In terms of whether the letter was a catalyst, what it did was to help level the playing field. Eventually, everybody in the street realised that we were all in the same boat and we were all vulnerable to eviction.

An event occurred. A violent eviction was undertaken by a housing association (still operating in TH today), hired in by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Looking back from here, 40 years later, I still wonder why did they do this? And who authorised it?

They (Labour controlled LBTH) must have assumed that they could intimidate the entire street, with sheer violence. I described the eviction in my speech. It worked to a certain extent; people were afraid of what they had witnessed. The hired thugs had dragged the woman out of the house by her hair, they had smashed up the entire inside, threw all the family's possessions into the back of a rubbish truck, smashed out the windows and the door and blocked them up. They left the traumatised family on the street.

But it also backfired on them, they had done their worst. We knew what was coming. We were angry. It affected me. I thought – bring it on – next time you send your thugs here, we will be prepared for them. Now you have a real fight on your hands.

We reoccupied the house, repaired it and declared it 'co-op property'. It was the first house we had claimed, in the name of the co-op. We held an allocation meeting and one family, living in awful conditions, in a damp basement, took the risk of moving into the house. We waited to see what would happen next.

There then followed a critical week or two. Many people thought that we would be arrested for re-entering the house. Each week we held a meeting in the street to say – we have not been arrested yet!

Gradually the reality of the situation became clear. Tower Hamlets Council were willing to use extreme violence to evict us and they would do that to everyone if they could get away with it. But if we joined together and fought back, we could take them on.

A few weeks later the thugs returned, this time backed by a group of Policemen. A crowd of people assembled in the street and surrounded the eviction team and their police escort. I remember, a Police sergeant, very close to my face, who asked me if I could get the crowd to disperse? I told him no, and that I had no control over the people assembled.

You could see him make the decision, that to go ahead with the eviction, would lead to violence as this time we would fight back. He ordered the withdrawal of the eviction team and the Police. Tower Hamlets Council never attempted another violent eviction in Parfett Street. It felt like we had won something on that day. After that, things moved fast. We officially formed the co-op, we found Solon and approached them for help. (Solon was riding high at the time. They were housing experts, recognised by the GLC, with many contracts, they helped co-ops and small housing associations get going. It was also useful that they were based in Whitechapel Road.) We could not have done what happened next without them.

Solon worked by allocating an individual case officer to each new co-op. and we got lucky to be allocated Maggie Jones. She was brilliant, smart, determined, enthusiastic, and knew what she was doing. That gave us a load of confidence. Every time we had a question – it was ‘ask Maggie’. If she says it is going to be okay, that’s gonna be good. She took on the sort of mother hen role in organising us all, in making us stand up and go, well ‘I’ll be the treasurer’, ‘I’ll be the chair’. We ended up with a scratch committee or something like six people. I think three were Bangladeshi and three were white, and all men.

Maggie worked hard for us and it cost her. It was important to validate our case, by undertaking surveys of who was living in each house. We had to do this, again and again. I was allocated to accompany her to each house, and we did this over several months. Unfortunately, Maggie contracted TB in this period, she became seriously ill and spent weeks in hospital.

Parfett Street was a ‘collective action’, that is why we were successful.

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But if there is one person without whom it would not have happened, Maggie is a good candidate.

Caroline (from No 25) also deserve credit for what she did. She was a teacher, a feminist, confident and very capable. She demanded that 'women are involved in the co-op'. The Bangladeshi men involved were resistant to that suggestion.

To out-manoeuvre them, Caroline set up a 'Women's Sewing Circle'. It was a front for an alternate coop management committee. For some time, what was not realised by the Bangladeshi men involved in the co-op committee was that the issues had already been discussed and scrutinised by the women's sewing circle, prior to the official meeting.

Another unlikely participant group involved was the children. As we started to have official meetings and Bangladeshi leaders came on board, the whole community started to get involved and saw themselves as part of a unified movement. This was exciting for the children in the street. To be part of something that was happening. We had lots of 'volunteers' from 5 years old, upwards, who wanted to know what they could do for the co-op? One summer, still wary of attacks from Tower Hamlets, we organised them into a 'Neighbourhood Watch'. Equipped with rape alarms, their job was to watch for trouble heading our way (LBTH, National Front, Police. etc.) and if they entered the area, to let off all the rape alarms as a warning, so we could then assemble.

For many years afterwards, I was occasionally approached in Whitechapel Road, long after I had left Parfett Street, with the greeting: 'Mr Jon!' – by a young man I did not recognise at all until it dawned on me that this was 'so and so' – who I had known as a 12-year-old boy, back in 1983.

The Housing Action Area Committee was also established, by the GLC. They initially opposed the formation of the co-op. We had to lobby hard for them to recognise us. They were concerned by our unity that was evident by then; white people working with Bangladeshi people. I think it scared them. We were not 'controllable'. They tried a number of tactics to try to stop the co-op, but we had little to lose, and we were not 'going away' – so, eventually they included us.

At the time, I was working at the garage every night and the shifts were heavy. I was doing six or seven nights a week. Setting off to go

to work to start at 10 pm and work through to 8 am. Back to Parfett Street by about 9-9.30am each day.

There was always urgent stuff to do, a letter to answer, another survey, a meeting to go to, minutes that needed writing up. The co-op office was, initially No 25, before moving around the corner to Myrdle Street. So, correspondence was coming into No 25 and needed dealing with.

Someone had to open them, do something with them. I had no administrative experience at that time. None whatsoever. So, I was reliant on other people to help me. Caroline, Charlie and Maggie were invaluable. They were educated, confident, just knew what to do.

Another organisation which helped us – SHAPRS – Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service, based just south of Brick Lane. They had legal experts and we used to go to them for help on how to write things up, what constitution to adopt, what the legal rules were?

We all took turns in being the Chair, Secretary and Treasurer. I think I did all three over a few years. Quite often it was – who is going to be the new Secretary then? Silence. These were not desirable positions! It involved a lot of work and responsibility and time.

I remember a particular moment, in a regular Solon meeting, quite early on. We were there for a review with Maggie and she had to report up to her boss. Up until then, they were helpful and had supported us, but I do not think they thought we would win. In the meeting, you could see her boss was reassessing. They must have had pre-notice from the GLC, that we were getting somewhere.

After that, they became much more business-like with us, and the activity ramped up. It became difficult to cope with their demands; 'we need this by x', 'Do this now', 'provide figures for y'. They realised at that point, that this could work, and we could get considerable funding from the GLC and it was very much in their interests to help us. Suddenly, everything had to happen at once. We were preparing for the purchase, applying for the GLC mortgage, trying to determine the title of the houses, which houses?

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets did everything they could to stop us. They wouldn't release details of the houses' titles, they would not communicate with us, they saw us as 'upstarts a threat to their established order.

On one occasion they sent officers to the street, without notice.

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They literally knocked on a random door, one of the 'co-op' houses, and said, to the person that answered the door: You're living here? Yes. Would you like to buy the house? And the guy responded: 'I'm not allowed to buy the house, it's a co-op property. And it's like, Yes, you can, we're from Tower Hamlets, and we can sell you the house now. And the second question, 'I cannot afford to buy the house' and it was like: No problem, we'll give you the mortgage. So, on the doorstep, there was literally a deal proposed, which was I think, we'll give you 100% mortgage of five grand to buy this house right now if you sign up. Anything, to undermine us, to stop the co-op from going forward.

We originally laid claim to 37 houses, but we lost two and the purchase went forward with, I think, 34 houses, for the total sum of £77,000, with a 100% mortgage from the GLC. Somehow, against Tower Hamlets vehement opposition, the deal went through. The GLC were our friends, Solon was our friend. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets, the Housing Action Area Committee, the local Councillors all opposed the co-op. And we played those cards heavily. Trying to set one off against the other. Always backed up by the 'threat' of united action at a street level. It worried them. The Sylhet Housing Co-op was very organic. I've been involved in many other organisations' developments since. And looking back on it, I realise it was extremely dispersed and organically led. Solon's involvement from pretty much scratch was important because that kind of instantly got it on to a trolley that was moving because they knew what to do next.

The immediate street politic was more about resisting the evictions which would take place or tried to take place. Rather than organising and getting the co-op committees and administration going the co-op's 'authority' came gradually - from each household leader coming on board, 'giving their support' to the concept of the co-op. Big decisions were made in street meetings, with a lot of individual talking and discussions behind the scenes. Not many people wanted to stand up and be exposed to public risk, or failure. For a while, everyone was looking at each other, with no one willing to come forward.

It was difficult to get new members to serve on the committee. I think the fundamental problem was, the same problem I had, a lack of literacy. No one felt 'qualified' to get involved. Many of the household heads did not have the basic English literacy skills to be

involved and they did not want to be publicly embarrassed. None of us really had the administrative skills needed. I certainly didn't. The white occupied houses, no 25 and particularly the women across the road could see the potential and had the confidence and education to pursue it. So, the initial management committee was originally led by them with a few Bangladeshi men also involved. In terms of the main challenges and barriers faced by the Sylhet Housing co-op, we had enormous amounts of paperwork to get something done and get access to funding, as is the case for any community action that ends up becoming more official. The amount of paperwork was ridiculous. I remember several days, weekends, sitting in the office in Myrdle Street, just surrounded by huge piles of paper. I did despair at times and realised I did not have the ability to get everything organised. I had never done anything like this before. But with Solon on board, we had no choice. Officially, we had to keep up to speed with them in administration terms. We just pursued it, used common sense, learnt how to write a business letter and begged other, more



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The local people, the Bangladeshi squatters did not have to contact the Sylhet Housing Co-op. There wasn't 'somewhere to go' to find the co-op. The Myrdle street office was just a room. A front room where we kept all the documents, the papers, and we sometimes met there. There was not a public office for the co-op. It was all around us; each house was part of a whole. We held meetings in each other's houses and in the summer, in the street. Our support for what we were doing, was all around us.

Meetings were either regular reviews with SOLON, a few people meeting up to write a needed letter, or in the summer, on a sort of a mob basis in that we'd set up a table in the street and have a meeting there. And then, you know, and there would be ten-fifteen people gathered around and we would make a decision. That said, there was not a sense of anyone being 'the leader' of it. I think it was part of its nature. It was everyone's desperate concern to make sure we would have a future in the homes and everyone became willing to get together and do things to try and achieve that objective. We had some sort of stormy meetings, but there was not a feeling of it being led.

I remember a critical moment after we had re-occupied the first house where the occupants had been evicted. We had drawn a lot of attention to ourselves with that action and a wide debate was ongoing in the street about whether to support the 'co-op' or not. A Bangladeshi friend came round to see me and said – 'you have a meeting to go to'. I had no meeting booked and asked him – where? He led me up to the Mosque and we went in through a back door and I was confronted by three gentlemen, who asked me to sit down and answer some questions. I realised that it was not an invitation I should refuse. They asked me a lot of questions, which took up about one hour. Then they told me to go. Afterwards, I came out and met a friend and asked him 'what was that about?' – until then, when we had called a coop meeting only a few households would turn up. My friend said – 'try calling another meeting'. We did and half the street turned up!

I realised we had been 'given permission to continue' and now we had official backing from the Mosque leaders. That moment was significant, it was a moment we realised we were now on our way.

After that, most household leaders accepted the co-op properly. Everything suddenly became a lot more structured.

We got better at the paperwork, and, with Solon's and Maggie's help, things happened. And that felt like, okay, this is becoming an organisation now. It is finally not just a front room dream, but it is going to be official from now on.

In terms of what kind of help we were offering, it was not much. We did not have the resources to get involved in any other issues. It was purely housing. I remember some conflict about that. Some people had thought 'the co-op' could do all kinds of things, benefits advice, family support, immigration advice, etc. We could not. We did not have the skills or capacity to react to needs other than the housing battle. The co-op was a single-issue organisation. We had a lot of requests for different things, and I think some were annoyed we could not respond.

Another crucial incident took place, which was controversial. This was after we had been given the heads up from the Mosque. It was a difficult issue, that had been outstanding for some time and threatened the whole concept of the co-op. The 'private landlords.' It was a historic situation. Since the previous squatting battle in 1972, when most of the street was occupied by white squatters, many of the houses had been 'sold' to Bengali men. Some of these individuals had set themselves up as landlords and had rented rooms to individual families, telling them that they 'owned' the house. We knew we had to deal with this, to assert the rights of the co-op and make a level playing field, where everyone had the same rights, that of being prospective co-op tenants.

It was done in one day. In a couple of hours really. A small group of us, white and Bengali, approached the first house we knew in this circumstance and knocked on the door to explain the situation. We told him that from now on he could not charge people to live in the house and that everyone in the house now had the same rights to live there. He did not like that at all. There was a brief scuffle and a bit of shouting, but the point was made. We approached the next house, we knew about. The man who answered the door readily agreed to 'join the co-op'. As did the third house and the one after that.

From then on people became aware of their rights and when asked to 'pay their rent', by a 'landlord', could reply 'talk to the co-op'. It

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was a difficult thing to do, but it had to be done. We knew it could have got out of control, but thankfully it did not. I think, behind the scenes, without our direct knowledge, individuals went to complain strongly to the Mosque leaders about it, but they backed us. And that was that.

Looking back, it shows the power of collective action, backed by the authority of the Mosque leaders. It was not our little group that had any authority to impose that. It was the wider support, in the street, behind the scenes with the Mosque, from the people who had been victimised, that made it enforceable. The individual landlords knew they were outnumbered and what they were doing was wrong and public support was with us.

There were other conflicts in the area. I remember one afternoon there was a sort of washback from what had been happening in Brick Lane. Two young white fascist men came down the road, one carrying a brick, lobbed it through a car window driven by an elderly, Bangladeshi man, who was injured. That sparked a rage. It all happened very fast. There were lots of young Bangladeshi men in and around the area. Word spread quickly.

Within a few minutes the two men who had attacked the elderly chap were being pursued by a very angry group of Bangladeshi young men. They ran, fast and the group followed them at top speed. When they came back, I asked, what happened? They replied, 'We chased them as far as Tower Bridge, but they went over into south London, so f**k them!' Thankfully, no one got into trouble with the Police.

But it felt significant, it felt like things had changed in the Bangladeshi community, it was no longer 'we can be victimised'. It was, "if you come here with the intention of causing us harm, expect us to fight back". It was kind of liberating.

There was a sense of building resistance. We knew we were almost there. We could see 'victory'. Gradually it spread through each household leader's mind, "are we on the side of the co-op or not?" As we got nearer to getting the deal done, the momentum built. And then it happened! Solon led us through the purchase of 34 Houses from Tower Hamlets council, for the sum of £77,000, with a 100% mortgage from the GLC. The houses finally belonged to the co-op! Wide celebrations all around.

The next day we contemplated our situation; we now owned 34

derelict, semi-derelict, properties with an enormous population of 340 people in them, that needed millions of pounds worth of repairs! It was a sobering moment. What was the point of owning them if it was always going to be a slum?

Solon knew what to do. They had huge experience and very good relationships with the GLC and the Housing Corporation. They explained that we could now apply for the grant monies needed to repair all the houses. No one was going to get evicted. Now, we all had the chance to decent, affordable accommodation. It felt like a victory.

There was a lingering feeling, how could we get this lucky? Was it a dream? Would we get another letter, saying 'fooled you! now get out!' It took a while to sink in that we had done it.

And I was done as well, ready to leave the co-op and Parfett Street.

I realised that if I were going to stay there and remain involved in the co-op, I would either have to give up work and work entirely for the co-op. Was there going to be a wage of some sort? Or carry on doing the near impossible, doing a night shift and coming back and then doing four hours day work on the co-op, and ending up with four hours sleep. It was not a healthy situation to be in. I was exhausted by then.

So, at that point, I was able to use the experience of the past three years to get a job in a short-life Housing Co-op in Camden. After working on the garage night shift, it was a breakthrough for me. It was a great job and I spent three years there. What I had learned in being involved with Parfett Street, started my career in housing development. The irony of ironies, I ended up as the Housing Development team leader in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets! Before leaving that in 1999 and I started J-GO, the multi-faceted social enterprise.

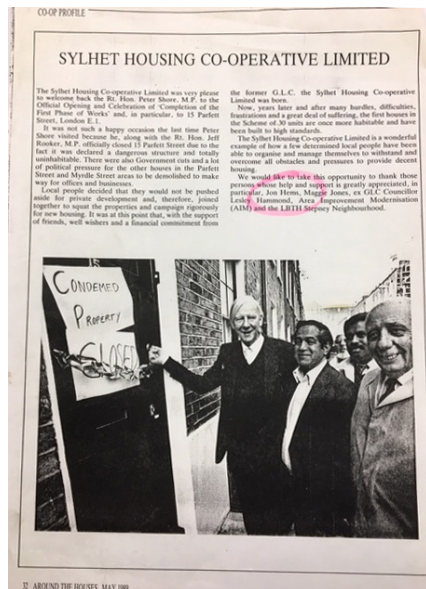
I made a clean break and moved to another squat in Camden and left Parfett Street behind. The co-op went forward, with many people contributing towards its final success. They were awarded a grant of over £3.5 Million to completely refurbish the houses. As far as I am aware, most people that were previously squatters in the street became secure tenants on affordable rents, in the improved housing. Sylhet Co-op did not survive as an independent organisation, but the houses were taken over by another Housing Association, with their future secure. I stayed in Parfett street for three and half years.

To conclude, I guess it proved what London is best at. It is the

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strange contradiction of the ability to live separate lives to your neighbour, who may live in ways that are completely different to you, which you have little hope of fully understanding. And then, in a sudden moment of adversity, to find yourself standing shoulder to shoulder, in a united front against a common enemy. As comrades in a fight, sharing and risking everything you have together.

It also proved to me that autocratic authorities, even when they have enormous power and arrogance, can be beaten by people united. If you push us too far, we will unite, whatever our differences and fight back. I found the whole experience inspirational. And you know, one of the best things to do in London, or was, I'm not sure if it's still do-able, is get on the 253 at Aldgate Station and count the communities and countries you go through, because by the time you get to Warren Street, after ploughing through Whitechapel, up through Hackney, over the top to Stamford Hill and down Finsbury Park, and through Camden, down to Euston, and ending up in Warren Street. Oh, my goodness, you have been through something like, what? 24 countries, and yet many more cultures than that, that is a Worldwide tour in one bus trip.



Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

My memories of living in Parfett St. in the mid 1970s

My memories of living in Parfett Street in the mid 1970s

Nora Connolly

Interviewed on 19 February 2020

At Nora's house

By Hayette Atoussi, Community Participant

I am Nora Connolly. I have a very good, strong Irish name. I was born in Warwickshire in the Midlands, England, where I went to school. But having an Irish father and an English mother meant always going home to Ireland during traditional summer times. I would go with my parents to my mother's family in Connemara, in the west of Ireland, where they had a farm. When I was young, I also wrote and delivered poetry in performance shows.



As a working actress, my job involved travelling around to different places. It was in 1974 or '75 when I was living in Dublin that a friend of mine came to perform at a play at the Half Moon Theatre in London. It was in Alie Street, near Aldgate East, which used to be an old Jewish Synagogue before it was converted into a theatre. I also came over to be in the play. That's how I got my first introduction to the East End.

Soon after that, I got involved in another play, an Irish one, at the National Theatre. It was a very interesting time when the National Theatre was moving from the Old Vic to its new building. I was

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

around the National Theatre for about three years or more, and by then I became firmly living in the East End.

I came to live in 34 Parfett Street, or as my Bengal neighbours used to say, Paarfetti St., for quite some time. The squatting movement had started before I came to live in that squat. The number 34 Parfett Street had already been opened up as a squat before I became one of its occupants. I lived there for over twenty years until about 1997.



*This is what 34 Parfett St
looks like now, after refurbishment*

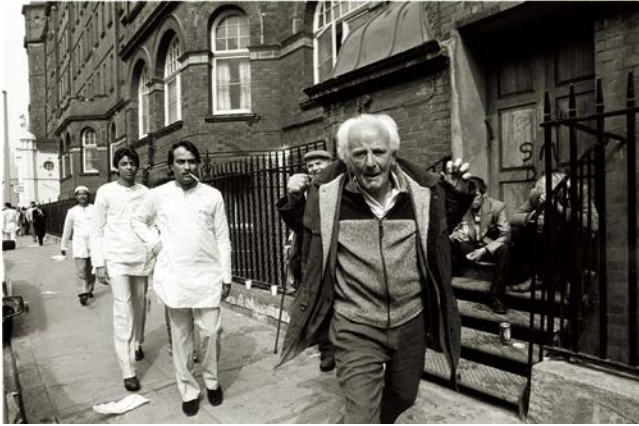
I have photographs and newspaper cuttings that have some specific details about the history of squatting in the area. For example, the building at the far end of Parfett Street, Tower House, is now a luxury hotel (below), but at that time it was a hostel for men (black white image on next page)next page).



We formed a residents' association and had meetings in two languages, mostly, in the back gardens/back yards of 34 and 36 Parfett

My memories of living in Parfett St. in the mid 1970s

Street. Eventually, through funding application, we formed the Sylhet Housing Co-op. The name was chosen for obvious reasons because so many people in the area came from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh. Thirty-four squatted properties in Myrdle Street and Parfett Street came under the control of the Sylhet Housing Co-op. This happened almost at the last minute before the demise of GLC, Greater London Council, and Ken Livingstone. Later, some of the properties became part of BGVPHA, Bethnal Green and Victoria Park Housing Association.



© *Daniele Lamarche*

What was the atmosphere like? It was fine, safe, busy and occupied. We were a sort of odd community with all sorts of people. The Bengali families had quite a lot of children. The non-Bengalis were more eccentric types with many having an arts background and quite a lot of us were teachers. I was personally involved in the theatre. There were people who were writing and dreaming, and some were fairly involved in left-wing politics with a socialist frame of mind.

A lot of photographs were taken. David Hoffman was one such photographer who lived in Fieldgate Mansions. I didn't know him at that time but had been to his exhibitions. I knew some of the of the people featured in his photographs, like Anne Pettit, Anne Zell and Tony Mahoney. They lived opposite. Anne Pettit and Anne Zell were particularly very political, and they had been to Northern Ireland.

In 1972, there was a civil rights march in Belfast where the British army opened fire and killed about thirteen people. Ever since, the issue has been going through the Diplock Court. Anne Pettit and Anne Zell went off to fight in the Divis Street Flats, championing republican politics and sort of women's politics as well.

So, what was the atmosphere like? It was a very high sense of ferment and political sensibility. We were activists.

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

All the houses were in the same state, very run-down. They had been left deliberately neglected to make them almost impossible to live in. When people were evicted, they smashed things like the toilets, or the bathrooms, or cooking hobs, to make living in these properties impossible. Some of the houses were boarded up.

There was a company called Epracent that purchased 34 properties in Parfett Street, Myrdle Street and Settle Street. These were built in the 1840s. If you go to Settle Street now you can look up and see brickwork. There had been a strong Jewish community in the past.

There was a dear man, called Bill Fishman, who was a historian but not alive now. His information will all be in Bancroft Road Library - about Jewish history in the area, which was huge. He used to bring groups of mostly Jewish people for tours around the area, who might be from America. But many such tourists knew that their grandparents or great-grandparents had spent some time in the East End. Their origin might have been in Russia, or from many other parts of the world, but they had stayed in the East End for a while before going off to America. Some of those who came in the past also stayed in the East End.

There was a Jewish community, a Greek community, a Turkish community, an Irish community, and back in time the Huguenots, and now the Bangladeshi community. Although the area was poverty-stricken and run down, it had lots of history, like the Whitechapel Bell Foundry round the corner.

At the end of Parfett Street, there is an education centre and living accommodation. There was also a tiny Jewish Synagogue where the mosque is, and I was surprised that in the redevelopment even the frontage of the Synagogue wasn't changed.



The Tayyabs restaurant, now across three frontages, was an old pub. It started as a small family business making sweet things and now

My memories of living in Parfett St. in the mid 1970s

has become an empire. But in the old days, the pub was there and there used to be an old Scottish fella who lived in the men's hostel. He played the accordion. He used to sit in the pub playing the accordion and the landlord would make sure that he got a beer. He got detached from his home and ended up in the hostel. Many people like him felt lonely and ended up drinking. People used to think of him as a Scottish Cockney.

So, you can see that the atmosphere was very rich and very vibrant. It is still so even though it's gone slightly upmarket.

This was the 1970s, a sort of a punk era as well. I might have my hair dyed slightly pink and certainly be wearing dungarees a lot of the time. This was almost like a feminist uniform. It was a period of very much women's rights, although we didn't see it as such at the time.

I have used the word eccentric earlier to describe ourselves. Our lifestyle was certainly bohemian, non-traditional in terms of British families. It must have been very confusing to Bengali families especially since none of us appeared to be married and we weren't. We got a gradual sort of community trust or acceptance from the Bengalis.

We knocked down the back yard wall of 34 and 36 Parfett Street to create a free flow. So, this might have been confusing to some Bengalis who looked through their lace curtains and saw somebody going through one door and coming out of the other door.

We made a sort of an alternative semi-communal experience. It was like a late hippy alternative community experience, where people cooked on a rota basis. We, as women or young women, had different experiences compared to our counterpart, the women of our age across the street. We didn't know what they thought about us, but the children who are more forthright had no inhibitions. They found us fascinating and would ask whether we were girls or boys because we didn't match traditional family codes of appearance.

Some people did have children within our so-called communes, but it wouldn't be clear to others whose they were. Although we had no sort of weird, peculiar sexual relationships, we were living communally. If someone was working, I might look after their child, take them to the nursery school or whatever. So, the Bengali children couldn't work it out because we were not seen traditionally or traditionally clothed.

They were fascinated by our lifestyle and the children particularly showed their fascination. It was an interesting thing for us to see Bengali men meeting and stand holding hands, which you don't see much now. This is because, obviously, cultural things change over time. But men at that time would stand for quite a long-time hand in hand, shaking hands, so everybody's had something different and distinctive.

That's where Soyful Alom came in and his brother Bordul Alom. They were a great unifying force between the Bengalis and the non-Bengalis. I even took up a course at Kobi Nazrul School to learn Bengali. But as other works came up, I didn't continue the course. I

got as far as saying 'amar nam Nora' (my name is Nora), and things like that. There was a lot of keenness and positive attempts to respect each other's communities. My attempt to learn Bengali was very rich and very interesting.

The roofs of the houses were very old, and, in the case of 34 Parfett Street, there was a creeping plant that grew up the wall, across the roof, through cracks, and then made its way across the attic. Where an attic cover should have been it dangled down. To anyone or our ordinary visitors, it must have seemed weird, strange and eccentric. There were also mice running. I called them chariot races in the cavities between the floor and through the building.

We were very keen to help each other. So, I made visits with Soyful or Bodrul to one of the other houses because their toilet seat had broken. They would say 'thoilet sita broken', and, of course, I would say toilet seat. There were lots of listening to one another. We made sure that the repairs were lined up and found somebody to mend the door, or the window, all very primitive, basic stuff.

There was nobody to finance or fund proper repairs to the very bad conditions of the buildings. In private hands, they're worth a fortune. One time, they came up for sale.

We went to see the Epracent shipping company that owned the buildings. Those houses might have been flattened for car parks or to build something new. This was the time when the Canary Wharf building with that triangle at the top was emerging. So, land and property values were rising. Development, planning gains and all that were in the air. So, somebody on the local council might have said, yeah let's get rid of these old buildings. But you never knew whose hands were in whose pockets. Some of the other squatters further down became local councillors and others, like Jon Hems, worked in the council.

We went to see Epracent to talk about buying these properties. I think you could have bought them for £12,000 each. But to have £12,000 to buy a property was beyond any of our financial capabilities. There was a man called John who lived with his partner in 36, and they had twin boys. There was another person who had a young child.

John in front and three of us women behind walking down a corridor, one by one, each holding a child, must have looked like some kind of weird Mormon thing. A newspaper got hold of it, and maybe in creative imagination thought that we were some kind of a weird cult. We couldn't afford the houses at £12,000 each. It was then that must have been when we fought back in some ways. We had already formed the residents' association and obviously campaigned and got to be a Housing Co-op, the Sylhet Housing Co-op.

I recently looked at some original news cuttings that I kept because I had to organise my thoughts for a talk that I gave on local history. But some of the newspaper cuttings are deteriorating. There are all

My memories of living in Parfett St. in the mid 1970s

sorts of interesting materials in my collection. For example, 'The Great East End Housing Disaster' was a pamphlet produced by some radical activists. They wanted an investigation into the housing situation in Tower Hamlets, for a number of reasons. Firstly, secondly and thirdly, renting. I think I am the only person who salvaged these and also have legal documentation. So, should I die, these should go to the Bancroft Road Library (Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives).

We ate communally, eating beans, lentils and garlic. The table was an upturned door on the floor, a very hippy, squatty stuff. But what furniture we had it would have been brought from the street.

The pub at the end of Parfett Street was called George the Pole because the owner's name was George, and he was Polish from a Jewish background. His wife, Eileen, was sort of glamorous and rather overwhelming. I would come to the pub with my long hair and my dungarees, and she would say, 'Oh darling, listen, darling, you are an actress, you should be glamorous'. But we went there as feminists, and our denim dungarees were right on and very political.

Last year at Speed Histories we focused a lot on Sylvia Pankhurst and the women's suffragette movement. Sylvia Pankhurst lived just round the corner of me in Old Ford Street in (1910-1912). As a result of their efforts, only a certain quota of women got the right to vote in 1928, but they had campaigned for years before that.

I gave a talk and opened an exhibition in the Four Corners photography gallery dressed as a suffragette in a sort of Victorian, Edwardian gear. It was an exhibition of an early photograph of a woman called Nora Smyth. And later in June, July, I did something with Maggie Pinhorn from Alternative Arts.

I was the MC welcoming people and we had Bangladeshi dancers, jazz, Jewish music and plasma. The person who cut the red ribbon was Helen Pankhurst, the granddaughter of Sylvia Pankhurst.

Did our activities attract other squatters into the area. No, I don't think so. We did not draw newcomers and also people from a non-Bengali background. Most of the squatters were teachers and I can't really speak on their behalf. But the actors were more what you might call itinerants. You stay for a while and then go to your next play somewhere.

Remember that was in the '70s into the '80s and '90s. There were no computers, no Internet, no social media. I don't think we attracted new people who said, 'yeah I will have a bit of that'.

We were artists and artistic people with a political edge. When artists move in somewhere - they probably move in because they are normally poor - but their creativity, inventiveness and how they survive, help the areas become hip, fashionable and popular, like what happened in Shoreditch and Hoxton. That's how slums become trendy and the artists who were the vanguards and leaders can't afford to live there anymore.

Concerning whether we artists had a similar impact on Myrdle Street, I don't think so. I think what happened to Myrdle Street was that it managed to maintain its Bangladeshi family side. I cannot speak on the non-Bengali inhabitants or people who live there. I am not in touch with that directly. Look at the appearance of houses. Sometimes, it has been fortunate that a wealthy person has moved in and they have restored its traditional appearance. There might be shutters outside, but the colours of paint that were typical of the time.

There was an activist, known as the 'gentle author'. I have only met him once. He was very discreet but has been very active in maintaining and saving lots of property around Spitalfields, which also has a huge Bengali community. He has campaigned from the point of view of the history of the Huguenots, the building that the silk weavers had built. They are phenomenally expensive now to live in and will ever be so.

You know if you look at Brick Lane and go to the Naz restaurant, you will see a mural of Lady Di on the wall. They painted a mural of a traditional, handsome prince and a beautiful princess, and another one of Lady Diana. Going to Brick Lane was for the market and to eat, things like that. After another generation, the first waves of hip restaurants came along, and the food and the atmosphere might be all excellent.

It might be very cool, chilled-out with really cool colours and pinpointed lights on flowers on a table. But I never take people to that kind of up-to-date and contemporary and hip places. If I am going and I am bringing somebody who has never been to Brick Lane to eat, I always take them to the Naz, and other older established places.

But going back to my point, Sylhet Housing Co-op might have been part of Spitalfields Housing Co-op, but it went. I don't know how it was then administered. But we came out and became part of the Bethnal Green and Victoria Park Housing Association, which is now the Gateway Housing Association.

On the opposite of where I lived in 34 Parfett Street, the council made an architectural error when they started to modernize some properties. To have a decent living standard, the first thing you need is to be able live cleanly, happily and hygienically. But they damaged the terraces by doing what was called a lateral conversion. Whereas you should have a door, and a window and a door and a window, what they did was to put only doors and no windows. So, you live there, or you live there, or you live there. With no more space than ever before. As such, they spoilt the visibility. If you are talking about architecture, they spoilt that side.

It sounds kind of good, on the one hand, to be sensitive to what a Bengali family might require. Let's look at cooking. It might be more traditional for the lady of the house to be like this, preparing vegetables or food. They got mixed up with how people were going to live and became over-sensitive. It was like trying to be too politically correct. It

My memories of living in Parfett St. in the mid 1970s

was getting ridiculous. But, anyhow, gradually what they managed to establish was no more newcomers into the area.

Gradually, one by one, the non-Bengalis moved out. I was one of the last ones and was very sorry to leave. I have huge, very fond memories of the place. I took away from the garden a manhole cover. In the old days when men delivered coal, they would have put them in the coal hole. The area under the street was known as an aree, like area but aree. I took it away with me as I was very fond of it.

A lot of the children I used to see and meet have grown up now. Sometimes I see someone but can't remember their name. There is a young man who I used to know when he was a child. He works now in Sainsbury's. I have spoken to him in the past, but he doesn't remember me now.

In Myrdle Street, there was a family I particularly got involved with. There was the father and his son who came initially and then the mother came with three daughters. I helped the children with reading and discussing things with the boy. They moved to Jubilee Street. I think the father has died.

The young women are now older and have children of their own. A child that I used to know works in a market stall of hardware in Bethnal Green Road, where they sell buckets and bags. I talked to him and took his photograph. Not everybody maintains the level of friendship or feelings of dedication that I have. When I met people that I knew in the past, they always used to say, 'oh you still in Parfett Street?' They were amazed at how long we had been there. I felt like getting a t-shirt with 'I still live in Parfett Street'.

It was all because I came to participate in a play at the Half-Moon Theatre in Alie Street. That was how my journey started.

We paid for gas and electricity. We paid our bills and had a telephone in the hallway. For a long time, we had no bath, but we didn't stink. We just went to another nearby place for that in East Mount Street, near the London hospital. We used the students' shower or swimming pool at the London Hospital. We were inventive.

We ate communally and there was the pressure of cooking in rotas for ten-twelve people. We also ate at the pub next door, George the Pole. And after dinner, the debates were a rich mix of socialism, Marxism, Socialist Workers Party, the Workers Revolutionary Party and Feminism. All vying to find a solution to the running dogs of capitalism. In one sense, and I am glad, the flavour of the time was very political.

There was a joke that came in the talk around the table. Could you change a plug for the revolution, said one of the lefties - a leftie joke at the time. I replied that I haven't arrived at an answer to that. I remain convinced that the spirit and passion of those time and its participants deserve accolades in the canons of Tower Hamlets History.

The 34 Parfett Street house is deeply invested in my memory. I often

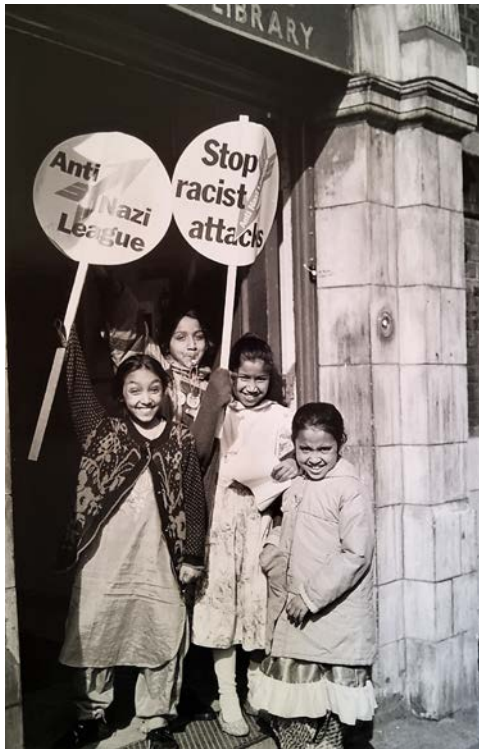
Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

dream of travelling back there and floating through the rooms, visiting my past. I dream quite frequently about it and I wake up thinking, God I have been in Parfett Street. Oh, I could cry.

We did not experience many hostilities while living in Parfett Street. But once I went with a friend of mine, Susan, to Fieldgate Mansions to support a family being harassed. I don't remember what time of the night it was but that it was dark. God knows how we came to know of the harassment with no mobile phones, but obviously, there was a chain of communication. in those days

I remember Susan and I going there to be there, to find out what had happened, and to show solidarity. I know these are typical political words from the time but to show solidarity and protect someone were important. Are you all right and can we do this? I don't think I witnessed anything more than that. Talking about antagonism and racism, vile skinheads were distributing their literature in Brick Lane.

This photograph was taken by the Whitechapel Gallery. It was the Whitechapel Library then, opposite Altab Ali Park. I have got more similar photographs. When I took this, I was doing photography.



© Nora Connolly

Other members of the people who lived in 34 and 36 were actors

and that. They were involved with theatre companies. There was one called Belts and Braces and another called 7.84. These theatre groups specifically had political agendas and did a lot of their work and play at the Half-Moon Theatre. They would take a play by Bertolt Brecht, for example, originally called *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and adapted by an Irish writer called Shane Connerton. It was then called the *Good Women of Wapping*. There was another play about the gangster, 'George Davis is Innocent', which was a huge story at the time. He was a reasonably petty gangster who was wrongfully arrested for a robbery that he didn't do. Subsequently, he was arrested for a robbery that he did do.

But even still today, by Altab Ali Park, the paintwork has nearly faded. But I know the locations and can just see what the slogans were. This was not to do with the Bengalis or racism or Afro-Caribbean. But kids today wouldn't know what the slogan, 'George Davis is Innocent OK' referred to, but many older people still.

There was a play at the Half-Moon telling the story of the campaigns and defending George Davis. This was like the tail end of the glory days of what were the Kray Brothers and all that local history. The Kray Brothers were said to be so good to their mums while they were murdering other people and running protection campaigns.

The Half Moon Theatre and all the actors came from well off backgrounds. You could be somebody trained in the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and there was no necessity for you to be involved in politics. But we weren't that. We were people and actors with a social conscience. Things have swung back again.

There are lots of debates and criticisms about educational opportunities. The young men and women from lower-income brackets had no chance of getting into the theatre, because, like politics itself, their backgrounds mostly are Eton and Harrow. They already came from elevated, superior, influential backgrounds.

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

My memories of living in Parfett St. in the mid 1970s

Parfett Street - A Place to Live

Nora Connolly

This written piece by Nora complements and adds to the information provided during the interview. It has some repetitions



“Are you still in Parfett St.?” people would ask with a note of incredulity as I lived there for nigh on 20 years at No. 34 to be precise.

Or as my Bengali neighbours call it Parfetti Street.

Built from sturdy London brick and Welsh slate roofs, when Queen Victoria was on the throne, this enclave of 2 or 3 streets running between Fieldgate Mansions and the Commercial Road, including Settles Street and Myrdle Street had remained intact though in an increasing state of neglect and deterioration.

Being near to the docks, in the 2nd World War 1939 -1945, the East End suffered severe war damage during ‘the Blitz’ (the German Luftwaffe bombing campaign). Many local people were killed, or if they survived their homes destroyed and families scattered.

25 years on, the Borough of Tower Hamlets was particularly challenged with the task of ‘slum clearance’ and planning the resurrection of this blighted area.

In the 1970s, when the prospect of Canary Wharf was just a gleam in the eye of the London Docklands Development Corporation (L.D.D.C.) a local textile company Epracent had purchased a bunch

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

of these houses which had fallen into neglect with a view to presumably capitalising on the commercial opportunity presented at that time.

In order to do so, their plan required to allow the properties to deteriorate to an extent that the only future was to actively set about demolishing them. They typically set about by boarding up windows and doors, cutting off gas & electricity and smashing up lavatories, which were mostly outside in the yards.

Desperate housing issues conjoined with the counter-culture of the times and so they were squatted! The barricades went up, and the bailiffs and police were met with marches and demonstrations, placards and protest, sleep ins and street theatre and colourfully dressed Gay Libbers. People power!

‘It’s better than telly any day’ said one of the locals.

But who were the people?

They were teachers and community workers and local Bangladeshi activists. They were actors and directors from the Half Moon Theatre in Alie Street down by Aldgate East.

In my recollection, the original key activists were Ann Pettit, Anne Zell & Tony Mahoney and of course Soyful Alom and Bodrul Alom.

And that as they say, is where I came in.

I’d been living in Dublin where I’d trained as an actor at the Abbey Theatre, Ireland’s national theatre. A friend of mine asked me to join him in a play at the Half Moon which was in an old disused Jewish synagogue producing leftwing alternative theatre.

The original turbulence and protest had settled down, the bailiffs had retreated and with a degree of skill and ingenuity the squatters had reconnected the electricity and fixed the lavatories. Running hot water and baths came later. In the meantime many of us sneaked into the student union showers and swimming pool round the corner at the London Hospital.

At the end of the street was a small synagogue. An expert on the history of the Jewish people in the East End, Bill Fishman often led groups of visitors to see where their ancestors had come to live having escaped Jewish pogroms.

A reminder of that faith meant that you would see a mezuzah fixed to the side of the front doors. This was a small scroll about 3 inches long containing a Judaic blessing for all who lived there. Its’ message being - ‘write the words of God on the gates and doorposts of your house’.

But now words and slogans of protest had been painted on some of the walls.

Many of the Jewish people had died or moved to the suburbs and the next to have arrived were the Bangladeshi immigrants.

And of course, us, the rather random young people involved in the arts and politics.

The houses were 4 storeys tall if you include the lower basement

My memories of living in Parfett St. in the mid 1970s

level which led out to the backyard, in which by the way there was not only an outside toilet but also an old Anderson bomb shelter.

We at number 34 & 36 Parfett St. and 28 Myrdle Street took down the adjoining back yard walls and created an open shared space, where endless meetings took place. These were lively affairs conducted in both Bengali and English. And as you might know only the Bengali men came as the women would be needed at home to mind the children and of course the assumption was that they would be in agreement with their menfolk when it came to any voting issues.

I briefly attended Bengali language classes at the Kobi Nazrul school.

A Residents Association was formed which in turn became the Sylhet Housing Co-Operative.

By now, unrest to do with major unemployment issues, in 1985 Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher took drastic action and brought to an end Ken Livingstone's jurisdiction as Leader of the G.L.C. (Greater London Council) by abolishing it.

Literally as time was running out, the G.L.C. in its' last throws of power granted formal recognition and funding for office premises on Myrdle St.

And so, all the hard work and meetings continued and it's worth pointing out that this was 1985 and at least a decade or more before computer technology, the internet or mobile phone systems existed!!

Meantime back at home in the 'Squat' - how did we conduct our day to day lives?

We ate communally - or - tried to. Not only for practical reasons but also as an attempt to practise, demonstrating a sense of a socialist sharing ethos and all very 'hippie'.

Rota's about cooking were drawn up but were not always successful.

The teachers would come home after their days work just as the actors were dashing out to do their work at theatres in the evening! So, in all honesty it didn't often work out.

The pressure of making dinner for about 12 people was definitely a challenge.

The meals were typically of a whole food organic nature. Beans, lentils, garlic and garlic, lentils, beans.

Our table was an upturned door resting on beer crates and of course we sat on the floor on bean bag cushions.

'After dinner debate' was a rich mix of Socialism, Marxism, bits of S.W.P (Socialist Workers Party) and W.R.P. (Workers Revolutionary Party) all vying for the solution to 'the running dogs of capitalism'!! I must admit not all which I understood.

"Are you a girl or a woman?" asked the Bengali children on the street, prompted by the fact that us women weren't didn't match the same family traditional image as theirs. We were single, independent dungaree wearing 'Fembos' (feminists)!

The Queen's Head public house, know as George the Poles was at the bottom of the street. It was a typical East End boozier run fairly strictly by George and his wife Eileen.

Next door was a tall red brick men's hostel established by Victorian benefactor Lord Rowton and known as Tower House, where rather down & out single gentlemen had shelter. George the Poles was another refuge. He was a kind man and sometimes sorted out their money problems. A Scotsman called Andy entertained us playing the accordion in exchange for the odd pint. If he ran out of money George would take the accordion in for safe keeping so that Andy didn't sell it or pawn it.

'George the Poles' (and yes he was Polish) is now the highly popular Tayyabs which started from small beginnings in 1972 and trendy young people queue up to get in.

Tower House is now an up-market hotel and far from its' original usage as lodging house for the working man. Only the small stone cherub at the top of the entrance could testify to that.

Meantime, back at No.34. the Virginia creeper, a plant not a person crept up the length of the back outside wall, climbed in through the gaps in the Welsh slate roof and dangled down from the loft in Gothic fashion.

Mice ran what I called chariot races between the ceiling cavity all along the terraces. So, all praise to the many stray cats who turned up and played their part in defending the houses. And I could name all of them.

Quite late into the evening you could hear the low buzzing sound of electric sewing machines as our neighbours on piecework, stitched zips into leather jackets.

(piece work = paid by the amount of units finished regardless of time).

The Sylhet Co-Op. went through several transformations - being adopted by Spitalfields H.A. then Bethnal Green & Victoria Park H.A. - which is now Gateway H.A.

The development and improvements of the properties to make homes for families meant that us single folk had to move on.

I now live up by Victoria Park. I sometimes see the children that I mentioned earlier, some of them remember me and have children of their own.

I took photos of some of the anti-nazi, skinhead aggression in Brick Lane.

The area has changed and become what the Evening Standard dubbed as 'hipster central'. Property prices have increased phenomenally.

Young people stroll Brick Lane with the air of having just discovered it. The older restaurants replaced by more so-called fashionable minimalist decor, but I always head for the Naz.

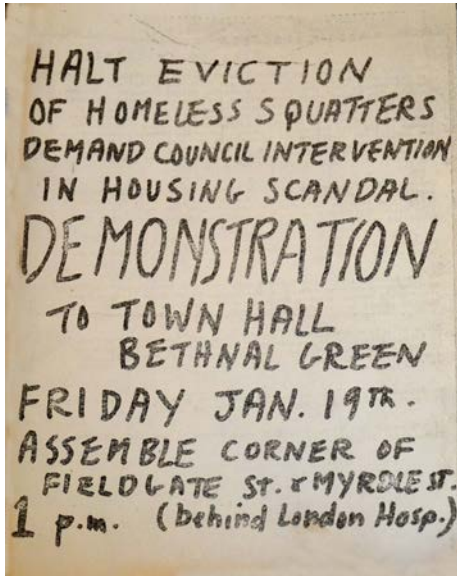
I'm still an actress and have good memories of that extraordinary

My memories of living in Parfett St. in the mid 1970s

time in Parfett St.

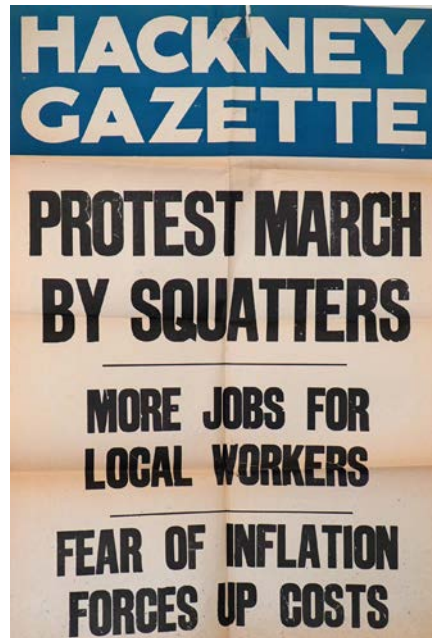
To return to my introduction - "Are you still in Parfett St.?"

No. I've long moved but so deeply embedded are those memories that often when sleeping, my dreams take me back there and I float through the rooms and visit my past.



A handwritten protest sign on aged paper. The text is written in black ink in all caps, with some words in larger, bolder letters. The sign reads: "HALT EVICTION OF HOMELESS SQUATTERS DEMAND COUNCIL INTERVENTION IN HOUSING SCANDAL. DEMONSTRATION TO TOWN HALL BETHNAL GREEN FRIDAY JAN. 1978. ASSEMBLE CORNER OF FIELDGATE ST. & MYRDLE ST. 1 p.m. (behind London Hosp.)"

HALT EVICTION
OF HOMELESS SQUATTERS
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A printed poster from the Hackney Gazette. It features a blue header with the title "HACKNEY GAZETTE" in white. Below the header, the text "PROTEST MARCH BY SQUATTERS" is written in large, bold, black letters. Underneath, there are two lines of text, each preceded by a horizontal line: "MORE JOBS FOR LOCAL WORKERS" and "FEAR OF INFLATION FORCES UP COSTS".

**HACKNEY
GAZETTE**

**PROTEST MARCH
BY SQUATTERS**

**MORE JOBS FOR
LOCAL WORKERS**

**FEAR OF INFLATION
FORCES UP COSTS**

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Squatters Heritage Walk

Developed by the Community Participants

*Ahmed Chowdhury, Cherifa Atoussi, Hayette Atoussi,
Kamrul Islam and Rosy Awwal*

With training support from Dr Georgie Wemyss

Parfett Street and Myrdle Street, and surrounding areas, have been a historically significant place in the narratives of squatting in London. One main difference in squatting and the squatting movements in Tower Hamlets from many other areas of London, that sought to support and justify squatting in boarded-up, public sector housing properties, was the role it played in developing and sustaining local Bangladeshi activism.

In Tower Hamlets, there were empty boarded up properties that the local authorities tried to keep in a damaged and unsafe condition, so that noone tried to squat in them. But the area also attracted ingenious and creative individuals, who not only defied the authorities' attempts to prevent people living in those properties but helped homeless Bangladeshis to break in, reconnect gas and electricity, and make basic improvements. Furthermore, they helped the Bangladeshis with advice and guidance on their rights and to become better organised for campaigns and negotiations with the authorities.

There are several locations in and around the Parfett Street and Myrdle Street area that played an important role in the history of local squatting and housing activism. Many left-wing and young artists were attracted to come to the area, many of whom tried to live a communal life. There were actors and photographers, some of whom used their talents to further the causes in which they believed. The Queen's Head pub, known as George the Pole, has become the well-known Tayyeb Restaurant, but at that time it was an important place for trendy squatters in the area to get together, socialize and discuss serious political and social issues, the dominant discourses undertaken through the prisms of Marxism.

There are locations that played significant roles in the life of both squatters and non-squatters in the area, and one particular building, Tower House, created a lot of nuisance because, as a hostel, it attracted a lot of transience people, some of whom lived on the margins of society. In fact, in the early 20th century, Joseph Stalin stayed at Tower House, in Fieldgate Street, for two weeks when he came to attend a conference in 1907.

The Whitechapel Centre in Myrdle Street and the next-door special needs school were also important local resources in the life and development of the local Bangladeshi community, including squatters. There were English language classes, musical and poetry lessons and drama rehearsals and performances. Local children got entertained and played games, such as Corram Board and badminton. The venue also held events, community meetings, and Bangladeshi national celebrations, such as the Victory Vay on 16 December (year?).

It was as a direct result of the eviction of a Bangladeshi squatter family, from 54 Parfett Street in 1983, and the subsequent attempt to evict another family, who were helped to move in by a group of local activists, that consolidated the efforts in the creation of the Sylhet Housing Co-op. Although it was called Sylhet Housing Co-op, it was not exclusively for Bangladeshis. Out of the thirty-four properties that came under its control, white people, some of whom were also on the board of the organisation, occupied about six or seven houses. It was a multi-community effort to fight for decent housing.

The movement that started from Bangladeshi housing activism and led to the community demanding and getting a local primary school, Kobi Nazrul School, established in the area on the location of a former rubbish vehicle depot.

A community Centre was set up at 46 Myrdle Street, called St Mary's centre in 1982, which spearheaded efforts in community development, helping members of the community access welfare, and promoting education and community engagement with the mainstream.

The main squatting locations in the area were Parfett Street, Myrdle Street, Fieldgate Manson, Verdian Street, Nelsone Street and Rampart Street (on the other side of Commercial Road). The mass squatting of Bangladeshis in Pelham Buildings in Woodseer Street by Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG), in 1977, forms a part

Squatters Heritage Walk

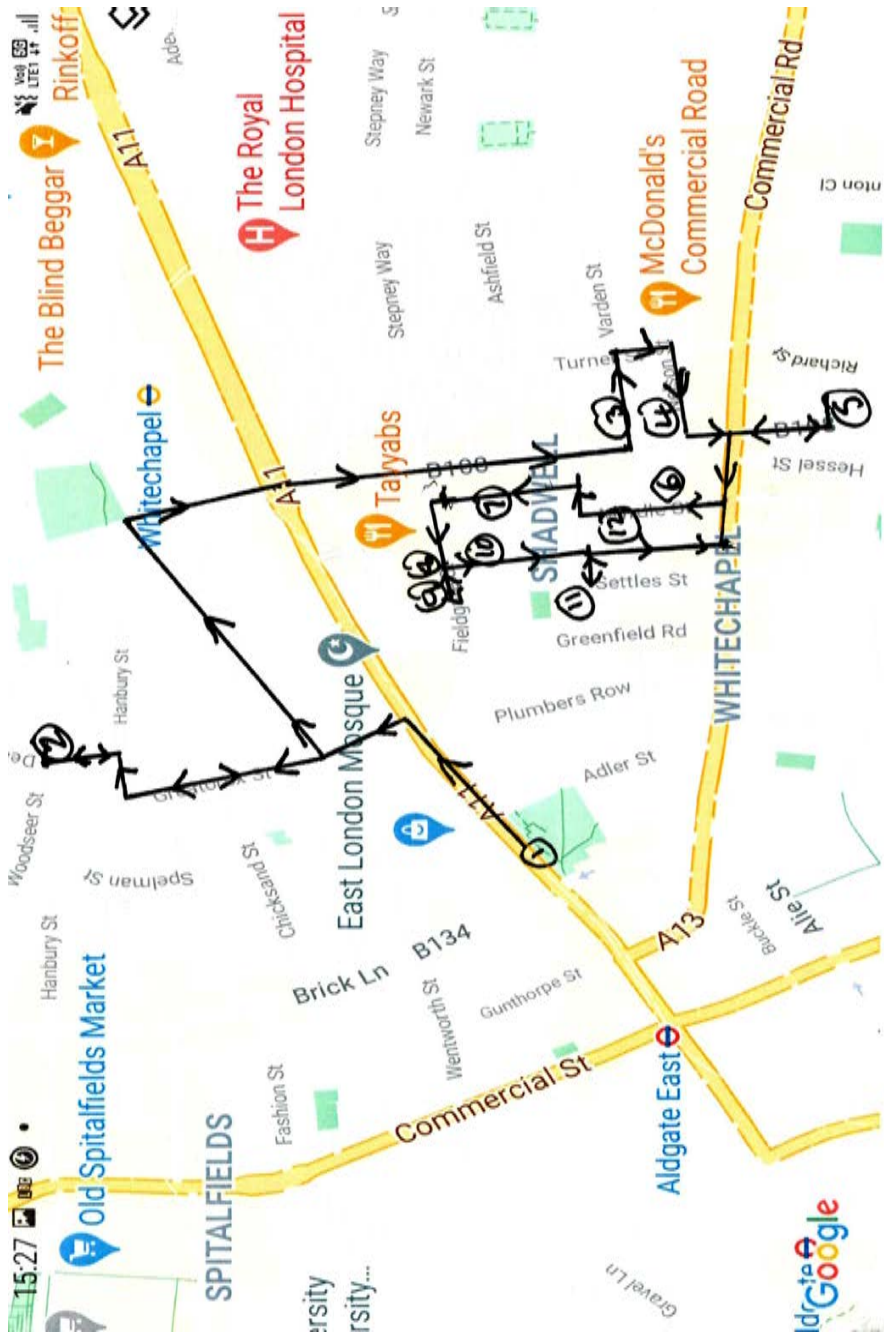
of the walk, although it is outside the immediate area of the project. It has been included because it provides the context and background to subsequent squatting and organised action and for being the single largest squatting by Bangladeshis.

The walk will take people, both local and from wider areas, through a journey of historical locations, Altab Ali Park to Stepney Community Trust, 46 Myrdle Street, the former St Mary's Centre. A pack with information on each stop will be developed. East End Conention will run more detailed Heritage Walk training to help train up local people to enable them to deliver interest public walks. The route identified is as follows:

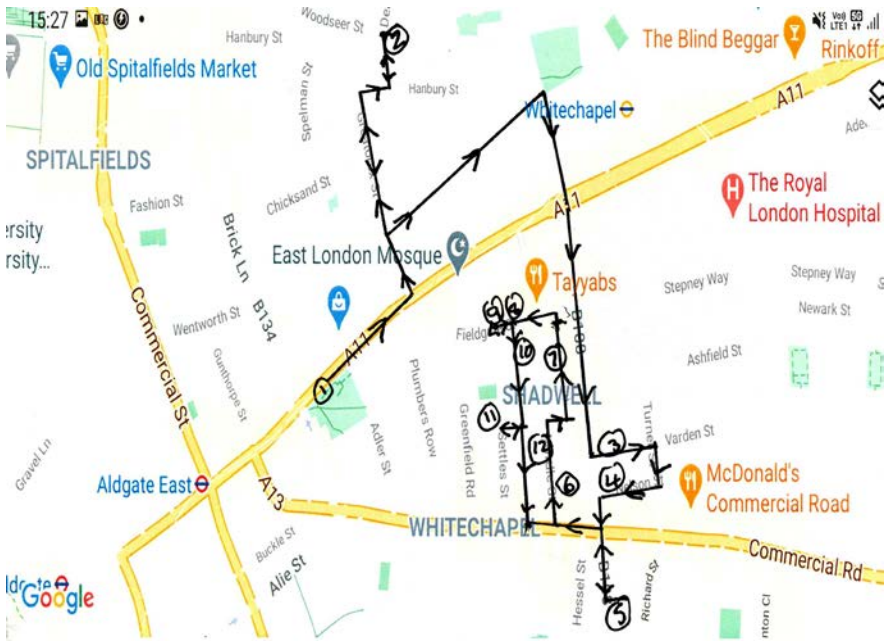
Heritage Walk Stops

1. Start at Altab Ali Park
2. Pelham Buildings
3. Nelson Street
4. Verdan Street
5. Rampert Street
6. Whitechapel Centre
7. Fieldgate Mansions
8. Tayyeb Restaurant (Queen's Head Pub)
9. Tower House
10. 34&36 Perfett Street
11. Kobi Nazrul School
12. Finish at Stepney Community Trust (St Mary's Centre)

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street



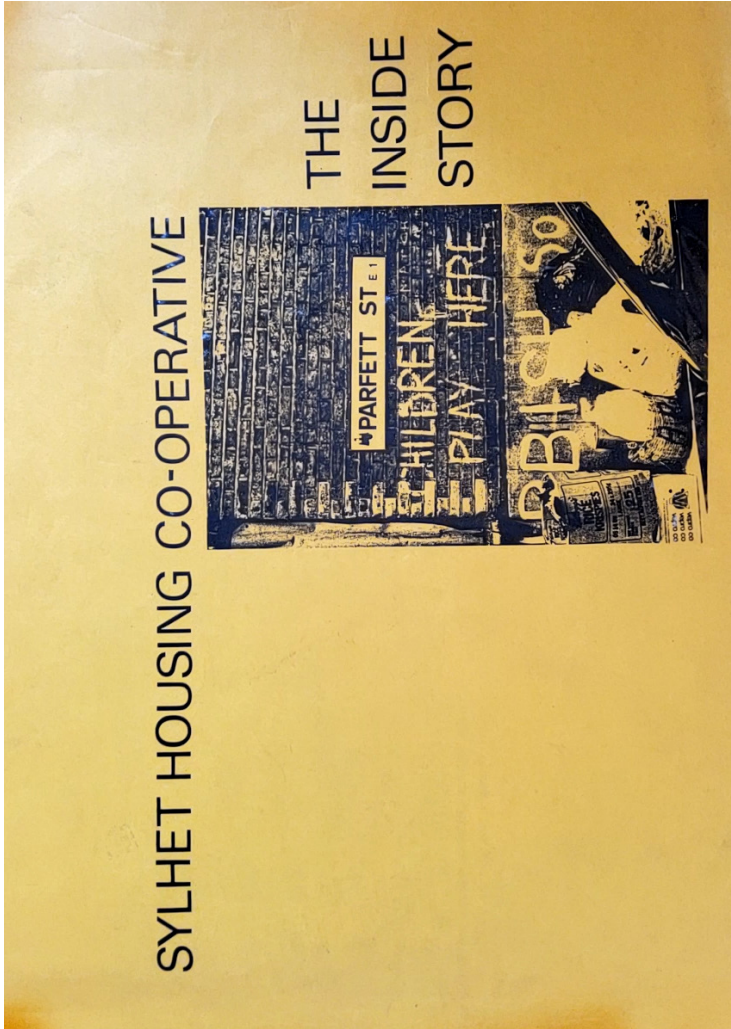
Squatters Heritage Walk



Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Appendix

Sylhet Housing Co-op *The Inside Story*



Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

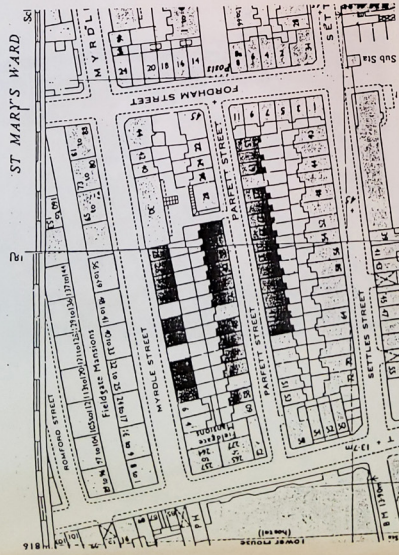
THE AREA

Parfett Street Housing Action Area is in West Stepney, almost in the shadow of the City of London. Until recently it was a "forgotten" area, an area with some of the poorest housing in London which was gradually getting worse as very little repair work, let alone improvement work, was being carried out.

Most people living in the area are living in grossly overcrowded conditions, some in tenement blocks and some in 3 and 4 storey terraced houses. Most households do not have a bath or a shower, do not have hot water and do not have an inside W.C.

Most of the people now living in the area are Bengali. Like Spitalfields, West Stepney is an area which has traditionally housed an immigrant population, and is regarded as a "safe" area by the Bengali community.

The area is no longer a forgotten area - the GIC declared it a Housing Action Area in May 1983, and have publicised the conditions of the area very widely. The problems are as great as ever, but a start is being made on tackling them. The tenement blocks in the area have been bought by housing associations, which have started improvement programmes. The GIC are aiming to tackle some of the problems of the terraced houses through an enveloping scheme - that is by repairing the outside of all the terraced houses to make them structurally sound and weatherproof, at no cost to the owners. The majority of these houses are privately owned, and the owners will be encouraged to improve the inside of the houses using improvement grants. 34 of these houses are owned by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets..... there has to be a way of improving the insides of these 34 houses.



PART OF PARFETT STREET HOUSING ACTION AREA
 Sylhet Co-op hope to buy and improve the
 34 houses shaded black

THE CO-OP

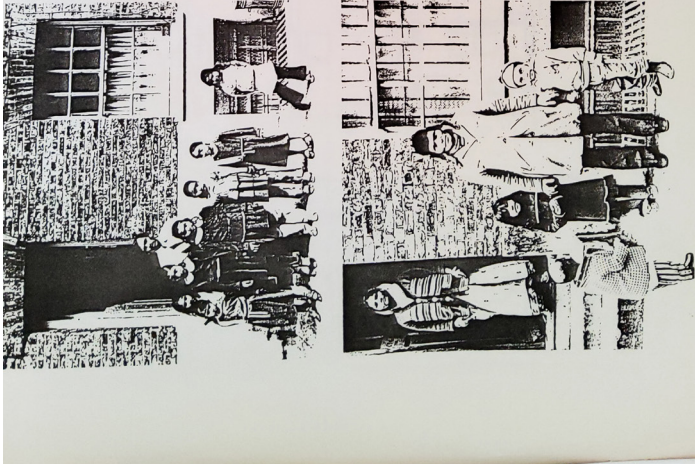
SYLHET HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE aims to involve all the occupants of the 34 houses as members. A lot of progress has already been made:

- SYLHET has been registered as a co-operative by the Registrar of Friendly Societies.
- It has held regular committee meetings and has been holding regular committee meetings.
- The GIC promised to provide the funds to enable the co-op to buy and improve the houses.
- Tower Hamlets agreed to sell the houses to the Co-operative.
- Solon Co-operative Housing Services agreed to buy the houses on behalf of SYLHET.
- Solon's architects, in consultation with the Co-op committees have drawn up plans for the improvement of the houses.
- The GIC has approved the plans and submitted them to the Department of the Environment.

The improvements will mean that all the houses will be brought up to a high standard, which, in practice, will mean that the insides will have to be almost gutted.

- Inside all houses will have:
- new windows
 - damp proof courses
 - proper kitchens
 - new wiring
 - basements made fit for human habitation
 - rotten timber replaced
 - new decorations

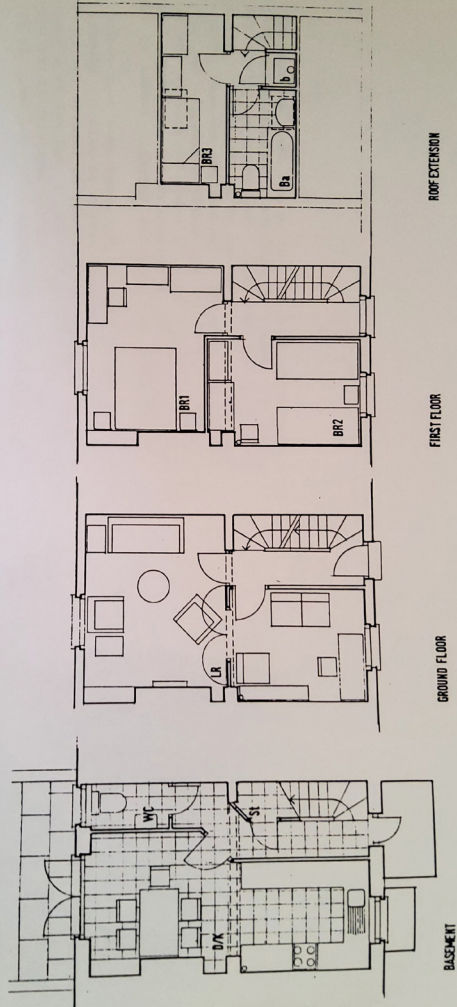
This will be done in close consultation with all members of the Co-op.



Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

The plans are to provide the following accommodation, to meet the needs of as many of the existing residents as possible:

- 2 1-bedroom flats
- 2 2-bedroom flats
- 8 3-bedroom flats
- 2 3-bedroom flats
- 18 4-bedroom houses
- 6 5-bedroom houses



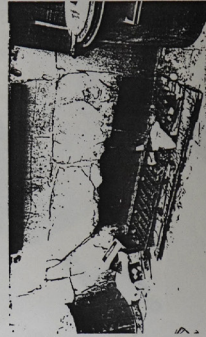
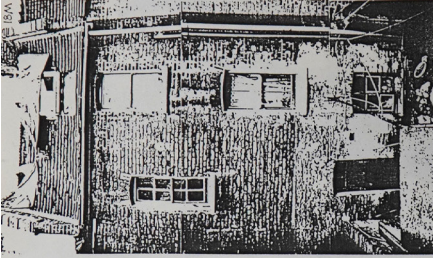
THE HOUSES

The 34 houses owned by Tower Hamlets were bought up by the borough over a period of time, with the aim of eventually redeveloping the whole area. The redevelopment plans were dropped, mainly because of shortage of money and changing attitudes towards redevelopment. Also many people in the area were opposed to re-development.

A few of the 34 houses are occupied by tenants of Tower Hamlets. Most are occupied by squatters and live in a mixture of large and small units. There are some 250 people altogether living in these houses. All the houses are in appalling condition - there are major structural defects, many have no bathroom or hot water and most only have an outside WC. The wiring is lethal, many basements are classified as statutorily unfit for human habitation, but are mostly lived in.

In July 1983, encouraged by the GLC, the occupants of the houses decided to form a housing co-operative. To quote a co-op member -

"The reason we formed SYLHET Co-op was we had been facing a terrible housing problem in this area. We had been living in very appalling conditions in these houses and we thought that the only way we could improve our houses was to form a co-operative"



THE FUTURE

SYLHET HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE was formed in order to get something done about these 34 houses in Parfett Street and Myrdle Street. In order that the occupants of the houses could be enabled to run their own housing, to decide for themselves how the houses should be improved and to be able to manage the houses themselves, the money allocated to which house, and to control the future management and maintenance of the houses.

SYLHET HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE is still very new. It has to overcome language and cultural barriers, it has a lot to learn yet. But it has come a long way in a short time, and the GJC has promised to provide the Co-op with a grant to employ a worker to help the Co-op to manage itself as soon as the houses have been bought.

The money must be found for SYLHET'S scheme to go ahead. SYLHET must be allowed to buy the houses this year and to make a start on improving them as soon as possible. The houses are decaying rapidly, and need complete rehabilitation. The problems are more fundamental than can be solved merely by enveloping. Unless SYLHET'S scheme goes ahead, the conditions inside the houses will remain as they are - conditions in which no-one should have to live in the twentieth century.



Appendix

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Greater London Council (GLC)

Some GLC documents on the Parfett Street Housing Action Area (HAA) and their role in helping to set up the Sylhet Housing Co-operative, funding to purchase and renovate the 34 properties that came under the control of the Co-op.

GLC
public relations branch
news service
release time:

Greater London Council
The County Hall
London SE1 7PB

01-633 7700 or 6529
7866 or 3235
2032 or 7977

IMMEDIATE, THURSDAY, JUNE 13, 1985

NO: 493

BOWZAT! GLC CRICKET DEBUT FOR BENGALI KIDS

The Greater London Council makes its debut into the cricketing arena this Sunday to raise cash for under-privileged inner city kids.

GLC members and staff will be hitting for six so that East End Bengali children can go on seaside summer daytrips - many of them for the first time.

These trips will ensure this year that around 100 youngsters from Parfett St, Cecil St and Myrtle Street in Tower Hamlets will not be prisoners in their own homes during the summer holidays. In previous years they were trapped indoors because of a lack of play facilities in the area and dangerous roads which led to serious accidents.

GLC Housing Chair Tony McBrearty said today: "The Parfett Street area was designated a Housing Action Area since it has some of the worst housing, not just in London, but in the country.

"We don't have the powers to hand out money for the excursions so a charity cricket match seemed the best alternative.

"Homes in this area are notoriously bad. When the GLC stepped into the privately owned properties in 1983 to set up an area improvement programme, we discovered that 80 per cent of the houses were overcrowded and lacked basic amenities like bathrooms and hot water.

"We have planned major renovations to eradicate the shocking state of the homes and bring them up to a decent standard."

The GLC will be playing the Bangladeshi Youth League and the Bengali Assistant High Commissioner will be present. Any extra funds raised will go towards the Bangladesh flood relief fund.

Mr McBrearty concluded: "I'm bowled over by the enthusiasm for the contest and anticipate a good match."

END

Press contact: Cathy Meehan (01) 633 7700

NOTE TO EDITORS: You are invited to send a reporter and photographer to the match. Play starts at 2 pm on Sunday, June 16 at the GLC Sports Ground, Overton Road, Sutton. GLC Housing Chair Tony McBrearty and vice chair Lesley Hammond will be present.

GLC

**public relations branch
news service**

release time: IMMEDIATE, FRIDAY, APRIL 15, 1983

NO. 222

Greater London Council
The County Hall
London SE1 7PB

01-633 7700 or 6529
7866 or 3235
2032 or 7977

Visit 1

HOUSING MINISTER VISITS SPITALFIELDS

The Minister for Housing, Sir George Young, visited the Spitalfields area of Tower Hamlets (Thursday, April 14) to see the housing problems of the area and how they are being tackled.

Accompanying the Minister were members and officers of the Greater London Council and Tower Hamlets Borough Council as well as officials from the Department of the Environment and the Metropolitan Police.

The party first went to the proposed Parfett Street Housing Action Area where there is a close knit Bengali population. Next stop was the Fieldgate Mansions where the GLC has arranged for a rehabilitation scheme to be carried out by the Samuel Lewis Housing Trust. Sir George then saw the Columbia Road Housing Action Area where the GLC's innovative 'Package Envelope Project' is under way. The Minister was given a bird's eye view of 150 new roofs from the top of a nearby block of flats.

A new low rise housing estate was seen at Hopetown Street and then another re-development area of slum tenement blocks, Wentworth Dwellings, was visited. The trip ended with a tour of the GLC's large Chicksand estate and discussion at the Town Hall.

Mr Tony McBrearty, Chairman of the GLC Housing Committee, said today: "I am glad that Sir George was able to come to see at first hand just what housing conditions are like in Tower Hamlets.

"Our route took in most of the serious housing problems facing the area - disrepair, mixed use, overcrowding, and the way these problems particularly effect ethnic minorities.

"We stressed to the Minister that if the Government will allow it the GLC are prepared and ready to do more.

"In Tower Hamlets, the GLC has already declared HAA's at Tredegar Square and Medway Road where 167 properties have already been improved and work will begin this year on the construction of 362 new homes in the borough.

mf

"We are going to carry out 480 'package improvements' during the present financial year; carry out environmental improvements to four estates; carry out special measures such as entryphones for 10 tower blocks; rectify major technical problems on 11 estates; carry out a pilot 'heating and condensation' package.

"The GLC is also giving £18,000 to the Safe Neighbourhood Unit to continue work with tenants on improving the quality of life on three estates in the borough.

"We shall also be shortly considering proposals for the declaration of a Housing Action Area in Parfett Street, close to our Columbia Road HAA where we have already put new roofs on half of the 308 homes that were in an unsatisfactory state of repair.

"The GLC has the will and the ability to help more in Tower Hamlets. I hope the Government will let us get on with it. Perhaps Sir George's visit today will provide evidence that help IS needed and that the GLC CAN give it."

END

Press contact: Eric Blackburn (01) 633 7700

GLC

Greater London Council
The County Hall
London SE1 7PB

**public relations branch
news service**

01-633 7700 or 6529
7866 or 3235
2032 or 7977

release time: 7 AM, THURSDAY, JUNE 9, 1983

No. 342

NEW HOUSING ACTION AREA AT TOWER HAMLETS

Another area of Tower Hamlets - Parfett Street - has been declared a Housing Action Area by the Greater London Council.

The area contains 208 properties and Fieldgate Mansions, which consists of 256 flats owned by the Samuel Lewis Housing Trust, many of the family houses being multi-occupied and some used commercially.

Mr Tony McBrearty, Chairman of the GLC Housing Committee, said today: "The objective of housing action areas is to improve the housing in the areas, the well being of the residents and the proper and effective management and use of the accommodation.

"Since the London borough of Tower Hamlets asked us to declare Parfett Street such an area, we have carried out a survey and consulted residents. The main problems are overcrowding, lack of amenities and poor physical condition of the homes.

"The area contains many large families as well as a disproportionate number of both single people and elderly people. The needs of the large families particularly ethnic minority families will be difficult to meet because suitable accommodation is in short supply.

"We will be holding a public meeting to explain the aims and procedures, and the formation of a steering committee will be considered."

END

Press Contact: Eric Blackburn (01) 633 7700

Greater London Council

Housing Committee
Finance and General Purposes Committee

Report (7.2.86) by

Head of Housing Services

Item	PRESENTED TO	820 S & S
5	13 FEB 1986 HOUSING COMMITTEE	(4)

SYLHET HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE -
LOAN FOR ACQUISITION AND CONVERSION
OF PROPERTIES IN PARFETT STREET
AND MYRDLE STREET, E1 (LONDON
BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS)
PROGRAMME REF: 7221

RECOMMENDATION

That, approval be given to the making of a loan totalling £1,139,380, to the Sylhet Housing Co-operative Ltd for the purposes of:-

- (a) purchasing 30 houses (Nos 15, 17, 23, 25-33 (odd), 34, 35, 36, 39-44 (cons.), 48-54 (even), and 58 Parfett Street, E1 and Nos 8, 10, 12, 16, 18, 22, 24 and 28 Myrdle Street, E1) from the London Borough of Tower Hamlets including fees, allowances and incidental costs connected with the purchase;
- (b) undertaking the rehabilitation of the 12 houses (Nos 15, 17, 23-35 (odd) and 39-43 (odd) Parfett Street, E1) comprised in Phase I of the overall scheme to provide 14 general needs units including the costs of works, professional fees, allowances and capitalised interest.

HG/HM/HA/NJ/5406
File Ref: 13297

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

1 INTRODUCTION

The Sylhet Housing Co-operative operates in the Parfett Street Housing Action Area, which was declared by the Council in 1983 at the request of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The HAA was declared in recognition of the acute housing stress in the area, characterised by overcrowding, lack of amenities and very poor physical condition of the properties. The report (HG 563) recommending the declaration of the HAA indicated that particular attention would need to be given to the future of Borough-owned houses within the area if the objectives of the declaration were to be realised.

2 SYLHET HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE AND BACKGROUND

The Sylhet Housing Co-operative was formed in July 1983 following a general meeting of the residents of the 34 Borough-owned properties in Parfett Street and Myrdle Street. These properties which are within the HAA are in extremely poor condition and suffer some of the worst physical conditions and highest levels of overcrowding in the HAA. They were originally acquired for redevelopment but these proposals were subsequently frustrated by events with the result that the Borough eventually admitted it no longer had the resources to tackle the problems of these dwellings and agreed to their disposal to a housing association or housing co-operative.

3 The intention of the residents (a mixture of tenants, licensees and squatters) in establishing the Co-operative was to provide improved housing for rent by its members by purchasing and rehabilitating the Borough-owned properties using loan-finance provided by the GLC. This action has been fully supported by this Council at both member and officer level since it is seen as being entirely consistent with achieving the objectives of the HAA. The Co-operative subsequently achieved registration as a Friendly Society within the provisions of the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1965 and has also been registered by the Housing Corporation under the provisions of the Housing Act 1974.

4 The Co-operative's membership is drawn from the 58 households who occupy the borough-owned houses. The membership predominantly consists of Bengali households, though some of the properties are occupied by young single white-sharers. The aim of the Co-operative is to provide a multi-racial organisation which gives all its members a democratic say in the improvement and control of its housing. The day to day business of the Co-operative is carried out by an elected management committee which meets regularly and periodically reports to general meetings of the members with copies of all Agendas, Minutes and other information being produced both in Sylheti and English.

5 GRANT ASSISTANCE TO CO-OPERATIVE

The formation of the Co-operative is generally seen as an important and integral factor in bring about an improvement in the appalling housing conditions in the locality. In recognition of this fact and in view of the incidence and complexity of the workload associated with the scheme for the purchase and rehabilitation of the properties the Council has already provided the Co-operative with revenue grant assistance.



The grant, to a maximum of £15,542 in 1985/86, has been made available to enable the Co-operative to meet the costs of establishing, equipping and running a permanent office as well as employing two full-time workers. One of these workers is engaged on housing management matters whilst the other concentrates on the development aspects of the scheme.

6 PROPOSAL

The Co-operative proposes to purchase 30 houses (Nos 15, 17, 23, 25-33 (odd), 34, 35, 36, 39-44 (cons.), 48-54 (even), and 58 Parfett Street, E1 and Nos 8, 10, 12, 16, 18, 22, 24 and 28 Myrdle Street, E1) from the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and to secure their rehabilitation using loan finance to be made available by the GLC for the purpose. The scheme for the acquisition and conversion of the properties will be undertaken in conjunction with Solon Co-operative Housing Services who will act as the Co-operative's professional advisers and development agents. Subject to the Committee's approval the Co-operative envisages that a start on the first phase of the scheme, involving 12 houses and producing a total of 14 units, will be possible before the end of 1985/86.

The overall scheme is designed to produce a total of 35 units of general needs housing. With emphasis on the need of the Bengali members for large or extended family accommodation the majority of the units to be provided will be for six persons or more. The overall mix of units proposed is as follows:-

- 4 x 2p (1 BR), 2 x 3p (2 BR), 1 x 4p (2 BR), 2 x 4p (3 BR), 4 x 5p (3 BR), 2 x 6p (3 BR), 11 x 7p (4 BR), 9 x 10p (5 BR).

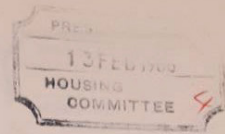
On the other hand Phase I of the scheme comprising 12 houses (Nos 15, 17, 23-35 (odd), and 39-43 (odd) Parfett Street, E1) will, as already mentioned, produce a total of 14 units as follows:-

- 1 x 2p (1 BR), 1 x 3p (2 BR), 1 x 4p (3 BR), 2 x 5p (3 BR), 1 x 6p (3 BR), 2 x 7p (4 BR), 6 x 10p (5 BR).

7 DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT CONSENTS/APPROVALS

The original scheme as designed and submitted by Solon CHS/Sylhet envisaged the purchase and rehabilitation of all 34 borough-owned properties in Parfett Street and Myrdle Street. In consequence a scheme on that basis was prepared and submitted to the Department of the Environment for approval for HAG purposes under Section 29 of the Housing Act 1974 in October 1984. The DOE subsequently approved the scheme in March 1985 and simultaneously granted consent to the borough to dispose of the properties on condition that a consultation exercise was first carried out to determine the wishes of the 5 borough tenants in the properties. As a result of this exercise one of the tenants agreed to join the Co-operative, one preferred to remain a Council tenant and to seek rehousing and the other three indicated that they wished to exercise the right to buy their homes under the provisions of The Housing Act 1980. Thus the number of properties which could be included within the scheme was reduced from 34 to 30, and in consequence a fresh scheme had to be prepared for re-submission to the DOE which was made in October 1985. The DOE has very recently responded to the effect that since the scheme will be undertaken on a phased basis the Department

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street



intends to withhold outline approval on the scheme as a whole preferring instead to treat each phase as an entirely separate scheme.

As a result Section 29 approval for HAG purposes has only been received for Phase I of the scheme and fresh submissions for approval will be required later in respect of the other phases. In addition the DOE has confirmed that approval to the purchase of all 30 properties by the Co-operative has been given.

Meantime, following enactment of the Local Government Act 1985, consent under Section 92 of that Act is required and that consent was sought and obtained from the DOE in August last year.

8 SCHEME COSTS AND EXPENDITURE

The borough is obliged to dispose of the properties to the Co-operative at the lower of outstanding loan debt or current market value as assessed by the District Valuer. In this instance disposal will be at outstanding loan debt (£51,000) which is substantially less than the current market value of £400,000. The estimated cost of acquisition inclusive of legal fees and allowances totals £77,513. It is anticipated that, subject to the Committee's approval, expenditure of this sum will be incurred on the project in 1985/86 and can be met from within the existing approved budget for assistance to housing associations and co-operatives.

As indicated earlier the Co-operative is also hopeful that a start may be possible on Phase I of the scheme before the end of the current financial year. The estimated costs of this phase in respect of works, professional fees and expenses as approved by the DOE for HAG purposes totals £852,921. Together with the costs of acquisition of all 30 properties, capitalised interest and allowances the estimated final cost of Phase I amounts to £1,139,380 and the Committee is recommended to approve a loan to the Co-operative for this sum. Apart from the possible payment of fees (maximum £40,062) which can be met from within the approval budget it is not expected that any of the works cost will be borne in 1985/86. Anticipated yearly levels of expenditure on the scheme are as follows:-

- 1985/86 - £ 77,500
- 1986/87 - £600,000
- 1987/88 - £250,000
- 1988/89 - Balance

9 NOMINATIONS

Under the terms of the loan the Council will be entitled to rights of nomination to 50% of the converted units. However, in view of the fact that this scheme will operate within the HAA and is basically designed to relieve the severe levels of overcrowding that exist within the properties it is unlikely that the Council will be able to exercise its nomination rights to the full particularly on initial lettings.

10 CONDITIONS OF LOAN

Subject to the Committee's approval a loan for the sum in question £1,139,380, can be made under Section 119 of the Housing Act 1957.

Memorandum to the Finance and General Purposes Committee
from the Housing Committee

13 February 1986

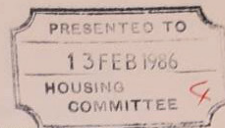
SYLHET HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE - LOAN FOR ACQUISITION AND CONVERSION OF
PROPERTIES IN PARFETT STREET AND MYRDLE STREET, E1, TOWER HAMLETS

The Housing Committee upon consideration of the report HG 1354 agreed the recommendation subject to the confirmation by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets as to their intention and ability to fund the future commitment on this scheme and the consent of the Secretary of State. The Director of Finance made an oral statement.

S. J. King

<p>CONCURRED RECEIVED / RECEIVED</p> <p>FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE</p> <p>Date 20/2/86</p>

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street



The advance will be secured by a first charge on the properties and the Council will be entitled to receive nomination rights to 50% of the converted units. In addition the advance will be subject to the following standard conditions of the Council's loans scheme to housing associations:-

- (a) interest to be at the authorised rate for housing association loans at the time each instalment of the proposed loan is advanced;
- (b) the repayment of the loan to be made by quarterly payments under the annuity system, calculated half-yearly, and to be completed within 30 years;
- (c) the properties to be adequately insured during rehabilitation and when works are completed to be insured for such sums as are considered necessary with Commercial Union Plc.

11 ETHNIC MINORITY CONSIDERATIONS

As already indicated the membership of the Sylhet Housing Co-operative predominantly consists of Bengali households. This ethnic minority group would, therefore, be expected to benefit from the improved housing which the proposals contained in this report are designed to achieve.

12 WOMEN'S CONSIDERATIONS

This report has implications for women. Not only will women be catered for through the provision of improved housing for single-sharers but it is intended in particular to provide large family houses for Bengali households. Since Bengali women tend to spend a greater proportion of their time in the home they would be expected to derive particular benefit from the provision of improved housing conditions. Moreover such housing will provide a safer environment for women in which to live.

13 CONSIDERATIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

A feature of the scheme is the intention of the Co-operative to provide a number of large houses to meet the specific needs of Bengali households with extended families covering more than one generation. Not only will such households benefit from the supportive services and advice provided by the Co-operative but they will also be directly concerned and involved in the design of the accommodation to be occupied upon improvement. Where such households contain people with disabilities or the elderly the accommodation will be designed and adapted to meet their particular needs.

14 CONSIDERATIONS FOR GAY MEN AND LESBIANS

There are no specific considerations for gay men and lesbians contained in this report other than that those who live in these properties will derive immediate benefit from the proposed improvement in their housing conditions.

B. B. Trish
7/2/86

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Progress Reports

The Inside Story, March 1987

Shows the energy unleashed by the Bangladeshi squatters struggles for decent housing.

The St Mary's Centre
সেন্ট মেরিজ সেন্টার
A Housing and Welfare Resource Project

Nearly a million Londoners are getting a raw deal - simply because the other 6 million let it happen.

He kick racism out of town.

GLC

St Mary's Housing Welfare and Resource Project
Is a Company Limited by Guarantee
Registered Office: 46 Myrtle Street London E1 1HL
Registered in England and Wales No.2036918

Progress Report
March 1987

The Rt Hon Peter Shore MP, Cdr. Bernie Saunders and Jim Martin (Armeds International) visited the St Mary's Centre by Sanyal Alam.

Mr George Young MP, Home Environment Minister, during his visit to the Forest Street Housing Action Area

St Mary's Centre Progress Report

FOREWORD

When the Parfett Street Housing Action Area was declared by the Greater London Council in May 1983, it was recognised that the problems of both the area in general and the St Mary's in particular were so wide in scope that they would not be solved through the improvement of the housing stock alone. The St Mary's Ward had already been identified as one of the most deprived areas of the country in terms of social, economic and environmental conditions. It was clear that the overstretched education and health services, the lack of training opportunities, the high level of unemployment, the lack of open space and play facilities, the inadequate traffic control and management and the pressure from commercial office development schemes were all important issues that would also have to be tackled before there could be a genuine improvement in the quality of residents' lives.

The idea of a community centre for the St Mary's Ward grew from the belief among some local people that they had been let down in the past by both central and local government agencies that had done little or nothing to improve their lives. A community centre run by and for the local people could act as a focal point for the community, and could best argue the case for them. The project has been able to acquire 46 Myrdle Street with the help of a grant from the GLC Community Areas Programme, repair and extend the building with a grant from the Borough, and employ staff with other grants from the Borough, and employ staff with grants from the Borough, the Commission for Racial Equality and the EEC. In less than three years, the St Mary's Centre has been firmly established as an advice, resource and cultural centre of great benefit to local people.

As Chair of the Parfett Street Housing Action Area Steering Committee from May 1983 until the abolition of the GLC in March 1986, it was clear to me that the highest priorities were an improvement in the appalling housing conditions and a reduction in the high levels of overcrowding that existed in the area. The initiatives that were taken by the GLC, by Housing Associations and by some of the residents themselves through the formation and development of the Sylhet Housing Co-op are now beginning to achieve results. It is hoped that both the Borough and Central government will continue to commit resources to the area so that the work can be completed satisfactorily. The GLC's community development programme, which helped to establish the St Mary's Centre was also important, and I hope that the Centre will continue to be more involved in many other problems that need to be resolved in the St Mary's Ward, so that the idea of the community development programme will not be lost.

Best wishes.

Lesley Hammond

March 1987

2

Introduction

St Mary's Ward — Population and Profile

St Mary's Ward lies on the western edge of Tower Hamlets and borders on to the City. The tall office blocks of major financial institutions, symbols of affluence, form a stark comparison with the deprivation of neighbouring St Mary's Ward. Among the more notable landmarks of the Ward are the London Hospital, the Great Synagogue, the East London Mosque, and the Church of St Augustine; much of the Ward consists of housing and small clothing factories.

There are about 7000 people living in the St Mary's Ward. It is a mixed community comprising people of different ethnic and linguistic origins. The Ward has seen successive groups of immigrants, starting with the Huguenots in the 17th century, and with the continuing arrival of the Bangladeshi community. While the 1981 Census found that Bangladeshis formed 7% of the population of Tower Hamlets, approximately 75% of those Bangladeshis lived in the western part of the Borough. The Census revealed that about one third of residents in St Mary's Ward were born in Bangladesh; however there is undoubtedly now a higher proportion of Bangladeshis in the Ward. With the East London Mosque situated in the Ward, St Mary's is one of the religious and cultural centres for the Muslim community in East London. The majority of Bengalis in St Mary's are from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh; those who originally came to England as sailors in the 1940's and their descendants, and men who later found work in the clothing workshops in the Brick Lane and Commercial Road area. More recently men have been joined by their wives and children, having been separated for many years. There is also a large number of white British residents in the Ward, as well as people from other ethnic groups.



CLC Bob Ashettle, former Mayor of Tower Hamlets, CLC Lesley Hammond, Sayful Alam (Chair of St Mary's) and Masseur Daisey.

The St Mary's Ward, particularly the Parfett Street area, suffers from multiple forms of deprivation which are common to other 'inner city' areas in London.

Detailed below is a list of major issues:

- ★ High levels of unemployment, lack of training and job opportunities.
- ★ Appalling housing conditions, inadequate housing accommodation and Homelessness.
- ★ Lack of basic amenities e.g. shortage of play facilities.
- ★ Pressure of commercial office development schemes.

The St Mary's Ward has been neglected for many years by the local authorities. We have failed even to get a fair share of the limited resources available.

The unprecedented level of deprivation in the Ward had in the past attracted visits from influential politicians and Government ministers.

To tackle some of these crises, a number of major initiatives have been launched:

- ★ The GLC declared Parfett Street a Housing Action Area. ▶

- ★ An enveloping scheme (modernisation and renovation of houses) is under way — administered and funded by GLC and now taken over by LBTH.
- ★ The Sylhet Housing Co-op and Adelina Housing Co-op have been established to provide housing for local people.
- ★ The Samuel Lewis Housing Trust and Bethnal Green and East London Housing Association have undertaken major renovation and development programmes in the area.
- ★ The GLC declared West Docklands (including the St Mary's Ward) as Community Areas Programme boundary.

The St Mary's Centre

The idea for such a centre has been in peoples' minds for a long time. However, it was in 1983 that a small group of people decided to become vigorous enough in their efforts to launch the St Mary's Housing and Welfare Resource Project. During the same period the GLC declared the West Docklands area (including St Mary's and St Katherine's Wards of Tower Hamlets) as part of their Community Areas Programme.

Although the group started with no resources, they were soon able to acquire their own freehold premises at 46 Myrtle Street, E1 — thanks to the abolished GLC. Subsequently, the St Mary's Centre has attracted funding from THAP which has enabled us to carry out refurbishment and extension work to the building. As a result we became the only community resource centre in the locality. One of the main objectives of the Centre is to act as an umbrella forum, through which local people voice their needs and grievances.

Availability of revenue funding from the GLC, CRE, the EEC Social Fund and the Tower Hamlets Council for financial years 85/86 and 86/87 has meant that the Centre was able to employ a full work-force, implementing a comprehensive work programme. The future plan for activities is dependent upon availability of funds from the sources mentioned above, in particular the Tower Hamlets Council.

In July 1986 the St Mary's Centre became incorporated as a Company Limited by Guarantee. Currently we are awaiting the outcome of our application for Charity Registration.

Thus the following parts of the report will concentrate on services we have been able to deliver; issues that we have taken up and an analysis of any success or problems we have encountered.

Aims and Activities of the St Mary's Centre

- To give advice to residents of the St Mary's Ward in housing and welfare rights.
- Act as a resource centre, particularly in relation to planning and environmental issues concerning the residents of St Mary's Ward.
- Provide facilities for and organise sports, recreational and cultural activities particularly aimed at women and young people.
- Take up training and educational issues that concern the local residents.
- Work towards the creation of a harmonious multi-cultural community in the St Mary's Ward.

Housing and Environmental Report

The Crisis in Council Housing

Fifty two thousand properties in Tower Hamlets (80% of the total) are owned by the Council. This is a higher proportion than in any other London Borough, and yet residents face a more acute shortage of decent housing, less choice of housing type, longer waiting lists, and an increase in homelessness, with each passing year.

Much of the Council housing that is available consists either of tenements constructed around the turn of the century; terraces built during the pre-war era; or monstrous tower blocks thrown up since the fifties. They are poorly designed and cheaply built, have decayed badly and are in constant need of repair.

Every year this ageing housing stock decays further, requiring far more money for what is now a huge repairs programme, and yet central government cuts have meant that progressively less and less money is spent on Council housing in Tower Hamlets. Very little investment can therefore be set aside for essential new building and modernisation programmes, and so the vicious circle of crumbling decay continues.

This dire situation — where most people live in Council housing and cannot afford to buy — is made even worse by the Council's strategy in recent years of selling property for private ownership, to people who often come from outside the borough. Thus the number of available Council lettings decreases steadily, and just as steadily the waiting lists lengthen. More families are made homeless and placed in hotels in places such as Finsbury Park, and more Council tenants are consigned to sub-standard accommodation within the borough.

The Proof

There is a wealth of statistics which provides ample proof that the housing situation in Tower Hamlets is reaching a crisis point. The 1981 census, for example, shows that 10% of all householders are living in a density of more than one person per room — the highest level of overcrowding in any metropolitan district in England. Conditions have certainly deteriorated since then, and one awaits the next census with trepidation.

More recently, in 1985 THIRRC confirmed that over 7,000 dwellings in Tower Hamlets were found to be unfit for habitation, and almost 20% of the total stock "unsatisfactory", although many of these properties were occupied. Tower Hamlets has also been found to have the highest level of householders lacking exclusive use of a bathroom and WC.

Every week, the St Mary's Centre receives a constant stream of Council tenants who are in urgent need of repairs for leaking roofs, broken windows, lack of hot water supply, peeling wallpaper, or crumbling plaster on walls and ceilings. Such people testify to the impossibility of contacting the relevant Council Officer, and often it is only after weeks and months of constant effort that positive results are achieved, if one is fortunate.

Perhaps most tragically of all, a large number of Council properties remain empty year after year. In 1984 it was established by the Empty Properties Group that 7.7% of the Council's housing stock lay vacant, and that over half of these had been empty longer than one year.

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street



Many of these properties could quickly be made ready for habitation and are of a suitable size to accommodate the larger families who face the longest waiting lists of all. So housing conditions are generally very poor in Tower Hamlets — and yet in St Mary's Ward (one of the most deprived wards in the borough) the situation is even worse.

The Problem of Office Development in the St Mary's Ward

The position of the residents of St Mary's Ward in the west of the borough and on the edge of the City means that they face additional pressures to those felt by residents elsewhere. However, despite the shortage of housing in St Mary's Ward — and in the western part of the Ward in particular — still the Council continues to give planning permission for office development, which often contradicts their Borough Plan guidelines.

The supporters of offices justify their case by saying that new offices bring in increased income from rates; more jobs for local people; and significant planning gains. But the Borough Plan, in which the Council's own planning policies are outlined, directly contradicts this line of argument.

The Borough Plan says that:

- a) Under present Government legislation, however large the increases in rates income may be, these increases are lost through the consequent withdrawal of the Government Rate Support Grant.
- b) When firms move into the area, they usually bring their existing workforce with them. Local workers do not therefore benefit, and unemployment rates continue to soar.
- c) These office workers commuting from outside the borough cause increased congestion in the local traffic system, more pollution, more noise, and make it more difficult for local residents and businesses to find parking spaces.
- d) Office development forces up land values, and in the western part of the Ward, prices are so high that only the large financial institutions can afford to pay.
- e) As rates and rents increase with the cost of land, so other activities are forced out of the area. Housing becomes derelict, and local businesses such as clothing whokshops and warehouses close down.

In reality, the disadvantages entailed in office development far outweigh the insignificant planning gains — for example, the shops and sports complex in Aldgate have not proved to be a real benefit to the local people.

The priorities for local people are housing, employment, education, health and environmental improvements. None of these causes are advanced by the quickening pace of office development. In fact, every office planning permission which is granted prevents the use of land in a way which is truly beneficial to the local community. This can be most graphically illustrated by the fact that from 1972 to 1982 permission was granted for 6.5 million square feet of offices; yet if half of this space had been used for housing, this could have resulted in 5,000 homes.

The Parfett Street Housing Action Area

Some housing in Tower Hamlets has been allowed to deteriorate to a quite shocking extent. It is to the west of New Road, that the Parfett Street Housing Action Area, and the worst cases of housing stress in the country is to be found.

The Housing Action Area was set up by the GLC and is now administered by the Tower Hamlets Council Area Improvement and Modernisation (AIM) office. Most of the housing here was built at the turn of the century, and consists mainly of large tenement blocks and some four-storey terraced houses, all in an exceedingly dilapidated condition.

Fieldgate Mansions is a large Victorian tenement estate of one-bedroom flats, which the Samuel Lewis Housing Trust is converting, mainly to large family units to accommodate the extended Bengali families, who form the vast majority of tenants, and who, equally, suffer the most horrific overcrowding.

A survey by the GLC in 1983 for example, found that 69% of householders in the Parfett Street area did not have exclusive use of internal WC; 79% lacked or shared a washbasin; and 61% lacked or shared a hot water supply. There are many instances of families of seven or eight being forced to live in one bed-room flats because of the chronic shortage of decent housing in the area.

The Pressure for Housing

Conditions in the terraced houses are equally bad — and yet it is in St Mary's Ward that rates of homelessness are amongst the highest in the borough.

The vast majority of families in the west of the Ward are of Bengali origin. Elsewhere in Tower Hamlets — as close as Bethnal Green in the north, and Bow and Poplar in the east — Asian families feel genuinely vulnerable to racist attacks. Such attacks still, of course, occur in the E1 area, but are less frequent, and so the demand for housing here in St Mary's Ward is higher than anywhere else. Despite this, the Council has devoted no resources at all to new house building in the area, and has allowed the offices of the City to encroach further and further east into the formerly residential areas.

To the east of New Road, a large proportion of the land is taken up by the London Hospital Precinct, which is unavailable for housing for local people. What is left is mainly residential; either Council dwellings or private accommodation. In common with many other inner city areas, such as parts of Hackney and Islington, the areas of private housing in St Mary's Ward are undergoing a process of gentrification, which may be more pleasing to the eye, but which unfortunately also results in forcing up land prices.

Thus the vast majority of local residents, who cannot afford to buy privately, face an ever tighter squeeze: from the City in the west; from gentrification in the east; from central government which mercilessly cuts investment; and, most tellingly of all, from the Council which continues to sell off estates for private ownership, and which has all but ceased to build new housing itself in the last twenty years.

Housing and the Ethnic Minorities — Does the Council Discriminate?

Perhaps as many as 50% of the residents of St Mary's Ward are Bengali and it has been shown repeatedly in the past that they suffer discrimination in many fields such as health care, education and, particularly, in housing.

The Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service (SHAPRS) in 1982, Deborah Phillips: "What Price Equality?" in 1983, and, most recently, the Home Affairs Committee Report "Bangladeshis in Britain" in 1987, all proved conclusively that a disproportionate number of ethnic minority households in the borough live in poor housing conditions. In the first instance, for example, over half the households from ethnic minority groups were living in overcrowded conditions, and the number lacking basic facilities was 15% — *double the normal figure for the borough.*

Ninety percent of the homeless families placed by the Council into chronically overcrowded hotels in places such as Finsbury Park and Victoria are of Bengali origin, and even as the expected bill to be paid this year, as claimed by the Council, reaches £16 million, and despite many pleas to do so, still the Council Administration refuses to institute a borough-wide programme of building large family housing — and blames the central government for unavailability of funds.

So, as the number of homeless families increases each year, and the costs mount accordingly, instead of breaking the vicious circle by building large family houses, the only solution that the Council has proposed is to force Bengali families with young children into overcrowded flats, in high rise blocks that nobody else will accept, on estates which are predominantly white and where it is known that they will be liable to racist attacks!

This is against a background of proven discrimination in housing allocation. Council officers know that on many estates in the borough, Asian families are frequently subjected to physical attacks from their neighbours in an effort to force them to move away. Despite this, the attitude of some officers in the allocation of housing is widely seen as encouraging such racist attacks.

For example, SHAPRS in 1982 showed that of 17 Council estates where Asian families comprised 17% of the total population, they had just over 4% of the tenancies, and that on many of the best estates in E1, Bengalis had been given less than 1% of the tenancies. In 1984, the situation had hardly changed, and today too, there are still many estates where families from ethnic minority groups are heavily under-represented and where they continue to suffer concerted attacks.

Residents expect that a Council which professes to be an equal opportunities employer, should carry out equal opportunities policies in housing as well. The Council has reluctantly agreed on a programme of ethnic monitoring of housing services and we eagerly await the results of this, to see if it brings about changes which benefit Council tenants from all ethnic groups.

WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED?

Vacant Sites for Housing

There is not much vacant land in the Ward where new housing can be built, but when the sites available had been identified, they were shown to approximately eight housing

associations and co-operatives; borough planners and local councillors.

Unfortunately money for developing these sites comes from Housing Corporation and is severely limited. Nevertheless as a result of this initiative the Bethnal Green and East London Housing Association is developing a site in Sydney Square for large family housing with an allocation of £750,000 for the 1986/87 financial year, which would otherwise have been lost. They have also made a successful bid for 1987/88 to develop a neighbouring site, again to build large family housing for fair rent — this time for £800,000, a total of £1½ million altogether.

The Housing Corporation has said that no more money than this is available for the Ward in any one year (it only has £10 million for the whole of Tower Hamlets) and so the Samuel Lewis Housing Trust, which has chosen two sites in the Ward as their top priorities in the borough, hope to be successful next year, with a bid for £2 million, yet again for large family housing.

Much time was spent with and on behalf of Asian Sheltered and Residential Accommodation (ASRA) to find a site for sheltered accommodation for the Asian elderly, as close as possible to the East London Mosque, and a site in Cavell Street will hopefully soon be developed. There are still some other sites available in the Ward, and it is hoped that we will continue working with ASRA to achieve more positive results in the future.



The present state of many of the empty sites is depicted through the picture above.
(R. SWALL)

One of the few large sites still available for housing in the Ward is to be found next to the East London Mosque, at the corner of Fieldgate Street and Whitechapel Road. Presently used as a car-park, local residents and the St Mary's Centre have long been concerned that no office development should take place at the site, and our Management Council's priorities of housing and light industrial units have been communicated to the Stepney Neighbourhood Committee, whose Chairperson has responded favourably. Unfortunately, many other parties are interested, and there is significant public support for additional community facilities, such as an Islamic school or a fire station — and, of course, the ever-present office developers are also lurking behind the scenes. A sizeable proportion of local people, however, would also like to see housing on the site, and we eagerly await the Planning Brief being prepared by the Council Planners as we go to press.

The Last Resort

Because central and local government funding for housing for fair rent has been so severely cut in recent years, many housing associations are looking at ways of using

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

private finance to build housing for shared ownership, or cost-sale (at 10%-15% below market value) to first time buyers. It, as a last resort, this was found to be acceptable, then schemes could probably be drawn up quite quickly, and work begun within the present financial year. A condition could be imposed so that people on the Council's waiting list and living in the borough would be offered preference.

Planning Issues -- Increasing Our Influence

The St Mary's Centre initiated and helped form the "Planning Action Group", a forum of local community and environmental groups which operate on the edge of the City and so face similar problems. Together, we consider local planning applications and hope to increase our voice on decisions taken by the Council and local Neighbourhood Committees.

Through the Planning Action Group we were involved in supporting the "Whitechapel Community Plan", which would have led to more than 300 new homes being built for people on the Council waiting lists, but which was unfortunately rejected by the Council because of doubts about design and finance. Instead, the site was awarded to the private developers Pengap, who plan to build much fewer houses, and who recently had still not specified how many will be for fair rent!

The St Mary's Centre also devoted much time and effort to the public consultation exercise carried out by the Planning Department on the proposal by other private developers to build a 60-storey office block (far higher than the NatWest Tower) on a huge site at the western end of the Ward, where Whitechapel Road meets Commercial Road. 5,000 leaflets were delivered door-to-door and a public

meeting, organised by the St Mary's Centre, was held in November. The public response was subsequently very unfavourable towards the development, and a Planning Brief is now being drawn up for the Central House area and the vacant site at Fieldgate Street, next to the East London Mosque, which may mirror very closely the points included in our publicity, i.e. housing, with light industrial units and warehouses. There is still, of course, much work that needs to be done.

A lot of work has also been devoted to Fieldgate Mansions, the infamous Victorian tenement blocks where, for the most part, the residents live in atrocious conditions. For about a year the Tenants' Association has just about ceased to function, and often the needs of the residents, individually and collectively, have not been effectively presented to the landlord, the Samuel Lewis Housing Trust. The St Mary's Centre has contacted all the residents and found that many are enthusiastic about setting up a representative and effective body that will take the problems up on a regular basis. A proper Committee has been elected and will talk to Samuel Lewis about the most pressing matters such as the proposal to demolish 20 flats, which the vast majority of residents are against, the lettings policies, and a plan to divide the central courtyard into small plots of "defensible space", which is almost universally unpopular.

Fieldgate Mansions comes within the Parfett Street Housing Action Area, which was originally set up by the GLC, but is now administered by the Tower Hamlets AIM office, which is at present carrying out rehabilitation works on the exteriors of all the sub-standard dwellings between Settles Street and New Road. We regularly attend meetings of the Steering Committee, and are particularly concerned about developments at another tenement block, Nos. 10-28 Settles Street. These properties have been improved externally, but are still in an atrocious state of disrepair inside.

The landlords Earlspring Properties, have made it plain that they would like to take advantage of the AIM office's internal improvement grants, which would of course, increase the value of the block. However, in return, they want to evict all residents who do not have a rent book, and issue short-hold tenancies of five years to all "properly registered" tenants. The managing agents, Bunch and Duke, have been inefficient for years on end, ignoring the residents and their problems as long as the rents have been forthcoming. This has meant that there are many residents who do not have a rent book, and despite the fact that they have been paying rent for years, they have not been able to get repairs done unless they paid for them out of their own pockets — and may now face eviction!

This is an extremely difficult situation to resolve, and the St Mary's Centre is contacting all residents to ascertain their personal details such as length of stay etc. in an effort to establish their rights and entitlements, and the duties of the landlord, which may in the end have to be determined by the Courts.

The St Mary's Centre has also regularly attends the monthly meetings of the Stepney Neighbourhood Committee; the Housing and Planning sub-committees; the Housing Advisory Committee; and the re-formed Race and Housing Advisory Group. Recently we have also reached agreement with the Planning Department, so that we are consulted for our views on any planning applications made in St Mary's Ward. Hopefully, by these means, we will have a proper say over decisions which affect the interests of local residents.

JOBS FOR LOCAL PEOPLE NOT MORE OFFICES !

TOWER HAMLETS COUNCIL IS CONSULTING ABOUT PROPOSALS FOR MORE OFFICE DEVELOPMENT - A 60 STOREY BLOCK CALLED CENTRAL HOUSE AT THE JUNCTION OF WHITECHAPEL HIGH STREET AND COMMERCIAL ROAD.

BUT THIS DEVELOPMENT WOULD FORCE UP LAND PRICES, FORCE OUT LOCAL BUSINESSES AND CREATE MAJOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS FOR LOCAL PEOPLE

The Council has sent out a questionnaire with seven questions. If you believe the area should be developed to benefit local residents, you should reply:

1. That the 60-storey block area should be left undeveloped
2. There should be workshops, shops, warehouses but NO OFFICES
3. There should be any facilities/uses/office of the Parfett Street site
4. The workshops should be rented
5. There should be houses for fair rent
6. You DISLIKE the Central House office block proposal
7. St Mary's Gardens should be improved and expanded

Central House Earlspring Properties Parfett Street Nat West Tower

SAY NO TO THE 60 STOREY OFFICE BLOCK !

SAFEGUARD AND INCREASE JOBS FOR LOCAL PEOPLE !

KEEP AND IMPROVE ST MARY'S GARDENS !

Produced by the Planning Action Group (a group of local community organisations: THE FT. SHARPS, ST MARY'S CENTRE - SPITALFIELDS PROJECT, WOAD)

Appendix

One of the most important developments of the past year has been the decision by the Stepney Neighbourhood Committee to accept the proposal of a Primary School/Community Facilities at the Settles Street Cleansing Depot, which now has to be moved. A public meeting was arranged by the St Mary's Centre at the Asian Studies Centre in Myrtle Street in October which was attended by over 100 parents, ILEA officers, planning officers and local councillors.



Local residents and Councillors at a public meeting in support of the ILEA proposal to build a primary school, combined with community facilities, at the Settles Street Depot.

As a result of this overwhelming public pressure — arising from a scandalous shortage of school places and waiting lists of over a year, ILEA have now given their architects instructions to consider development plans, incorporating ideas forwarded by our office, and the borough valuers have been contacted to prepare for the acquisition of the site. One major obstacle still remains, however: that of finding an alternative site for the cleansing facilities at present provided by the depot. The Stepney Neighbourhood Committee still has to decide on the size of the alternative site required, and the location, but when this problem is solved, hopefully without job losses, the work can begin in earnest.

Health and the Environment

Many of the local residents who visit the St Mary's Centre for help with their problems complain that poor housing conditions affect the health of their families. The continued deterioration of the housing stock has meant an increasing number of residents suffering from cold and damp, with condensation sometimes in every room; paper and plaster falling from the walls and ceilings; bad smells emanating from sinks and toilets; and rain pouring through the roof.

Inevitably these appalling conditions have detrimental effects on the health of the inhabitants who are exposed to the risks of chest and bronchial complaints. Infant mortality in the St Mary's Ward is high compared with the national average, and is particularly high in the Bangladeshi community, reflecting the higher levels of general deprivation within that particular racial group.

Death and disease rates are also higher than the national average, with other contributory factors besides poor housing. There is almost no playspace in the Ward specifically for children, and so they have been forced to play in streets strewn with rubbish, dangerous objects, and fouled by animals. Many roads are also constantly busy with traffic, and so the children are vulnerable to lead pollution, and many are involved in accidents.

Positive steps have been made in the past year, with more regular and effective refuse collections, and attempts recently made at the education of local people in preventive

health care, family planning and childcare, although much, much more still needs to be done. A Community Health Centre in the Ward is a high priority, for example, as is a programme of training members of ethnic minority groups to work in the health services.

To complement the recently instituted zonal Council car-parking scheme (which, incidentally, charges far too much for residential parking bays) some streets should have road humps to slow the speed of cars and minimise accidents.

WHAT ELSE NEEDS TO BE DONE?

1. An extensive borough-wide programme of building new houses needs to be commenced — especially of those units most in demand by large families and single people.
2. A comprehensive programme of rehabilitation of empty properties and derelict sites in the Ward to meet local needs.
3. Consultation on the sale of existing Council property — a practice which does not benefit Tower Hamlets Council tenants, but which instead decreases the housing stock and increases the waiting lists.
4. Increased financial support for housing associations and co-operatives in their work of restoring and modernising housing stock and building new properties for fair rent.
5. Reconsideration of the policy of placing more than 1,000 homeless families in sub-standard hotel accommodation, and a diversion of the millions of pounds this costs (and which benefits private hoteliers) into new build and rehabilitation programmes to provide decent accommodation within the borough.
6. A halt to the practice of forcing homeless families with young children into overcrowded flats, in high rise blocks, on predominantly white estates where it is known that ethnic minorities are liable to racist attacks.
7. A halt to the practice of placing any ethnic minority families on an estate where they are liable to attack, without an effective support system, which includes tenancy agreements imposing penalties on the perpetrators of racist behaviour.
8. Shared ownership schemes should be considered, in proper consultation with local residents where it is not possible to implement a scheme involving fair-rented accommodation.



Children in the Parfett Street area play in hazardous traffic conditions.

PVRL SHAWWELL

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

9. The initiation of improvement works elsewhere in the Ward to mirror work being carried out in the Parfett Street Housing Action Area.
10. Constant encouragement for the setting up of tenants groups and community groups for the effective representation of residents' problems to the appropriate authorities.
11. Co-operation between Stepney Neighbourhood Committee, the Department of the Environment, Council Officers, and Housing Associations to develop a Joint Housing Programme for the Ward.
12. The Council should investigate the possibility of paying ethnic minority organisations to provide accommodation where there is no other alternative to bed and breakfast hotels.
13. Tower Hamlets HIP allocation should be increased to at least the extent needed to prevent further deterioration in housing conditions in the borough.
14. The Council and Stepney Neighbourhood Committee should employ Sylheti and other minority language-speaking housing officers, and also appoint ethnic minority (Bangladeshi) officers in key and policy making positions. ■

Work with Women and Children

We were able to begin development work with women and young people from September 1986, which was made possible by the appointment of our Women's Development Officer.

The essence of specific Women's Development work stems from the relative isolation and double extent of disadvantages suffered by Asian women. The contributory factors include the lack of English language and the nature of their position in society.

The situation in St Mary's Ward is a new phenomenon, not only in terms of the innovative work with women and children, but community development work in general.

Extensive outreach work has been done to identify the needs of women and children in the area. We have also carried out much publicity work, including leafletting to encourage women to use our services, in order that they can spend less time in the home and more time in the community.

Specialist classes and courses set up for women include:

- English as a Second Language
- Cookery classes for young girls
- Sewing classes for women
- Health Education Courses

On a daily basis clients who either come to the advice sessions or just drop into the centre are serviced by the bilingual Women's Development Worker. The casework involves housing, welfare rights, and Nationality/Immigration.

Clients who do not usually speak English are accompanied to D.H.S.S., hospitals and clinics. Hence, a network has been set up, whereby women are coming together to provide mutual support to each other. This is a welcome change enabling women to pursue new interests.

8



Health Education session

The momentum created has occasionally been directed to organising Social and Cultural activities for women and children. Activities organised during the past several months including the very, very successful EID and CHRISTMAS/NEW YEAR gatherings.



Participants at the Christmas and New Year function.

As a result of our research, we have discovered that basic amenities for women and children are missing in the area. There is a desperate shortage of creche/nursery facilities, and a Health Centre is also urgently needed. There is also a shortage of primary school places; in fact a large number of school-age children are waiting to register for primary school places in the area.

Future activities for women and children depend on the availability of funding for workers and resources. Our priorities will be as follows:

- a) Individual casework and interpreting services to individuals.
- b) Social and Cultural activities specifically for women and children.
- c) Camping trips for families.
- d) International Exchange visits.
- e) Play-schemes for children.
- f) Creche/Nursery and Health Education facilities.

Liaison with the Community, and Cultural Activities

In this multi-racial area of Tower Hamlets — St Mary's Ward, our communities have distinctive and contrasting features, and links between these communities have often been tenuous at best.

However, with the inception of the St Mary's Centre, workers were recruited with special responsibility for community development and cultural activities. Given the short period of time in which the St Mary's Resource Centre has been in existence, some real progress has been made in this field.

Some of the major events organised by the St Mary's Centre are highlighted below:

Martyrs' Movement

In Bengali it is called the "Soheed Dibosh", which means the Language Movement Anniversary of Bangladesh. In 1952, on the 21st of February, students in the Dhaka University campus were shot dead for protesting against the conspiracy to replace the Bengali language with Urdu. Their courage and sacrifices eventually led to the end of tyrannical army rule by West Pakistanis in Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan). Fuller background papers on the Movement have been written by Abdul Gaffar Chowdry and Tassaduq Ahmed, who were directly participating in the students' movement and now live in London, and who closely associate with the St Mary's Centre. Copies of paper will be available upon request.



Community workers paying tribute to the Martyrs of the Bengali language movement at the St Mary's Centre.

For the last two years the St Mary's Centre, in conjunction with the Bangladesh Youth Movement, Sunrise Youth Project, Shapla Shingha and the Federation of Bangladeshi Youth Organisations organised the Anniversary functions to pay tribute to the martyrs of the Bengali Language Movement. Such a remembrance ceremony once a year helps us to draw inspiration and strengthen our determination to achieve the rightful status of the Bengali language, both in Tower Hamlets, and other places in Europe where there are significant concentrations of Bengalis.

At the Martyrs' Movement meeting in February 1986, it was unanimously resolved by a packed house meeting that the St Mary's Centre should work towards establishing a permanent Martyrs' Monument (Soheed Minar), a replica of the National Monument in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Accordingly the proposal has been submitted to the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) for inclusion in Primary School package for Settees Street Depot, London E1. His Excellency



Observance of Martyrs' Day at the St Mary's Centre last year. In the picture: S U Ahmed, Ibtul, Washul Alam and R U. Jilal.

Mir Shawkat-Ali, the High Commissioner for Bangladesh, has also been approached for both moral and financial assistance. Hence we are hoping that the project will be a success, and co-operation will be sought from the community at large, as well as the relevant authorities.

Victory and Independence Day

As a by-product of the Language Movement in 1952, Bengalis achieved the victory of the liberation struggle on the 16th December 1971, and the country of Bangladesh became officially independent on the 26th March 1972, when the West Pakistan Military Junta surrendered to the Mukti-Bahini (the Freedom Fighters of the Bangladesh Liberation War). Hence, the birth of the new nation was recognised by the world at large, and Bengali became the official State language.



Victory Day celebrations.

The Berner Festival

In conjunction with the Bangladesh Youth Movement, Toc H, Golden Moon Youth Project and the Berner Tenants' Association, the St Mary's Centre jointly sponsored the annual Berner Festival in July 1986. This is regarded as one of the most successful open-air festivals in the area, organised with the direct participation of young people and members of the local community.

We had originally attempted to organise a separate festival in the St Mary's Ward, but due to shortage of funding we now have to participate in the joint initiative to organise the Berner Summer Festival.

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

Eid Celebration

Eid-Ul-Fitor and Eid-Ul-Adha are two of the most colourful and significant dates in the religious calendar of Islam. Our celebrations held locally at the Asian Studies Centre, attracted hundreds of local residents.

Other Guests of Honour included His Excellency Mir Shawkat Ali, High Commissioner for Bangladesh, and Mohammed Abdul Jabbar, the National Singer of Bangladesh.

With Manna Haque in charge, the cultural function was made a success with the participation of Amit Baron Saha, Bodrul Alom and Shakil Theo.



Participants at the Eid celebration function.



Christmas and New Year gatherings

St Mary's Centre has attempted to go beyond cultural and religious boundaries. In this effort we have organised activities with an intention to foster harmonious community relations.

For the last two years, Christmas and New Year festivities were jointly organised by St Mary's Centre, Parfett Street Residents Association, Toe H. Asha Women's Group, Sylhet Housing Co-op, Asian Studies Centre and Shapla Shangha. Children and families joined in their hundreds.



Nazrul Festival

A series of seminars was organised by the Adult Education Institute (AEI) at the Asian Studies Centre in Whitechapel on the life and works of Kobi Nazrul Islam, national poet of Bangladesh, better known as the rebel poet of Bengal.

At the concluding seminar it was resolved by the public meeting to organise an exhibition in the East End of London to promote the life and works of the beloved poet. The exhibition is expected to be expanded later and promoted throughout the U.K. and Europe.

A special committee of interested persons with specialist knowledge and skills relevant to the works of Nazrul has been launched and the St Mary's Centre has temporarily taken responsibility for administration works. The group is at present working enthusiastically to raise funds.

Asian Pensioners Club

The Directorate of Social Services of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets appear to be unwilling to take up equal opportunities policies, and their total disregard in meeting the needs of Asian and Moslem elderly in the borough. Throughout Tower Hamlets, for example, there is not a single Bengali social worker to be found. An Ethnic Minorities Team (EMT) has been set up, but its function is limited because they do not enjoy a powerful position in the hierarchy of the Council. Indeed, policy papers submitted by the EMT are totally disregarded by the Administration.

However, the community groups felt duty-bound to provide a much-needed service and recently a joint initiative by Toynbee Hall, Dame Colet House and the St Mary's Centre has resurrected the Asian Pensioners Group, which was originally started in July 1983 as the result of a partnership

between the Bengali Welfare Association and the EMT of the Social Services. Age Concern also donated a minibus for the use of the Pensioners Club.

The Club later fell into severe difficulties due to the unavailability of finances and resources, and was revived by Dame Colet House. It is now run as a Luncheon Club only one day a week, is still restricted in its range due to the lack of finance, and the Club now faces crisis because without drivers and bilingual staff the scheme cannot run. Added to this is the impact of cuts faced by voluntary organisations, including Dame Colet House and the St Mary's Centre.



Asian Pensioners Group during their luncheon at Dame Colet House



Asian Pensioners Group during their outing trip in Brighton

Regardless of the difficulties, however, Dame Colet House, St Mary's Centre and Toynbee Hall have decided to try and run the Pensioners Group, as best as they can.

Nevertheless, the demand from the pensioners is clear. They want a fully-fledged service provided by the Council. It was proposed some years ago that they should provide a Day Care Centre run exclusively for the Asian pensioners, taking account of their special needs, for example, language, culture, food habits and religion.

The pensioners have revived their Action Group and will be working for their rightful entitlements from the Council.

They will also be approaching the United National YASH Project, the Housing Corporation and Tower Hamlets Council to provide finance and an exclusive Day Care Centre with residential accommodation for the Asian elderly.

The St Mary's Centre will be concentrating on the following community provisions in the future:

- A proper Youth Centre for young people in the St Mary's Ward.
- A Community Centre to cater for the social and cultural needs of the local people, e.g. weddings.
- A Pensioners' Day Care Centre, with residential accommodation combined.
- Resources for the local Community and Tenants' Organisations.

Advice Service

Our offices are open from Monday to Friday, 10am - 5pm. The Centre is open to the public throughout the day, bilingual staff are available for advice on specific issues.

We have mainly concentrated on the following areas:

- ★ Housing
- ★ Welfare Rights, and
- ★ Nationality.

In short, we deal with any general queries people bring to our attention.

Each day, staff at the office deal with up to 20 enquiries from members of the public on a face-to-face basis. These can be roughly divided into five sections:

- problems regarding Council Housing; waiting transfer lists,
- repairs to Council flats,
- nationality/immigration,
- welfare benefits (e.g. DHSS),
- miscellaneous queries (filling out forms, making phone calls to various authorities, etc.)

We are also a Resource Centre for the local community. We are happy to provide help and support to local community groups and tenants' associations. We also provide information on local needs to the relevant authorities. We are open to clients from 10am - 3pm, Monday to Friday.

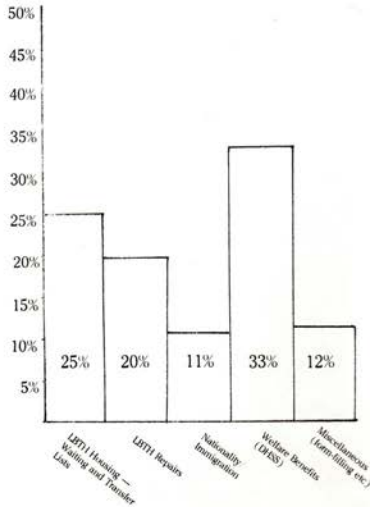


A client is seen by the Housing Officer Gary Hewitt



A section of the workplace in action

WEEKLY ENQUIRIES (IN PERCENTAGES)



Progress Report on Building Works

When 46 Myrdle Street was acquired, freehold with funding from the GLC, the basement and ground floor were both in poor condition, and the building required major repairs and improvements before it could be used fully. The Surveying Services Agency, part of the GLC's Area Improvement and Modernisation Division, was commissioned to draw up the scheme which was intended to repair and extend the basement and ground floor, improve facilities and provide adequate means of escape in case of fire.

Once the scheme had been drawn up and approved by the Management Committee, two major problems had to be overcome.

- 1) Planning permission was initially refused by the Borough following complaints from neighbours. This decision was eventually reversed after the residents withdrew their objections and the Borough was satisfied that the building would be used responsibly.
- 2) The Fire Brigade required major revision of the scheme before approving the proposals for means of escape in case of fire.

A capital grant from THIAP was eventually approved and works were carried out by Crispin & Borst contractors under the supervision of Jim Martin, a former Surveying Services Agency architect who had set up a private practice following the abolition of the GLC. The works have now been completed and the total cost of the scheme is £53,000.

The revision of the scheme required by the Fire Brigade has reduced the amount of space available in the basement and the ground floor, but the basement has been brought into use for the first time, and the building can at last begin to be used fully for the benefit of the local community.

The newly refurbished Centre will provide meeting facilities for local people with whom we have links, and for other community groups in their own right, which may apply for block bookings for the hall on a first-come, first-served basis. However, priorities will be determined by the Management Committee of the Centre.

The Centre is open from 10am - 6pm Monday to Friday. It is also open by arrangement on Saturdays and Sundays.

Links and Affiliations

Stepney Neighbourhood Committee and its advisory groups on housing and planning

Tower Hamlets Environmental Trust

Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Equality

Tower Hamlets Community Transport

Tower Hamlets Training Forum

Spitalfields Project

Samuel Lewis Housing Trust

Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service

Area Youth Office of Tower Hamlets

Divisional Office 5 - ILEA

Race and Housing Advisory Group - LBTH

Commission for Racial Equality

Solon Development Agency

AIM Team of LBTH

Tower Hamlets Tenants Federation

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Toc H

Bangladesh Youth Movement

Federation of Bangladeshi Youth Organisations

Toynbee Housing Association

A.S.R.A.

Ethnic Minorities Team of Social Services - LBTH

Tower Hamlets Homeless Families Campaign

Tower Hamlets Law Centre

Asian Unemployment Outreach Project

Tower Hamlets Adult Education Institute (AEI)

Tower Hamlets Youth Unemployment Project - ILEA

Appendix

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street

About East End Connection

East End Connection (EEC) is a community based (bridge) organisation that aims to help empower and upskill local residents; promote community history and heritage; achieve social and community cohesion in Stepney and Whitechapel, London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

EEC was initially established in 2009 and have successfully organised and offered socio-cultural activities and informal educational supports to small groups of children and adults. It has recently delivered a number of Awards for All funded project.

During the last few years, the organisation has been delivering Awards for All (Big Lottery) funded projects covering ESOL, ICT and Job search.

Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatters of Myrdle Street and Parfett Street