

RESISTANCE ON THE HOMES FRONT

AN EXAMPLE OF HOW A GROUP OF LEADS RESIDENTS
DEFEATED THE LOCAL COUNCILS PLANS TO DEMOLISH
THEIR HOMES.

WATCH IT STAY UP !

This is an eyewitness account of the fight by a group of Leeds residents to save their homes from the bulldozer. The author was heavily involved in the two-year battle and makes no claim to be objective. (It is difficult to be objective about proposals to knock your home down.)

THE PROBLEMS OF THE EBORS

I do not wish to be "slum-romantic". There are many areas of old Leeds that have quite rightly been bulldozed to the ground. There are some left that should be. There are, in my opinion, estates only a few years old, that should be bulldozed.

But planners are too bound up in statistics: so many houses to the acre, too many back-to-backs that are bad for the "image of Leeds" (1), too few houses demolished last year. An area like the Ebors needs sensitivity - a sensitivity that can only be provided by those living there. We know from our everyday experience what makes it tick.

Sure, the Ebors had and still have big problems. Some of the back-to-backs lack an inside toilet and bathroom. Worse, although back-to-backs are fine for single people or couples, in one or two, there are families with four kids living in hopelessly overcrowded conditions.

As for the big houses, the bourgeoisie left these for the private landlords who are more interested in a quick profit than maintaining them. The attitude of Building Societies does not help here. They will not lend money for people to buy houses in inner city areas such as the Ebors because such places are always likely to be in the "redevelopment" part of a planners dream. Hence, the houses are sold to those who can pay cash - landlords.

The result of this is: increasing private rented accommodation, and increasing multi-occupancy. Too much multi-occupancy means an unstable population - too many people who don't give a sod about the district.

The prophecy of the Building Societies therefore becomes self-fulfilling. Because of their policies (known as blue zoning districts) the place DOES become a slum, and falls to the bulldozer.

Most of all, however, the problems of the Ebors were due directly to the policies of Leeds City Council. Ever since 1961 the area had been in either the 1977-81 or 1972-76 slum clearance programme.

This meant that those who wanted to improve their houses couldn't obtain grants because a minimum 15-year life is needed before such helping hands are given. But worse was the blight that gradually set in.

The area had no future. Hedges were neglected, repairs and decorating put off, broken walls not replaced, houses left empty. (2) Small things in themselves, maybe, but they signified an increasing lack of pride in the district and, taken together, they added up to a general picture of neglect and decay.

GETTING OFF THE GROUND

Yet the people who lived in the area still wanted to stay. (3) Moans over garden walls were frequent: "This used to be a lovely district. If only they would do something it could be again. These houses have got years of life - what a shame." It was this sort of prodding over a period of some months plus a personal anger that they could do such things which led to two of us deciding that we should do something.

In May 1974 we sent out a leaflet to every house calling a public meeting. The first lines of the leaflet ran as follows:

"The Ebors and surrounding streets are not bad ones in which to live. The area is going downhill, however, because nobody knows or will say exactly when the houses are due for demolition..... In this atmosphere of uncertainty it is not surprising that people are not over-bothered about proper maintenance or about improving their homes"

The leaflet ended:

"...while the houses are still standing there is time for us to do something. But we won't get very far if we restrict our "something" to moans over the garden wall with next door neighbours. We therefore ask everyone - young and old, owner occupiers and tenants to try and attend the open meeting.... The more there are of us, the more the council is likely to take notice, and the more chance we have of success."

I have quoted extensively from the leaflet because it set the trend: open meetings and the active support of as many people as possible. It would have been all too easy at this stage to call in friendly Architects and other "experts" from the outside: ask them to do it all, and let them pit their wits against the experts on the Council.

We didn't. The fight was worth fighting only if the residents wanted to fight, and because of this emphasis the campaign ultimately became much more than a housing campaign.

Thirty-odd people attended the first meeting. Encouraged we formed an ad hoc group to do a survey of the area and to organise a bigger and better public meeting to which the ward city Councillors would be invited.

The next day I was amazed. People from the streets next to mine, people who I had never spoken to before, stopped to say hello and offer help. The feeling was there to win.

EARLY DAYS

I knew well two very sympathetic offset litho printers - Leeds Community Press - who operated literally 100 yards away from the Ebers. For our second meeting, therefore, the ad hoc group decided to print a broadsheet. This we called 'Heresay' after the initial letters of the streets involved. The broadsheet was backed up by flyposters under the theme: "An Area Fit to Live In?"

The public meeting took place four weeks after the first. We had made a boob over the date - it clashed with the Scotland-Brazil World Cup game on the telly. Nevertheless over 70 people packed the hall for what turned out to be a "bear-baiting" session with two of the Ward Councillors (both Labour Party).

I gave a short introduction. The first person who spoke after me was a bloke in his fifties with a strong Yorkshire accent. After a beautifully timed build-up, he said: "I'm going to fight for my 'ouse and I hope everyone here is with me." Spontaneous applause, and we were on our way.

On the surface, nothing ever positive comes out of public meetings with politicians. I know of no better way, however, of instilling an overt sense of solidarity within a group of people.

One of the Councillors present was particularly good at doing this. "Now you leave everything to us, we know best... As Harold Wilson once said, a week is a long time in politics... I don't think you quite know what you want..." And after one very beligerant speech from a resident: "I've been in politics 25 years and I haven't come here to listen to speeches like that. Why don't you stand for the Council?"

Devious, divisive, patronising, she stood out a mile. By the time the local radio reporter turned up, just before the end, the meeting was baying for blood.

There followed, over the summer, two public meetings among ourselves. The first appointed a Treasurer, Secretary and Chairman (me). I was instructed to "go right to the top" and demand a meeting with those on the City Council responsible for our homes.

It was decided not to have a formal committee. Everything would be decided at the public meetings. Delegations and ad hoc committees for specific functions would be elected as the need arose. It was also agreed at this meeting that everyone living in the area should be kept fully informed of everything that happened in connection with the housing campaign, whether they came to meetings

or not. 'Heresay' therefore should continue to come out and be delivered to every door.

The second meeting was to elect our first delegation. Via the friendlier of the two Ward Councillors, we had at last been invited to the Leeds Civic Hall.

This meeting also passed unanimously the following resolution:

- 1) "The basic demand for the Ebors Action Group is a minimum 15-year life for all the houses in our area, so that improvement grants may be obtained."
- 2) "That all delegates should consider this basic demand to be non-negotiable. Any modifications can only be made at a public meeting."

So there it was. Control of the Ebors Action Group was theoretically in the hands of all the residents. It was up to us what we did with it.

OUR FIRST SET-BACKS

Our first meeting at the Civic Hall took place in late September 1974. We met the paid Council officers who advise the Housing Committee, i.e. the local bureaucrats.

Although the officers are only supposed to advise the politicians, in practice their power is very great. As one Councillor once remarked: "If you don't take the advice of your paid experts, why employ them?"

We didn't get anywhere. The environmental health officers, especially, were hostile. To them the area was to be measured solely in terms of damp cellars and crumbling garden walls.

It came as no surprise, therefore, to the six of us on that first delegation, that the Housing Committee's decision, 6 weeks later went against us. The area was to be split into two halves. The southern half was to remain in the 1974-76 clearance programme, the northern was to be rephased into the 1977-81 programme.

The uproar that followed this announcement, however, was surprising. People stopped each other in the streets, and several angry letters and telephone calls were made to the Housing Committee Chairman (we published his address and telephone number in 'Heresay').

A public meeting was hastily arranged to which the Housing Committee Chairman was summoned. He claimed a prior engagement, not that he would appear before us rabble anyway. A heated phone conversation went as follows:

-If you can't come can you send someone else from the Housing Committee?

-No.

-Very well then, I shall go over your head and invite them myself.

-They won't be allowed to come.

-Why not?

-Because I say so.

-I see. Well, if you're insisting on exercising dictatorial control over your committee I shall make sure every newspaper in the country knows about it come tomorrow morning.

-Now hang on a minute. (mutter, mutter, mutter, climb down). I'll see what I can do.

In the event, over 50 residents turned up on a cold, wet November night to find themselves confronting the Deputy Chairman of the Housing Committee, the Tory Shadow Chairman (4), the Chief Environmental Health Officer for Leeds, his deputy in charge of demolition, and two planners.

Of all these celebrities, only the Deputy Chairman and Chief Environmental Health Officer said anything. But they were enough. Some of the things they came out with were unbelievable even to someone like myself who has read all the correct books about those in authority.

Typical exchanges were:

DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Now, don't you think you would all be better off in a nice modern Council house.

RESIDENTS: No!

DEPUTY: There's a lady down there who disagrees with you.

Uproar; In fact the lady in question had previously said that she wanted her landlord to be forced to provide her with an inside bathroom. Nothing about wanting a new Council house.

CHIEF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH OFFICER: My men have been inside every house in the area.

CHAIR (to meeting): How many of you have been visited by an Environmental Health Officer?

Silence for a few seconds and then more uproar as nobody raises their hand. Hurried whispers among the Councilmen.

RESIDENT: Having heard how angry we all are, will you return and recommend reversing your decision?

DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: No. My colleagues and I have gone to a great deal of trouble tonight to come and listen to what you had to say. But the decision was taken three weeks ago and must stand. Now, it's very cold in this hall, if you don't mind we'll take our leave.

The Councilmen left to pandemonium.

Three days later the Chairman of the Housing Committee telephoned to say that the decision on our houses had been suspended pending further consultation with the residents.

THE LONG GRIND

More public meetings and more delegations (each one being elected afresh) followed. We produced our own full report and obtained the help of a friendly architect for the section on the physical structure of the houses (we still wrote it ourselves). We even had a spontaneous delegation descending on our MP. If nothing else, this was good publicity, and sympathetic articles appeared in the local papers.

The Council too put in a good deal of effort. On several occasions the Chief Environmental Health Officer was seen touring the area with his underlings - making sure that every house was visited.

Eventually, in May 1975, it was announced that the Northern half of the Ebers was to be removed from the demolition programme and was to become one of Leeds' first four Housing Action Areas (5). The southern half was to remain in the 1974-76 programme.

Personally, I thought, "This is it. The campaign has already dragged on a year. The 'Divide and Rule' is bound to work." But no - a public meeting made the mandate clear. Continue to fight for the southern half, although we now agreed that some houses (about 20) in this half would be best demolished.

The decision had not yet actually been made, so a picket of the Housing Committee meeting the following week was arranged. Back-up publicity was obtained by the evening paper and Yorkshire Telyvision, and the Housing Committee saw its first public demonstration in years.

The decision went through, but still had to be confirmed by the full Council. A delegation was arranged to attend the June Council meeting, where we were allowed to make a five minute speech. This was presented by someone who had lived in the area over 30 years. She put so much feeling into it that a spontaneous burst of applause greeted her at the end.

Then there came the ritual proposal that follows all delegations - that "this matter be referred to the appropriate committee". A farce? Sure - but at least it meant that the subject would be raised again, and we obtained yet more publicity.

The delegation worked. The Housing Committee deferred their decision while members had a tour of the southern half of the Ebers.

We received wind of this visit and decided to arrange a welcoming party. Posters went up in house windows demanding improvements rather than demolition, window boxes full of flowers lined the streets, and across one street - Regent Terrace - a huge banner swung: "Regent Terrace Welcomes Happy Councillors".

The crowning glory, however, was a jazz band in one street to greet this rare delegation from the municipal seat of power. "The Sunny Side of the Street" rang out as they walked past.

Alas, the Councillors kept a stiff upper lip. They even refused offers of cups of tea from residents following them round.

FINAL SKIRMISHES

Our tub-thumping and publicity was having some effect. The decision on the southern half was again deferred at the next Housing Committee meeting "pending more consultation with the residents". Meanwhile, we started talking seriously of setting up a Housing Co-operative in the Ebors.

These "consultations" lasted many months, with many delegations. Finally in Easter 1976, the Housing Committee Chairman intimated that he would be prepared to look at fresh expert advice on the southern half.

We read this as a face-saving tactic, and I, for one, sensed we were about to win. What the Chairman was saying, in effect, was that he wasn't going to accept anything from the plebs who live in the Ebors, but if it came from an acknowledged "expert" then it may be O.K.

We brought in a friendly architect again, and told him what we wanted doing with the southern half: twenty houses demolished, in two blocks. In their place we wanted new "infill" housing and/or play areas.

The architect agreed and produced a beautiful report with so much "correct" jargon that it almost mystified us! We passed the report unanimously at a public meeting and sent it off to the Council.

One month later, within the space of half an hour I received three phone calls. The first one was from a Ward Councillor.

- Don't say anything, but there will be a decision on the Ebors soon and you should be pleased.

The second was from the Council Officer in charge of the Leeds Improvement Programme.

- Don't say anything but the Council Officers have just produced a fresh report on the Ebors which is very sympathetic to you.

The third was from the Housing Committee Chairman.

- Don't say anything because the other Councillors haven't seen the next Housing Committee agenda yet, but we will be making a decision on the Ebors in line with your Architect's report.

Ten days later the Housing Committee accepted a report from its officers on the Ebors. This coincided exactly with our Architect's report.

We'd won.

THE AFTERMATH

The Ebors were declared Leeds' second Housing Action Area in August 1976. The improvement programme is now getting slowly (too slowly) under way.

The Housing Co-op idea was dropped fairly quickly. It did not help to be told such things as, "With all the financial strings attached to your money, which is public money may I add, you'll be left with little more choice than the colour of your own wallpaper".

Without going into a major critique of Housing Co-ops, suffice to say that enthusiasm soon waned when we learnt we would be little more than our own rent collectors.

Instead the Ebors Action Group has joined the Leeds Federated Housing Association. This is a weird federation of small housing associations in Leeds plus groups like ours (6). It is also a housing association in its own right and by virtue of us joining it, it has taken on the improvement programme for the Ebors. The Housing Corporation, a government financed body, provides part grants, part loans for this purpose.

The problem is that before the Housing Association can improve any houses, it's got to own them. With the Ebors being so close to the University and Polytechnic, there is a high demand for rented accommodation. Therefore rents throughout Hyde Park are the highest in Leeds. It is not financially worthwhile for many landlords to sell, especially as the Housing Association can only offer a price suggested by the District Valuer.

The way forward for the Ebors Action Group is probably a rent campaign. Already one public meeting has been held on the subject. The idea would be to get every tenant to register their rent at the rent tribunal and obtain a so-called "fair rent". This may not be very "fair" but at least it's almost certain to be lower than what everybody is paying at the moment.

I know of at least one landlord who is thinking of selling to the Housing Association under threat of a registered rent.

If landlords don't sell, then they can be forced to improve - but such clauses in the Housing Act are full of loop holes and take notoriously long time to implement.

But, if the Ebors Action Group is going to mount a rent campaign it must change. We always prided ourselves in the past on making no distinction between owner-occupiers and tenants. We were for all the people who live in the area, and although our active supporters contained proportionately more owner-occupiers, many tenants played a full part.

Now the owner-occupiers have got what they want. By and large they live in the best kept houses, and they, as individuals can apply for improvement grants.

Tenant emphasis is needed, simply because tenants face the biggest problems.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I said 2,000 words or so back that the Ebors was much more than a Housing Campaign. I have tried to convey some of the "umph" with which the campaign went at times. Yet the manner in which it brought people together manifested itself in a host of ways.

Right from the beginning we got into the habit of going straight to the pub from meetings. At the end we even arranged a trip to the other side of Leeds to view the first Housing Action Area plus its local.

Also, there were the "talks" we were invited to give from time to time. Always a support group would travel with the speaker.

I must mention the Christmas Parties - in the upstairs room of one of the local pubs. A mixture of formal acts and do-it-yourself from the floor, the three we have held so far will hold fond memories for all my life. In the last two we have even presented original plays - 'The Golden City' (A comedy-folk musical about the area) and 'Eborella' (A panto).

There is so much latent creativity in people, so much desire to enjoy ourselves, that even a cynical 'Solidarity' subscriber would have been impressed and not knocked us too hard for not quite getting it correct.

When you're out at work all day, you can't come home each night and put what little energy you have left into a housing campaign if that campaign is dull, monotonous toil. It's too much like what you've just come home from.

But, if the campaign is fun to participate in, then you can keep it up indefinitely. Well, you can keep it up at least for two years, which is what the Ebors Action Group did.

The same goes for power. The internal power of the Ebors Action Group lay in its public meeting. Every resident was entitled to attend, speak and vote. Public meetings were usually well attended because people knew they made the decisions there.

I do not wish to conjure up images of incredibly conscious public meetings. They weren't, and I have to be honest and say that some people put in a lot more spade

work than others.

A fair proportion of the spade-workers were people from the "lumpen intelligentsia" who I mentioned earlier. It was naughty of me to categorise us (half an hour's break for self-criticism). One success story of the campaign was that black and white, academic and worker, treated each other as nothing less than individuals in their own right.

Forgive me for using the word again, but what the lumpen intelligentsia could offer were: more time; vitriolic fingers to work vitriolic typewriters; contacts with such people as cheap printers, theatre groups for lending stage props, and architects.

Yet we offered this because we lived in the area. I became involved not because I'm an agitator and it's my duty to become involved, but because I was furious about my lack of control of our environment.

The lumpen intelligentsia were not a bunch of politicians who moved in from the outside with an agitation kit, nor were we social workers. The area was our home too, with a good number of years tradition behind it as being our home. We harmonised, and that's all you'll get from me on self-justification).

The residents of the Ebers won a reform - a reform that could easily be accommodated within the system. But more important, we learnt first-hand what those in authority are like - they lie, they cheat, they twist, they're opportunist creeps (7). Most of all we learnt what sticking together can do.

Is such a reform, won in such a manner, reformist?

Are we all better people as a result of the campaign? I hope so.

I called this section "Some Concluding Thoughts". The thoughts that are left to me now are all memories. They probably say more than every other word I have written.

- To Theresa, in the off-licence the day after our first public meeting; "Hello love, we're going to show those buggers we know our rights".
- To Les, in the pub; "We used to hold this country to ransom in our Union (the Constructional Engineers). Had it by the short and curlies we did. Then things went wrong in the 50's. I got out of union politics and closed me garden gate until this housing thing came up". (Les also led the first May Day marches in Leeds after the war).
- To Hilda, talking to an Environmental Health Officer: "We've all sorts in this area - Poles, Asians, West Indians, students - and we like them living here. We want them to stay".
- Environmental Health Officer in reply: "Well, I can see you're not going to give up. You're a jolly crowd at least."
- To Connie, having just got me out of bed at 11.15pm "I've just rung up the Housing Chairman and told him what I think of him. His wife told me he was in bed at first and that he worked 24 hours a day. I asked what he was doing in bed at eleven at nightDid I do wrong?"
- To Angharad, after a stormy public meeting with Councillors and officials: "This is supposed to be a democracy. Yet you come here and say the decision's already been taken. You haven't listened to a bloody word". The Councillors stood dumbfounded at this outburst and then breathed a sigh of relief as she stormed out of the hall, slamming the door on her way.
- Finally, to the Environmental Health Officer in charge of Improvement, confiding in an acquaintance: "The Ebers are falling to pieces. It was a political decision that had them saved".

In other words, the politicians had over-ridden the judgement of their advisors because we had shouted too loud.

What a tribute! After all we weren't the National Union of Mineworkers with real economic power. There was little else we could do but shout.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Quoted from Leeds, Housing Potential and Priorities, 1971-1991. This was accepted by Leeds Council in 1971.
- (2) At the time of writing (Jan 1977) 10 houses are empty in the Ebors.
- (3) Our first survey indicated an 80% support for the Housing Campaign.
- (4) Since 1975 the Chairman.
- (5) Housing Action Areas were invented in the 1974 Housing Act. They are supposed to be areas where social factors and physical conditions combine to create housing stress. The idea is to take the area by the scruff of the neck, inject a lot of money and bring the houses up to standard in five years. The basic feature is 75% improvement grants for house owners (including landlords).
- (6) For example Leeds Womens Aid which runs the battered wives hostel is a member. So too is the Action Group representing Leeds' first HAA.
- (7) Three days after the Ebors had been saved a local Ward Councillor had the nerve to say on local radio: "Look what I did for the Ebors". What she did do was tip me off once when Councillors were to tour the area, and to say how delighted she was at the Housing Committee that saved us.

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