

BHAG and Stephen and Matilda

At the time in Tower Hamlets there were sixty councillors, and all were Labour. There was no democracy. There was blatant corruption, particularly in housing. In the borough at the time there was apparently the greatest concentration of public housing 'this side of the Iron Curtain' (the Soviet Union). However, if you were a single female or single immigrant, you had no chance of getting a council tenancy. An estimate at the time was that there were 32,000 empty properties belonging to Tower Hamlets Council. In its ignorance, the housing department would give Bengali families tenancies on estates which were strongholds of the National Front. They suffered abuse such as smashed windows, shit through the letter box, saris pulled off in the street. The Bengali Housing Action Group, fired by these issues and supported by the Tower Hamlets' Squatters Union and Race Today, quickly joined the squatting movement and within a year had squatted dis-used blocks of flats, one of them Pelham Buildings, and three streets: Aston Street, Nelson and Varden Streets.

In 1976, as part of the GLC amnesty, the BHAG was offered tenancies where they wanted them. BHAG drew up lists of acceptable areas, making sure that immigrant families were housed together. This was the start of the debate – and awareness – about how to house immigrants.

Another important housing struggle in East London at that time was based on the Stephen and Matilda estate. This consisted of two tenement blocks of flats about five stories high, each built round a courtyard. They were early LCC housing, probably built in the 1930s. They were in prime real estate location, next to Tower Bridge, with views over the river, and were earmarked for future development, thus left empty as tenants moved out. Since the late 60s they had been progressively occupied by prescient housing activists from the Redbridge squatting campaign, established in 1968 as a 'living demonstration'. By 1974 the estate was fully occupied by well-organised squatters, and in the GLC squatting amnesty of 1976, they petitioned the GLC and eventually succeeded in establishing the two blocks as a housing co-operative. The organisers were active in initiating EEDAG and JDAG, and saw their action as consciously opposing the land grab of the docklands by private sector developers.

There was support from students and lecturers at the Architectural Association. The squatters also documented such things as the tendency for the sale of historic warehouses on the riverfront followed by their 'accidental' burning and collapse, making them ripe for pristine new luxury flat development. The project was very successful and the two blocks were a vibrant housing co-operative for two decades, until the advent of the property market became too tempting for those residents who were not politically engaged in the values of the co-operative. In the 1990s, the Management Committee voted for the right to buy, and individual flats were sold off for astronomical prices. Some flats have remained in the co-operative, and the blocks are still there, testament to the opposition to Docklands gentrification..