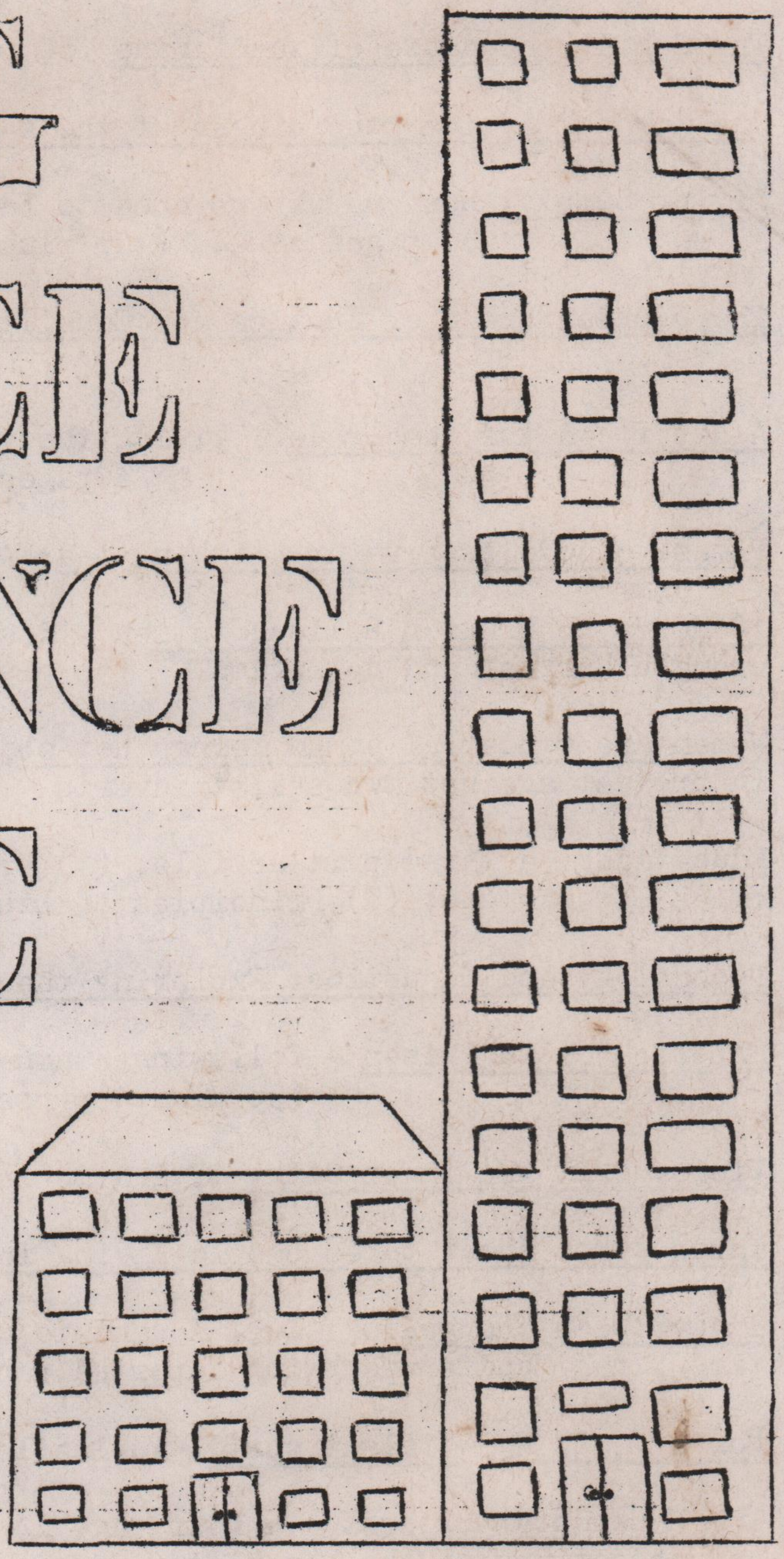


# 'TRYING 'TO FACE VIOLENCE IN 'THE INNER CITY'



Our experience of teenage violence, with an analysis of the wider social factors behind it.

SUGGESTED DONATION; 10p

Produced by Whose World?, c/o The Old Vestry, St Ambrose's Church, 395 Liverpool St, Salford, Greater Manchester. M6 5RU.



SOME WHOSE WORLD MATERIALS

- \* The Sahel: the cause of the famine 30 pages of A4 (10p plus 24p postage)
- \* The Horn of Africa: the causes of the famine 30 pages of A4 (10p plus 24p postage)
- \* Living Simply: how and why we came to believe in an anti-materialist lifestyle  
30 pages of A4 (10p plus 24p postage)
- \* The Utopian Dream of Justice and Equality: together we can make it happen  
8 pages of A4 (5p plus 15p postage)
- \* A Report on the Tea Trade: giving the view that we need to give up drinking tea 30 pages of A4 (10p plus 24p postage)
- \* Please choose to give up drinking tea: A4 poster (free)
- \* 12 Hours in Brixton Police Station - describing an individual's account of his wrongful arrest and detention (5p plus 15p postage)
- \* Women are wonderful human beings not objects - an account of a non-violent action in protest against two sexist adverts 7 pages of A4 (5p plus 15p postage)
- \* Education: a three part article: (1) Primary School experiences; (2) Secondary School Experiences; (3) Principles of Libertarian Education (20p plus 24p postage)
- \* Technology and Injustice: Exploring the Links 12 pages of A4 (10p plus 15p postage)
- \* Experiences in Prison - following a non-violent protest against nuclear weapons  
(5p plus 15p postage)
- \* Violence in the Inner City: trying to respond non-violently (10p plus 15p postage)
- \* Three poems about three people living in the Inner City 6 pages of A4 (4p plus 15p)
- \* I have been changed: "I feel I want to write about some of my feelings during the time Viraj Mendis was being deported, and since", 5 pages of A4 (3p plus 15p postage)
- \* For a Just, Non-violent world A4 leaflet (free)
- \* The Manchester Project - a four page A4 pamphlet describing the aims, philosophy, and objectives of the Manchester Centre for Non-violence (free)
- \* The Whose World monthly newsletter - 22 pages of A4 (10p plus 15p postage;  
£3.00 for 12 issues.
- \* Back issues of the Whose World newsletter including 'Squatting in Manchester'; 'The Middle East: Flashpoint of the Third World War?' (10p plus 15p postage)
- \* Fear of Violence: How Should I respond when I see men being violent to women?  
two accounts of personal experiences of trying to respond non-violently  
13 pages of A4 (8p plus 15p postage)

These materials are available from Whose World, c/o St Ambrose's Church, 395 Liverpool St, Salford, M6 5RU.

We should be grateful if you would send the suggested donation for the various materials in the form of cash or stamps, as we are in the process of giving up our bank account. Thanks very much.



# TRYING TO FACE VIOLENCE IN THE INNER CITY

## INTRODUCTION

For many years now, I've lived in inner city areas and although I've always been aware (to varying degrees) of the structural violence prevalent in inner city areas, I've never had much experience of personal violence towards me or people round about me. This seems to have changed over the last 2 or 3 years or so. Perhaps this is partly because/the area in which I now live there is a greater degree of violence than in other areas; perhaps also this is because I'm more aware or take more notice of what is going on round about me than I used to. This rings true to me because the last 2 or 3 years has coincided with a growing awareness of my own responsibility to do something about this violence as well as a growing feeling of confidence or faith in non-violence which leads me to believe that I can do something.

In this two part article, I focus specifically on 2 people's experiences of violence at the hands of a group of young people on a council estate in an inner city area. In the first part I describe what has actually happened whilst in the second I try to analyse all the various factors involved in this conflict and at the same time try to explain why I feel that only through non-violence can we hope to resolve these conflicts.

## MOVING HOUSE

A couple of years ago, my partner, Maria and I, made a decision to squat in 2 separate council flats. In a sense, right from the start, we received notice of what the estate that Maria moved onto was going to be like. Maria and Billy had arrived with a cart and bicycle full of belongings, which they'd just brought from their previous house. The cart and the bike were left at the bottom of the stairs whilst they carried the belongings up to the 7th floor. By the time they came down, Billy had had his wheels slashed and the cart had been damaged. A few days later, Maria, Billy and I were unloading more belongings from the cart and again we left it at the bottom of the stairs. About 1 hr later I returned to find it had been completely taken apart and destroyed. Only the wheels were left. We found the bits dumped in various bins in a nearby park. It had taken David, a friend of ours, more than a day to put this cart together and some members of the local youth had destroyed it in less than 1 hr. It was a sad and



However, over the next few months we began to build a relationship with them. The situation was like this;-there are two lifts in the block of flats where Maria lived and 1 set of stairs. Maria and I didn't use the lifts (as they use electricity) only the stairs. These, we soon discovered were the meeting place, a sort of youth club for some of the young people in the area, and as we used the stairs all the time, there was fairly regular contact. If there was only a small group of them, say 2 or 3 or 4, this was often quite positive and cheerful and relaxed. If the group was larger, 7 or 8 or sometimes even 12 or 15, it was a more daunting or intimidating experience. Nothing particularly dreadful happened; it was just that they blocked the passage way and you had to ask them to allow you to come through. It was also true that the atmosphere on these occasions was more sniggering and snidy. It just wasn't particularly pleasant to come back after a long and tiring day and face that when you just wanted to relax. This was much worse for Maria than for me because she lived there, I didn't. However, as I said, slowly relationships began to form; they came to know our names and we got to know some of theirs. On 3 or 4 occasions we had conversations with some of them about nuclear weapons, CND, our diet, how we lived etc.. From these conversations we became known as Greenpeace. (Greenpeace must have been more in the news at the time than CND.)

### THE EARLY MONTHS.

This slow process of building relationships suffered a significant set-back 3 months or so after we'd moved in. Living next door to Maria were some other squatters whom we knew. From what we could make out, the teenagers saw us all as 'the Greenpeace lot'. We're still not quite sure how or why it happened, but suddenly a quite 'heavy' degree of conflict seemed to erupt. As I remember it, Ted informed us that one day some of the male youths called at his house and asked if they could come in (or for some water for their "bong" or both, I'm not really sure.) (The "bong" was some sort of bottle filled with water which they used to smoke drugs.) He refused and asked them why they weren't at school. (Some of them, maybe all of them were of school age and it was a school day so presumably they were truanting.) This seemed to anger them and quite a heated discussion followed. The next day (or soon after anyway) there was a sudden commotion outside Maria's door and when we went out to investigate, there was smoke pouring out of the chimney next door. Ted had gone out only ten minutes earlier and had come rushing back when he saw smoke pouring out of a house that looked to be his. Fortunately, however, there was no fire in his house, there was only smoke pouring out of his chimney. There were 3 fire engines on the scene and an audience consisting mainly of the male teenagers. Again it was a school day; none of them live in the block, and it was difficult to see how they arrived on the scene so quickly if they weren't involved. It's not too difficult to get onto the roof from the top floor and put something down a chimney that would make a lot of smoke..

What I've related here is what I recollect of what Ted told us. Noone saw the teenagers doing it and I never heard any explanation from the firebrigade as to what caused the smoke. So all the evidence is circumstantial but we didn't have too many doubts at the time about who was responsible. What was clear was that if our suspicions were correct, it was meant to be a very intimidating and threatening act and one that seemed to us to be really way out of proportion to the conflict that had preceeded it. Although we disagreed with how Ted had handled it and felt that if he'd not been angry in his response to the teenagers, the subsequent events might not have happened, it still left us shocked and in a state of anxiety about how they and we might be treated in future if this sort of thing was indicative of how they responded to anyone who crossed them.

### MORE INCIDENTS.

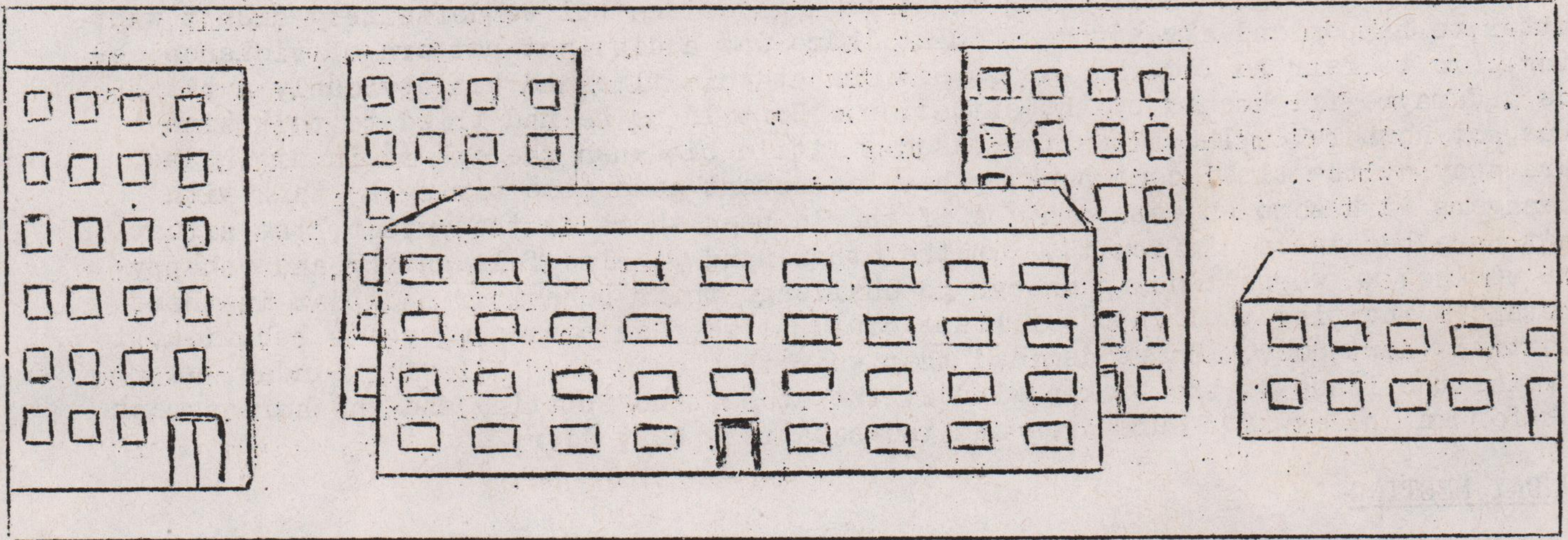
A few days later, a group called at Ted's house for some water for the "bong". Ted refused to let them in and shut the door on them. Sometime that same evening, his small kitchen window was smashed. Ted subsequently reported the incident to the police. He told them he didn't know their names and addresses but he'd have no trouble identifying them. The police told him that as he was squatting their policy was to treat it as vandalism to council property and so they would inform the council and wait for their response.



Following these incidents, for most of the next two months, the teenagers regularly turned up on our landing and asked to be allowed to come in, or for water for their bong, or just hung around on the top of the stairs or on the landing creating a racket. They arrived about 7.00pm and left about 10.30-11.00. I remember feeling sufficiently intimidated that I made some effort to get back before 7.00 or not until after 11.00. I always felt reluctant about leaving the house between those hours. This was because invariably we would be subject to abuse and sometimes spat at, though Maria usually had to suffer this more frequently than I did and it would be more often sexist and sexual abuse which I didn't get. She was called a tramp; a "tart"; a "cunt"; a "slag"; etc.. She was also asked questions about her sexual life in a way which was meant to embarrass her and which was suggestive that she should have sex with the young men. On one occasion, she was surrounded in a corner by several of the young men as a joke, but almost straight away they let her go on up the stairs. Both of us were subjected to being laughed at about our way of life. Repeated questions about did we use loo paper; why didn't we use the lift etc., which, whatever our answers, were almost invariably followed by laughter or abuse. Sometimes, I would be asked if Maria was my 'girlfriend' to which I'd reply that she wasn't she was my partner. I was then asked do you "shag" her/"fuck" her? I'd ask back do you mean do we have intercourse together? Sometimes, I'd leave them pondering on this and move on. Sometimes, if they then changed their question to do we have sex together, I'd say yes, and sometimes, I'd tell them that they already knew the answer to that question.

#### A DILEMMA

I was caught, because, on the one hand I was wanting to show that their questions didn't embarrass me (which apart from a slight uncomfortable feeling they didn't) and that it was possible to be open and honest about sexual relationships without being sexist or abusive or trivial etc., ; whilst on the other hand, the tone in which they asked the question didn't deserve a reply and that there was always the possibility that the answer would form part of the following day's abuse.



The irony was that coinciding with the beginning of this intense period of conflict was the fact that relations with some of the young women were sufficiently good that they agreed to come round one Sunday afternoon for tea. 4 of them turned up and it went very well. We talked about their families, what they enjoyed doing; what they wanted to do when they left school; what they thought about school etc., and at the end we did a bit of singing and dancing. They asked us questions about how we lived. There was still a hint of making fun of us in the atmosphere but all in all, it was a very positive step.

However, later that same evening, there was a knock at the door and Maria went to answer it. One of the young women was there and asked if she could come in. Maria let her in but then, to her surprise, found about 12 teenagers pouring through the door. She felt tricked as most of these had remained out of sight at first. We both felt a bit invaded. As soon as they entered, many of the males just started looking through every room, poking about with things etc.. At the same time, we were inundated with questions; can we smoke? No, not inside the house. Why not? Followed by an explanation of why we



were opposed to smoking. One of the males started deliberately kicking the typewriter. Taken by surprise, it was difficult in this situation to reassert control. However, within about 15 mins we managed to get them to leave, although I made the mistake of promising that they could come back next week without asking Maria first. We found afterwards, that some of the young men had thrown one of our carpets over the balcony to the ground 7 flights below (we didn't want it but they weren't to know that). However, as far as we know nothing in the flat was actually damaged or stolen.

### OUR OBJECTIVES.

We had 2 or 3 main objectives in our heads at this time. The first, for myself, was that I've always enjoyed working with children and young people. For 7 years I'd worked voluntarily or in paid employment with them until I found myself no longer able to work in schools, youth clubs, children's homes etc., because I disagreed with how they were run and their policies and practices. I wanted to prove to myself that it was possible to do something outside any established structure. Similarly, I've long wanted to set up my own voluntary, informal "school" and encourage parents not to send their children to state schools (or private fee-paying schools for that matter) as well as encouraging children and young people not to attend. The aim of our "school" would be conscientisation; confidence building; encouraging a critical awareness of the world around us; and encouraging and supporting the growth of non-violent attitudes and values within all of us. I hoped this might prove an opportunity to try it out. Finally, the conflict was so bad that we desperately needed to do something to try to improve the situation. We had no doubts that it was right to try and build up a relationship with them; the problem was that we felt sufficiently intimidated and frightened that we didn't challenge their behaviour enough.

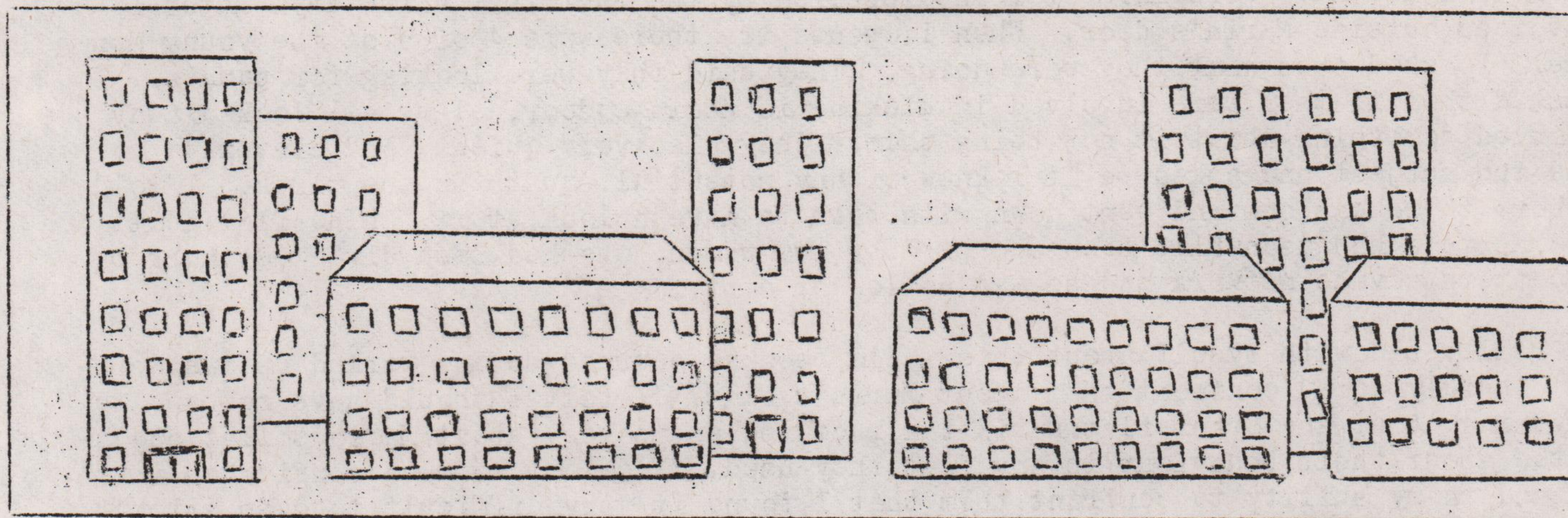
This policy led us into slight conflict with Ted who wanted us to have nothing further to do with them and to stop encouraging them. When he was feeling very angry towards them he talked about finding out where they lived and sending letters to their parents and if that didn't work, getting a large group of squatters together and threatening to beat them up. We thought the letters might be a good idea but we definitely didn't want the latter to happen and already we thought there was a distinct pattern of violence escalating. (To be fair to Ted, he was on his own at this time and was obviously a bit anxious and maybe frightened by the situation. He told us he had tried to talk with them but got nowhere. The situation eased a little bit when the others in his house, who were away at the time, came back. They too, spent some time trying to talk with the teenagers with some success. Maybe if they'd been there at the outset, the situation wouldn't have become so difficult.) On the other hand we also felt guilty and unhappy because we knew we weren't doing enough to challenge their behaviour and that in these circumstances inviting them into our house could be seen as condoning their behaviour to the squatters next door. So we decided that when they came the following Sunday, we would raise the issue of the broken window, the abuse, the spitting and the harassment and ask for an apology for ourselves and the squatters next door.

### THE SUNDAY MEETING

Again my memory of this meeting is a bit hazy, but I think that initially a large-ish number arrived - about 12. However, when I told them in serious terms that we wanted to talk to them, about 5 of the males left. This time I was determined that we were going to be listened to and be in control so I said I wasn't going to speak until they were quiet. However, this intention had already suffered a setback with the departure of the 5 males, as I'd meant to say that if they left they wouldn't be allowed to come back, but they were off before I got chance. This was to mess us up later on in the meeting. In the meeting, the 3 remaining males especially refused to remain quiet and continued to mess about (although Maria thought that they were quiet enough and that I waited too long.) until eventually I asked them to come outside with me. (This had the desired effect as it was very cold) I managed to have quite a useful talk with them about the fact that we were quite willing to let them come every Sunday and have a 'club' but first they needed to apologise to the people next door and to us for their behaviour. I think they agreed to but I'm not sure. The young women had already said they weren't involved. We accepted that to an extent in that we knew they wouldn't have smashed the window or spat at us or whatever but I still felt it was important to say that if they knew what was going on, or were there when things happened, they needed to either challenge the behaviour or leave the group otherwise they were part of what was happening. They looked a bit crestfallen



and tried to explain that the "boys wouldn't listen to them". I think though that they did apologise to us and I did understand their situation; as I learnt in more detail later, their own position with the males was none too secure.



### A REASONABLE SUCCESS SPOILED.

What spoiled it from being a reasonable success was the fact that 6 or more returned a little later on. Before the meeting we'd said to ourselves that we'd finish at 8 pm in order to try and establish some security for ourselves by making fairly clear boundaries and sticking to them. It was about 7.45 when they arrived and 5 minutes later in the midst of a rising hub-ub, I said that they'd have to go in 10 minutes time. There was immediate protest at this and shouts of "That's out of order" but we refused to back down. To our surprise some of them just marched out and the rest followed. Our intention had been to discuss the terms of next Sunday's meeting but all this went by the wayside. It was to be some 6 months before we were to invite them in again and then it was only renewed to the young women. Still, although in the short term, our grandiose ideas came to nought, there was some curtailment in the more outrageous forms of behaviour, and perhaps significantly, Maria's flat was never damaged during this period. Nevertheless, sometimes, we felt very close to giving up; there was considerable tension, anxiety and stress involved in having to confront them in this way and it often felt it would just be a lot easier for us if we simply moved away from the area.

### A BREAK IN.

Perhaps the lowest point for me during this period was when Maria was away. I called round to her house one day to find that the door had been kicked in. Nothing had been taken and, strangely, nothing was disturbed. However, I felt very shaken, shocked and tense. I felt I couldn't cope and just wanted to run away. I'd been feeling very low and isolated and alone at the time anyway, and it just felt as if I was having to deal with another major crisis on my own. I also remember experiencing that sort of sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I tried to fight my fear and my feeling of wanting to run away and I managed to write out a poster saying, roughly, that this was someone's home and to respect it as such and how would they like it if someone did that to their home, and stuck this on Maria's door. I also managed to repair the door. (We probably had nothing stolen because we'd taken the precaution of removing all cash from Maria's to my flat before she left.)

My first reaction was why have they done it to Maria. They know that's her house; she hadn't done anything against them and nor had I. I felt angry and invaded by their lack of respect and disregard for her home. However, afterwards I thought it was possible that they were confused. As I said earlier, I think they regarded both squats together as Greenpeace, and at some point around this time the people next door moved out, partly because of the harassment and partly because of the risk of being burgled. (The window that had been smashed was still broken and a wooden board covering the hole had been repeatedly pushed through so it would have been relatively easy for anyone to enter the flat.) As the others had left, they may have thought we had left too and so kicked open the door in an attempt to find out. (Even if this was so it still doesn't excuse them, but I think it's probably true to say that they had sufficient respect for us that they wouldn't have done it if they were sure Maria was still there.) However, no one saw



them and so it may not have been them at all. I didn't have many doubts myself though.

#### A FEW DAYS LATER.

What doubts I did have were more or less dispelled by the fact that a few days later I heard voices outside Maria's door. When I opened it, there were 4 or 5 of the young men outside. I asked them what they were doing. They said they were looking for squats. I then asked them if they were involved in kicking in Maria's door. They all looked away and mumbled something about it not being them. They also very quickly and cleverly changed the subject and asked me if I knew of any potential squats in the block. I told them where there was one and went down with them to have a look at it. (The flat next door to Maria's had meanwhile been occupied by two women, who had been directed there by the squatters advice network and so was no longer empty.)

I felt really bad with myself about this. I'd been so churned up and worked up inside that I'd hardly dared confront them about Maria's flat. I felt I should have refused to say anything about any other flat until I'd received an apology about Maria's flat and a guarantee about their behaviour in any flat they used. I'd lost so much confidence in myself and in my ability to confront them that I found it very difficult to even attempt it. Every encounter seemed to finish with me feeling lower and more humiliated than before. I was putting on a much braver face to them than I felt inside. The constant tension and conflict of the last month or so was hitting me hard. I've always known that once you lose your confidence in dealing with young people whose behaviour is aggressive or antagonistic, it leads to a downward spiral of where, in almost every encounter, you lose more self-respect and confidence as their behaviour towards you becomes more disrespectful and outrageous. I've known it's very difficult to break this cycle once started. This was what was happening to me and I felt awful. I felt all alone with no one to help me. (Maria was away and even when she was there she felt more anxious and tense than I did.)

#### "A LECTURE"

However, I was also torn. I did think that they had as much right to use vacant, empty, property as I did. I did feel that they needed somewhere where they could meet and do their own thing and talk and mess about. That's what they wanted and I felt that was fair enough. The problem with that was that their behaviour was so negative and destructive that they weren't likely to use it constructively for that purpose for very long. So I didn't really want to help them unless we had long discussions about a concern for their neighbours; about just because property was empty didn't mean to say they could smash it up and that they should look after it and use it constructively or leave it alone. Although I did manage to 'deliver a lecture' to the 4 or 5 I found outside Maria's door, I was sufficiently scared of them that I was only half hearted and they only half listened.

In the end another group of squatters living on the floor below Maria's opened up a flat on that floor for them. It was they who had told me about the empty one I showed the teenagers. They weren't too happy with me when I informed them that I'd done this. Anyway, the outcome was that they used that flat for themselves and opened up another one on the same floor for the teenagers. This episode just served to erode my confidence even more. On the one hand I should have refused to show any squats to the youths. On the other feeling obliged to put forward their case because I'd shown it to them and because I didn't want them to feel that I'd deliberately misled them. I felt foolish and inept because I'd put myself in this quandry through not being strong enough to refuse to give them any information until they'd apologised in the first place. Again I felt more humiliated and less confident of challenging them as a result. I did, however feel relieved at the passing of responsibility. I hoped that the squat being opened up for them would take the pressure off Maria and I. To some extent it probably did, but the catalogue of destructive behaviour had by no means come to an end.

#### TWO FIRES

Sometime during the next few weeks/months, there were two fires; one in the flat next door to Maria's and one in the flat I'd shown to them. The two women had moved out of the flat next door to Maria after only a couple of weeks; - the flat was left empty but open (the locks had been taken away.) After a week or so the teenagers started using it regularly as a gathering/meeting/social space. This lasted for maybe a couple of weeks until one day I called round to see Maria only to see that the flat next door had had



quite a serious fire. (Maria was in her flat at the time when it happened,) A mattress inside had been set on fire/caught alight. Again noone saw them doing it so it may not have been them. On the other hand, they were the only ones who used to go into that flat. We know less about the fire in the flat below. We don't know who, if anyone, was using it immediately before the fire. Our suspicion is it was the young males again but we have no direct evidence for this and less circumstantial evidence than in other cases. Maria in particular was quite shaken by these fires as they seemed to display a considerable disregard to the people living in flats above, below or next to the ones set on fire. There have also been a number of smaller fires (ie the rubbish chutes have been set on fire (or catching fire). Although there's a great danger of giving a dog a bad name and so when any fire occurs, our suspicions make us think of the teenagers, when it may not be them at all, nevertheless there does seem to be a pattern involved.

During this same couple of months, the squatters in the flat on the floor below also had one of their windows smashed and a stereo stolen. This happened after they had invited the young people to a party and to which a number of them turned up. Again noone saw them so it may not have been them, but the pattern was a familiar one.

### THE NEXT FOUR MONTHS

The next four months saw a considerable lessening in the traumas. There was still the abuse, even the odd incident of throwing a can at Maria; and there was still the rubbish, cans, fag ends, papers etc., that seemed very connected to their visits to the stairs. On the whole, it was a period when we were able to relax a bit more and recover our confidence and our strength. Encounters continued which sometimes were quite positive. For example, we managed to have some quite reasonable discussions on racism and sexism. This was only so, though, if the group was small. Moreover, as my confidence came back I was able to challenge their behaviour more. For example, I was walking with a male friend, one day in July, who was wearing a blue smock. The young women came over to chat to us and expressed their disapproval by subtly making fun of him. The young men openly, but keeping their distance called him a "puuf" and asked us if we "were screwing" each other. I told them not to be abusive and that if they wanted to know they should come and ask us. Other times the males would shout at the females in the group things like "hey, Christina, give us a blow job." (=suck my penis to make me have an orgasm) which I would challenge; or their use of the word "cunt" which I would say was sexist and abusive and attempt to explain what I meant; or challenge their use of the word "paki" and their attitudes to black people. Sometimes we would be offered dope and heroin and when we refused they would ask us our views on drugs and didn't we ever take drugs? Surely we must have done some time? No, we replied (making it clear we were referring to "illegal drugs") and all drugs are harmful especially tobacco and alcohol and including "medicinal" drugs etc..

### THE SUMMER.

Sometime in the summer, a number of the young men were caught breaking into a car. A couple of them were to spend the next 5 months in Detention Centre, whilst most of them were released on remand straightaway. We wouldn't wish prison on anybody and certainly not for breaking into cars. However, it seemed to be the case that the ones who had given us most trouble and most abuse, particularly to Maria, had been locked up. It also seemed to have the effect of breaking their group up a bit. Whatever the reason things seemed to become a lot easier around that time, although they'd been moving in a more positive direction for a while. I feel that this was a lot because of our continued efforts to be constructive with them and yet challenge when necessary. There were some specific occasions when this seemed to be particularly successful.

For most of the summer, Maria dealt with the situation by trying to ignore the group, unless she met the young women on their own. This was because she felt angry and upset at the abuse that she was still getting from the young men and just didn't want or feel up to talking with the group. On the whole, I didn't get this abuse, although sometimes the young women would try and make fun of me and one or two of the males would 'try it on.' I would just tell them that what they were doing was abusive or making fun and move on. Most of the time, I had a pleasant but brief conversation with the young women whilst the males would ignore me. After a while, it became

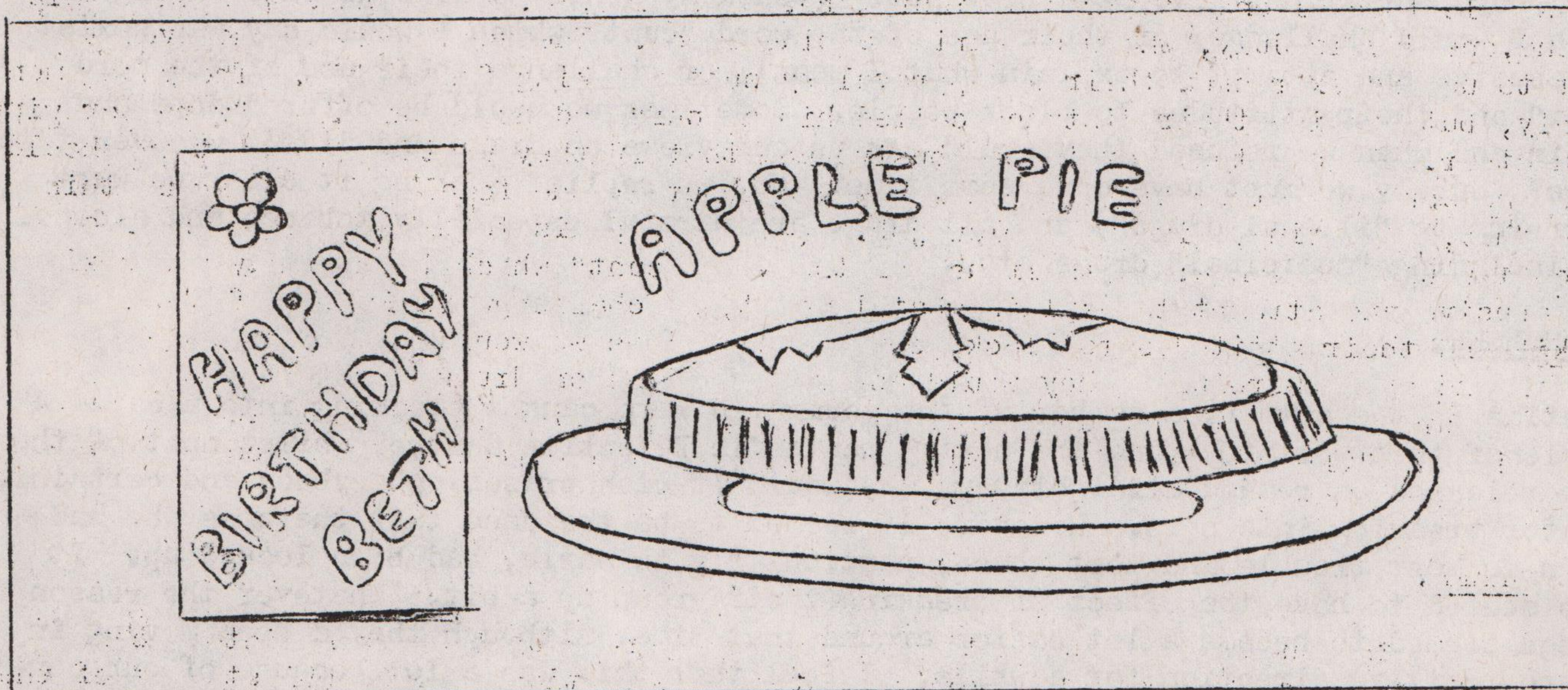


more and more obvious to them that Maria wasn't talking. Then, one day, in the autumn, I met the young women on the stairs. They asked me if Maria was alright as she never seemed to talk with them these days. I told them why she hadn't been talking to them. They immediately tried to protest their innocence saying "it was the boys, not them".

#### OUR CONVERSATION.

I agreed with them to an extent but went on to point out that they did make fun sometimes and even when they didn't, they'd never challenged the males or said anything that would make them think that they disagreed with how they were behaving and difficult though this was, they needed to do it. Life was full of such difficult decisions. They then started to tell me how difficult this was because they too were harrassed by the males. Angela told me how she suffered repeated sexual harrassment from Jonathon, one of the young men in the group; he used to put his hand on her bottom and she didn't know what to do about it. She told me she couldn't understand what men got out of that. Christine said that she'd just finished a relationship with Jonathon and that he'd just abused her in front of the other males and females present in the group by calling her a "cunt", "slag", "tart" etc.. That's why they were on the stairs; they'd walked off in disgust. Beth then told me about how only the other week she'd been sexually attacked whilst walking home and had managed to fight him off and run home. They all told me of an incident the previous Saturday where they'd seen a man viciously kicking and punching a woman on the floor. They had felt powerless and afraid of doing anything and so seemingly had half a dozen or so other people who were standing and watching. Eventually a taxi driver intervened and helped the woman into his taxi and drove off.

Out of all this came a long discussion about sexism and feminism. They then said they had to go and promised they would apologise to Maria. Just before they left the 3 of them began to tell me that I seemed to be different from other men they knew and that I was "nice" and "cared about people". With these praises ringing in my ears, I felt over the moon and laughingly told them if ever they wanted to talk they were to just come and ask and with that they left. Sure enough, when they met Maria one by one over the next week or so, they made a sincere apology.



#### PROGRESS

Over the next few months, meetings and conversations were dramatically improved and often gave me a boost where before they had been a great source of tension and anxiety. We were invited to Beth's birthday party. Maria made a card for her. When she came round to collect it she was delighted with it and her mother made us an apple pie in return to show her pleasure. (She went to a lot of trouble to make us something we could eat as Beth, after numerous conversations with us is quite aware of what we will eat.) Amazingly, some of the young men started offering to carry Maria's bike up the stairs for her and the boxes of food that we bring back from the market, which she



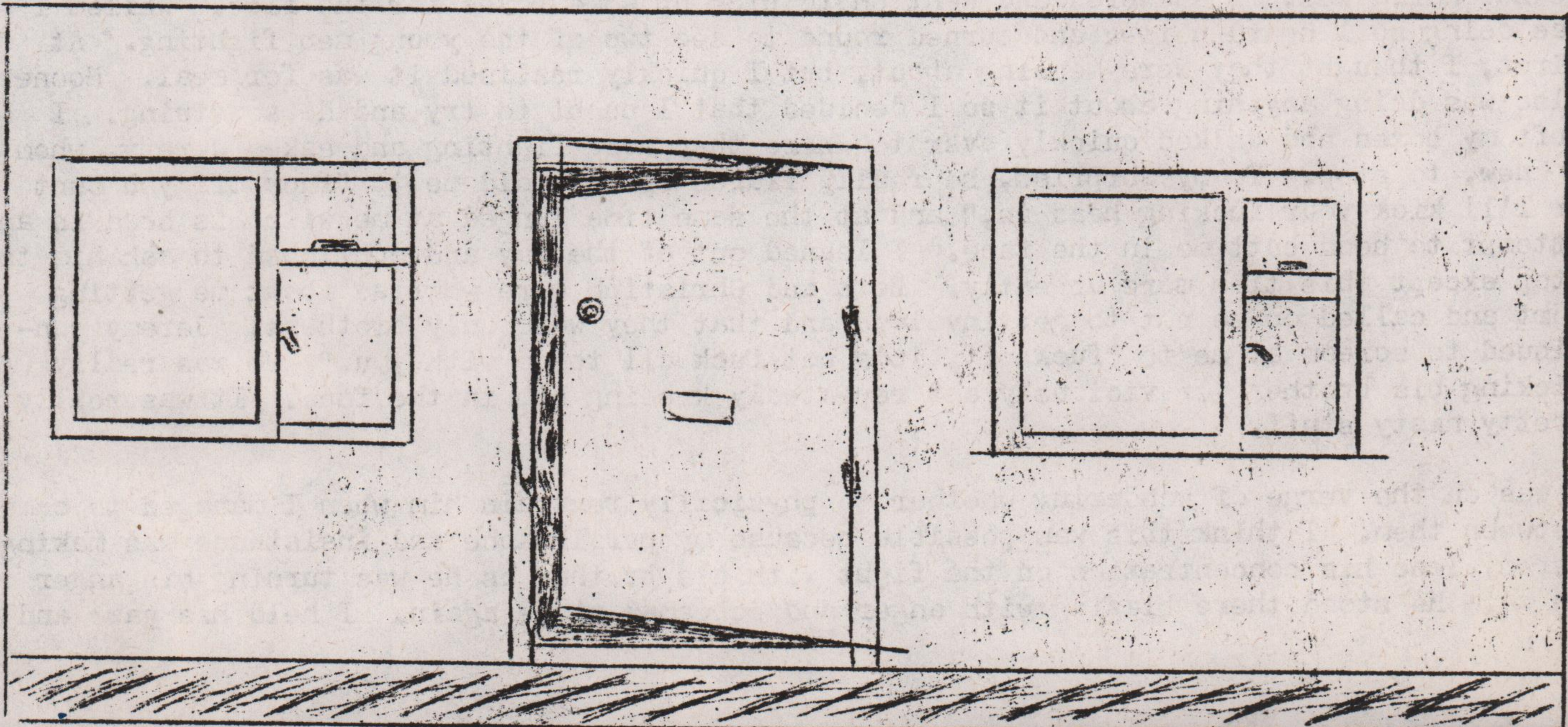
accepted twice as she was quite tired. Angela, Christine and Beth promised to come round and visit me on Christmas day when Maria told them I was going to be alone and sure enough they turned up which was really nice of them. A few times they dropped round to visit and would chat about how they were feeling or just have a laugh and then leave.

It was a time of very positive communication. Even some of the young men started saying hullo and chatting without any hint of making fun. (Although this had happened before on occasions if they'd been on their own or in a pair.) A couple of times I saw Beth making rude or insulting remarks or gestures to Bengali or Vietnamese people. I asked her to apologise to the Bengali man and she did so, I think sincerely. After the incident with the Vietnamese man, the 3 of them came back to my flat and I talked with them about it. I asked Beth how she would feel if someone did that to her. She seemed to take my point although the 3 of them and maybe Angela in particular, felt that "Pakis" should "go home". Their stark racism always saddens me and seems in such contrast to the fact that they are often genuinely warm and friendly young people.

#### MORE BREAK INS.

Over a period of 6 months, there were 2 similar incidents to those which we'd endured earlier in the year. On one occasion Maria's door to her new flat was kicked in. This incident seemed to bear all the hallmarks of being the teenagers. Nothing was taken, the door was just kicked in. Again, they may well have been checking who it was who'd moved in or looking for stuff like stereos and other expensive gear to steal. Although we both felt down and upset and shocked, it didn't have anywhere near as bad an effect on me as the previous time in March had. We just set to and repaired the door there and then. I still felt frightened though and wanted to run away and leave it until the morning. Our much quicker recovery was evidence of the fact that we were becoming reconciled to the insecurity of our position. We had nothing of great value to steal, although some items like our bikes and typewriter, would cause us a great deal of inconvenience if stolen. Amazing to think that your attitude to security could change so much that you could almost get used to this kind of treatment. Nevertheless, there was still a sadness and anger that we had to suffer this sort of treatment and that they still didn't respect us enough to stop doing it.

The 2nd incident was when one of our friends came to see us, she had her car broken into. She didn't have anything of value stolen (In money terms) but things that were of great emotional value to her. We had no evidence that it was the teenagers we knew who did this specific act. We know the young men do break into cars and that the car was parked in one of their patches. But no doubt there are individuals in the same area who steal from cars. - Nor in this case could there have been any personal aspect of attacking us as they wouldn't know that this car belonged to our friend. Nevertheless, it was a very sad and disturbing event as our friend was very distressed, upset and shocked by the incident. We tried to get the stolen items back by putting up a large poster where the car had been parked asking the people who had taken them to return them.





MY WORRIES.

Maria, particularly, was very keen on doing this, whereas I'd been quite reticent and afraid when we discussed it thinking that more people may come and break into my house and attack me. When Maria asked me to state my worries and my fears about it, I found it wasn't easy to do so or if I could, what I was afraid of wasn't at all likely to happen. I realised that for some reason it raised fears in me that had little to do with the reality of the situation and were probably to do with feeling uneasy because it was something new and unusual we were doing to publicly accuse someone of committing a crime or a moral wrong in our terms and put our name and address to it. (We didn't accuse anyone specifically, we just said that someone had broken into the car etc.) I think it may also have been my male patterns of thinking that if anything happened, I would have to face it not Maria (it was my name and address that went on the poster as Maria didn't want to publicise the fact that she was a woman living on her own) and feeling that if anything bad did happen I'd not only have to deal with my own fears but hers as well. Whether this is fair to Maria or not I don't know. However, although I was still afraid I thought it was important to put up the poster and try and deal with and overcome my fear. For 2 days I felt, intermittently, that churning of the stomach and then it went. I'd challenged and overcome my fear. I was very grateful for Maria's initiative and courage. We didn't get attacked or anything untoward happening. We did learn that a few people stopped and looked at the poster because they told us they had. Although we didn't get the things back, we had taken another step forward in our challenging of wrong behaviour and our confidence to take this on and do this sort of action had been increased because we suffered no harm.

MORE PROGRESS

Even when I moved into the same block as Maria before Christmas, my door wasn't kicked in. This seemed to represent to us a sign of more progress. I asked Angela, Christine and Beth to come with me to see an elderly woman who lived locally who was very lonely. They readily agreed to come. The first time we went Amanda was busy and so couldn't see us. Afterwards, the 3 came back to my flat and we talked about sex, sexism, racism and depression amongst other things. We also did some singing and they tried to teach me how to dance. (A forlorn hope..) The following Sunday, they had an argument between themselves and so failed to turn up. Nevertheless this was the sort of constructive thing I hoped to be able to encourage them to do. The 3 of them were often bored and at a loose end and wanting to feel useful. Amanda was lonely and bored and really missing and needing company. I go and see her regularly, but the more the merrier and she likes the company of young people. It just seems crazy that here are the young and the old, separated and cut off from each other and yet both needing things that the other has to give. So far it hasn't come off but I hope it will.

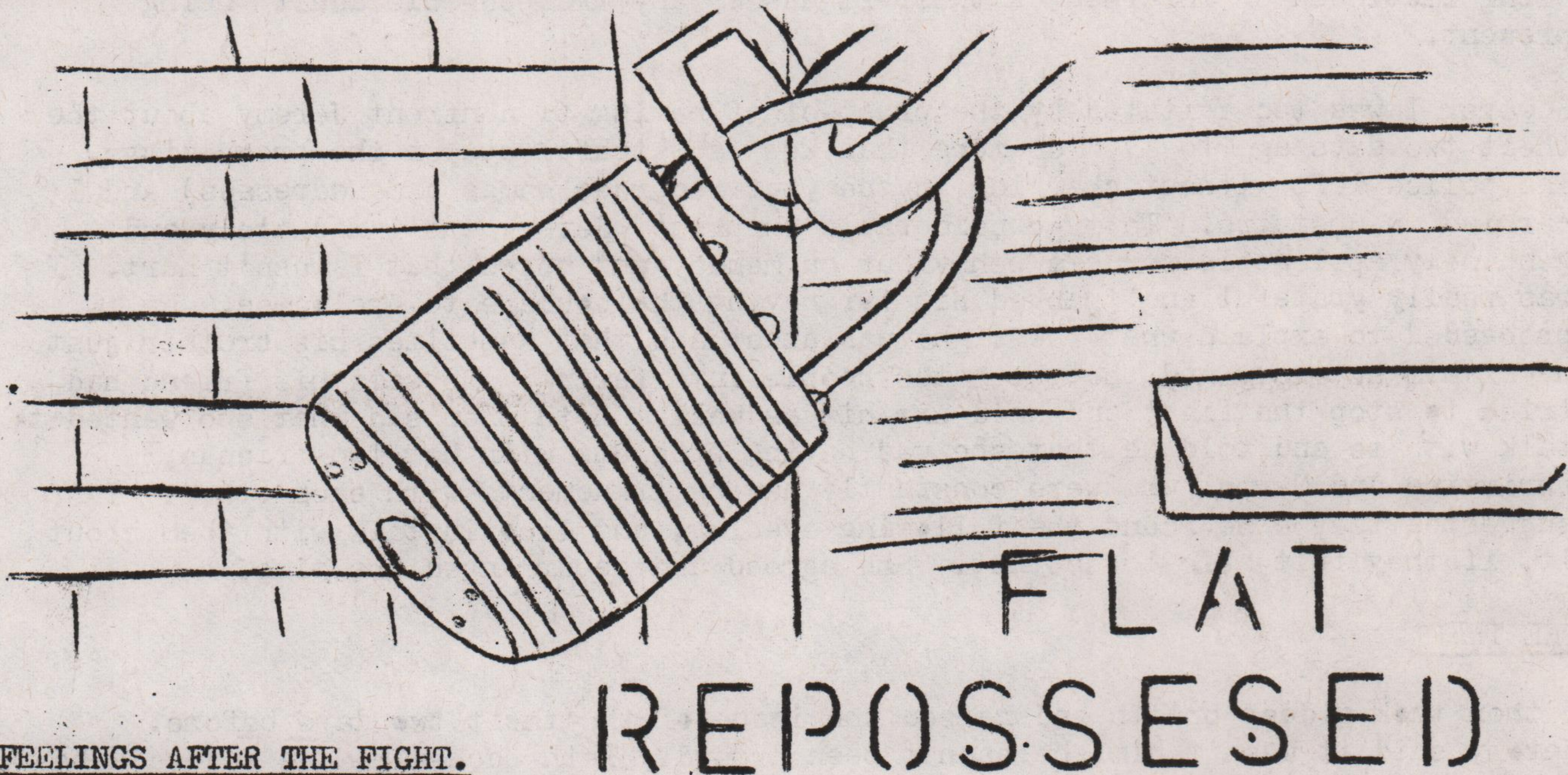
THE NEW YEAR.

Finally the New Year brought with it a new turn of events. I was returning from the library one evening and passed the teenagers. Angela and Christine said hullo and asked me how Maria was. I answered and went on to pick up some boxes for the fire. Whilst I was doing so I heard noises and turned round to see two of the young men fighting. At first, I thought they were messing about, but I quickly realised it was for real. No one else was doing anything about it so I decided that I ought to try and do something. I left my boxes and walked quickly over to where they were fighting and asked Jeremy, whom I knew, to stop. To my surprise, he really flared up and told me to "fuck off you cunt or I'll kick your fucking head in," and at the same time lunged at me with his head in an attempt to head butt me in the face. I leaned out of the way and continued to ask him to stop except this time more urgently. Beth and Christine were worried about me getting hurt and called on me not to get involved and that they were only brothers. Jeremy continued to scream at me to "fuck off, it's got fuck all to do with you." He was really kicking his brother viciously and repeatedly kneeing him in the face. It was really pretty nasty stuff.

I was on the verge of wondering whether to physically restrain him when I managed to come between them. I think this was possible because my persistence and insistence was making Jeremy lose his concentration on the fight with his brother as he was turning his anger on me. He stood there blazing with anger and screamed at me again. I held his gaze and



calmly but firmly told him that he could hit me if he wanted but I wasn't going to leave but nor would I hit him back. Up to that point, it seemed very much as if he was going to thump me. This seemed to shock him and take him by surprise, he hesitated. In these few seconds, his brother must have got up off the floor and left. 2 women came out of a shop and said the police were on their way. Jeremy wandered around still obviously tamping mad but with noone left on which to vent his anger and maybe still a little stunned. Angela and Christina thanked me but repeated I shouldn't have got involved; it was only a brother's fight. I asked if his brother was alright and they said yes, but I didn't check myself which I should have done.



#### MY FEELINGS AFTER THE FIGHT.

While it was happening, surprising as it may seem, I was reasonably calm. When I got back to my flat, I was really churned up. It was the first time someone had definitely attempted to physically injure me since I was 16 or so. What would I have done if he had started to hit me? At the same time I had a feeling of considerable elation. Never before had I actually said to anyone that they could hit me and I would still not do what they wanted. Never before had I said I would not hit them back. It seemed clear that this statement of nonviolence stopped the fight and also prevented me from being hit. At least this is what it felt like but there's probably always an element of luck; maybe I was just lucky. What was especially important was that hitherto Jeremy had been probably the most abusive of all and the one with the least respect for us. He had been particularly abusive to Maria. As a result we were afraid of and intimidated by him more than any of the others. I think there may have been an element of this dislike towards us in how he'd reacted. So for us and for me especially, it was psychologically very important because it represented a refusal to accept his abusive behaviour any longer. I needed to be able to overcome my fear of him and to refuse to allow myself to be intimidated by him. At the same time I didn't want to humiliate him or beat him up or whatever. I thought I'd achieved a significant positive change in our relationship. Nevertheless, I was still anxious lest it may have been perceived as an attack on him and so lead to reprisals against us.

#### TWO DAYS LATER

Two days later, I was walking past Maria's flat (her flat had been repossessed the week before and we were still in the process of moving her stuff), when I noticed that food had been strewn all over the floor. When I went in to investigate (although the Council had put an anti-vandal clamp on the front door, the same window that had been smashed the year before was still broken and so it was fairly easy to get in). I found that about £3 in money had been taken and all Maria's belongings had been gone through. My immediate reaction was again that sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach at the prospect of having to face more confrontation. I assumed it was the reprisals from Jeremy that I'd half expected.



Two days after this, I arrived home after midnight to a scene at the foot of the stairs, where two police officers were questioning Gareth, one of the group. Christine and Carmel were waiting nearby. I learnt that Jeremy and Beth were upstairs. When I heard this I didn't pay any attention to the scene that faced me, although I should have done because even though they were all juveniles, they were being questioned about acts of criminal damage and possession of drugs (none of them had any) and Gareth was searched, without as far as I know any of them being cautioned or informed of their rights or any 'responsible adult' being present.

However I was too agitated by the prospect of having to confront Jeremy about the theft two days ago to do more than keep a watchful eye on the proceedings. The police left without charging anyone (but recorded names and addresses) and I carried on upstairs. To my considerable surprise, Jeremy was immediately and genuinely apologetic for his behaviour on Monday and hoped that I wasn't hurt. I was really grateful and thanked him for having the courage to apologise. He proceeded to explain what the fight was about and that sometimes his brother just makes him so angry and that he hates people interfering. He said his friend had tried to stop the fight and he'd hit him as well. Beth then said that she wanted to talk with me and told me that she was having problems with her two friends, Christine and Carmel who were constantly having arguments with each other. I suggested they come round the following evening, and I could talk with them about it, if they felt able to do that. She agreed and we arranged the time.

#### THE THEFT

I then took a deep breath and raised the issue of the theft two days before. Jeremy said it wasn't him; he hadn't been around. Beth backed him up and said he was over in Thornton that day. I wasn't too convinced and pushed further saying that his nickname had suddenly appeared on our door. He said the others could have written it. So I then proceeded to talk about how we'd never done any harm to them (he agreed) and we'd always treated them with respect and yet all we got from them was hassle. He was genuinely listening and even sympathetic, asking me how much was nicked and saying that it was really bad, even though it was only a small amount, because he knew we had nothing. He promised to see what he could do to get it back and with that they said their goodbyes and went on their way. Unfortunately they never came back the next day.

#### THE BICYCLE

Two days after this, on the Sunday evening, we heard noises outside. On going outside we saw Gareth and Leslie about to walk off with one of our bikes that they had just taken from Maria's old flat. I was so surprised and stunned, I didn't know how to approach it especially as Gareth had perhaps been the only young man who had never joined in the abuse. I tried to question them about the fact they must have known it was our stuff. They denied it. Maria was so incensed, she just screamed at them, 'liar, liar, liar!!' They were shocked and taken aback; they didn't know how to respond. It was a difficult encounter; I was trying to coax the truth out of them and Maria was screaming at them that they were liars and told them to 'get lost'. She wasn't happy with me being reasonable with them and I wasn't happy with her screaming at them. I daren't try and challenge her though as I was afraid she would turn on me. (She was feeling very angry and upset before they arrived.)

The encounter revealed a lot about their attitudes to squatting and squatters. 'Its not your house', Gareth claimed, 'and so its not your stuff. Its been left for two weeks, we thought nobody wanted it'. He said the same about the money, although he was later to deny taking it. (The Council had repossessed the flat by putting a bar over the front door 2 weeks previously; it was true we had been slow moving our stuff out.) There followed a discussion about squatting, about property and about what was theft and what wasn't. I found myself feeling awkward about it because I couldn't strictly say I/we needed this bike and it was lying there being unused at that particular moment. On the other hand we do use it when our other two bikes are out of order, and as far as we know, Gareth has a bike. Also I'd feel that I should offer them the bike (although I'd find it difficult to



do except for the fact that they don't seem to need it and their attitude to it is destructive. It wouldn't help anyone if the bike ended at the bottom of the canal.

### OUR ATTITUDES TO PROPERTY.

On the one hand I/we did feel they'd committed a real moral wrong against us in that at the very least they were doing something to us which they would strongly object to if it happened to them, and that it seemed clear that underpinning their attitude was that because we were squatters we were fair game to steal from and that this lack of respect for us had been clear throughout, but it was the first time it was openly expressed in this way. On the other hand, I didn't want to be involved in arguing over property that we didn't strictly need, in this way. The whole incident was very revealing of the fact that our attitudes to property in practice weren't what we wanted them to be and of what their attitudes to us had been all along. Although it was very revealing, it was also very unsatisfactory and inconclusive. The following day, Maria felt very sad that she had shouted at them and was remorseful that she had not behaved how she would have wanted to behave. She felt her screaming and not listening to Gareth's explanation had been the very opposite of non-violence. She felt upset and worried that she'd messed up the relationship we'd built up with the young people.

When we talked about it, we felt that Gareth and Leslie were getting her anger and upset that she felt towards the council for evicting her; to me for not helping her move sooner; to whoever had strewn food over the floor and gone through her things and the anger that she felt at the way she'd been treated by all of the teenagers over the previous year. She had been feeling angry and down anyway that evening and down in general and Gareth and Leslie suffered from that. Only some of her anger was anger she felt about that specific occasion. Still, in another sense, I didn't feel that a great deal of harm would come from it as it wasn't anger that was physically threatening but the anger of anguish and despair and in one sense, it may be that them seeing the 'victim's' anguish may help to change their attitude to that sort of behaviour.

### 3 DAYS LATER.

3 days later, there was a knock at my door. It was Gareth who'd come to collect some clothes that he'd left in Maria's old flat when he'd gone in there. He'd thought he might sleep there sometimes. I invited him in and gave him his clothes back, (we'd moved them, assuming they belonged to previous squatters) and told him that I'd like to talk with him about the other day. He told me he'd been arrested 4 times in the last fortnight; (twice for things he hadn't done) one of these was for assault occasioning actual bodily harm on a Bengali man. (He'd thrown a stone which had hit him in the mouth. He told me he hadn't intended to hit him and I believed him.) So I talked with him about racism for a while. He told me he hated 'Pakis' and 'Coons'; that when he was a small boy at school, there were only a few of 'them' but gradually, they'd taken over. He felt this wasn't right; this was his country not theirs but what could he do about it?

He said they come over here with a few pounds and then get rich. He felt they owned all the big businesses in the area where we lived. I asked him what about Woolworths, the Queen, Mrs Thatcher etc., weren't they rich? What did he feel about them? He wasn't concerned about them they were white. I tried to say that this illustrated my point; that they could never do anything that was right in his eyes because they were black. The problem was that he was making a distinction between human beings based on the colour of their skin. If you cut yourself, you bleed red blood; if they cut themselves, they bleed red blood too. We're all people; we all have the same needs for love and care and affection. He listened but it all seemed a different world from where he was at.

### OUR CONVERSATION ABOUT THE THEFT.

He felt he might go to prison and so I asked him if he was worried about that. He said he wasn't and we chatted about it for a while. I then asked him about the other night and told him that Maria wanted to apologise to him and that she was sorry. He said it was nothing, just a misunderstanding. When I questioned him again, he admitted that he knew it was our stuff but thought that maybe we didn't want it. He was so confident of this that he said that when we came out and saw him with the bike, he was on the point of coming to ask us if he could borrow a pump. (I believed him). I asked him if he could

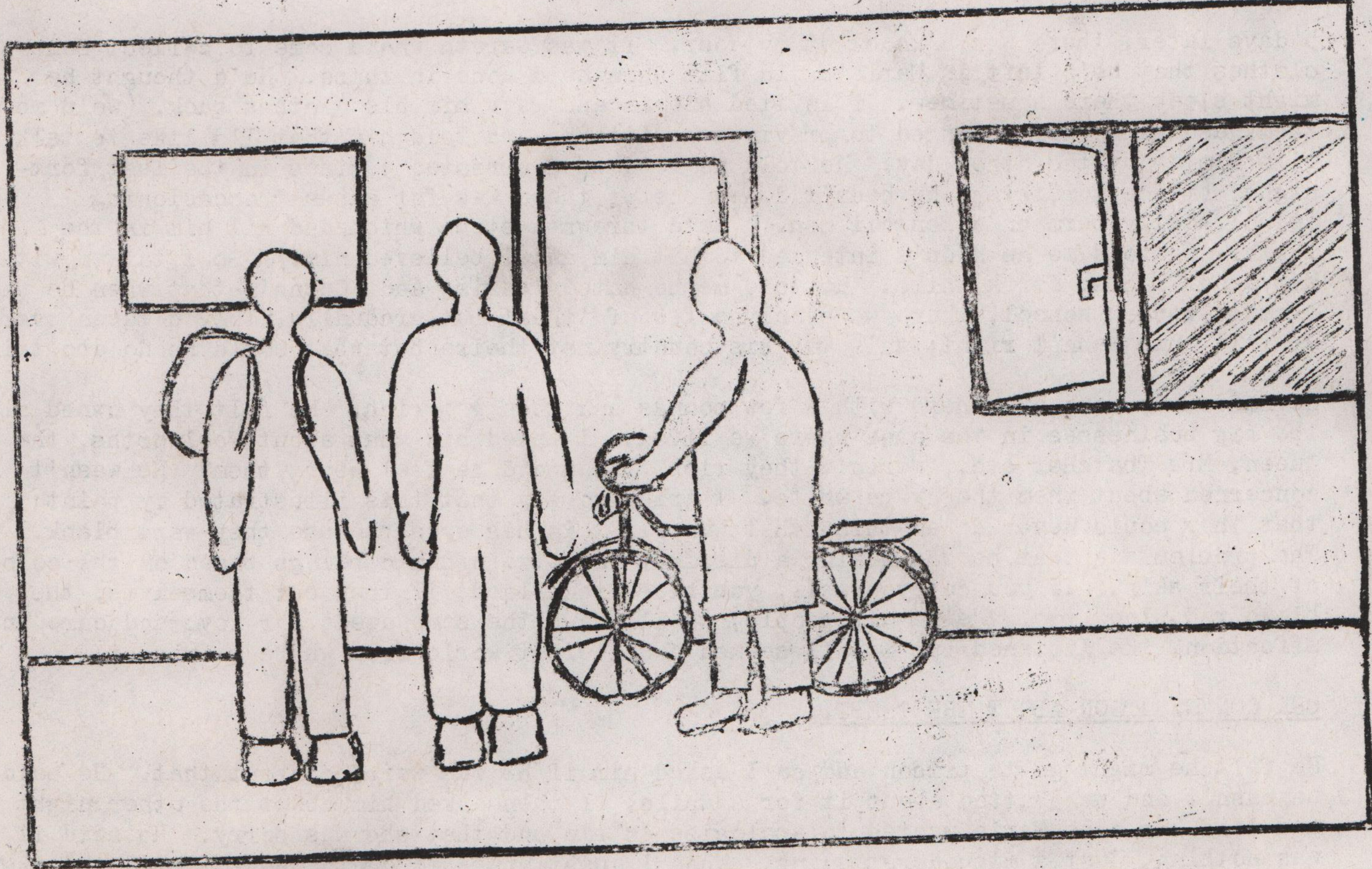


see that he'd done wrong. He gave an equivocal answer implying that the wrong was being caught, but he readily agreed to apologize and did so. He agreed, when I asked him, to undertake not to take any of our things again. (He said he'd called twice earlier and could have kicked the door in if he'd wanted to. This can be read both ways, positively and negatively). I said that if he needed the bike and wanted to, he or any of the group was welcome to use it, provided it was genuine and they would respect it. I also said if he ever wanted to talk about something or needed to stay the night, he was welcome. He replied that he might do that.

THE STORY SO FAR

This is the story thus far. It is still ongoing. (Maria wants to apologize to Gareth. She feels daunted at the prospect of talking with him in the larger group, but very much wants to apologize to him when she meets him on his own or with one other person). Although considerable progress has been made, it's still a very difficult struggle. We still feel on some occasions tension and anxiety as there always seems to be the potential for conflict or some behaviour that needs challenging. The balance is swinging our way although we've had to endure a great deal. Slowly, our persistence seems to be paying off. Although there are still (and will continue to be) times of stress, tension, and anxiety, there are also times of relaxation, warmth, and even joy. It has been hard, and often is still hard despite our success. Sometimes, like early last year, it was so hard that we wanted to give up. It's also been difficult because we've had to deal with all the conflicts on our own with little immediate support. My feeling is that the conflicts we have engaged in are not likely to diminish because there are many aspects of structural/institutionalized violence involved in their behaviour. It is these structural factors underlying the young people's behaviour that I wish to focus on in the second part of this article.

(THE NAMES OF THE PEOPLE AND THE PLACES INVOLVED IN THIS ARTICLE HAVE BEEN CHANGED)





# TRYING TO FACE VIOLENCE IN THE INNER CITY

PART 2

(Readers will remember that in the last issue I tried to describe the conflict Maria and I had been having with a group of young people. My intention in this second part of the article is to try and explain the social forces that I feel are behind this conflict.)

## CLASS

In my opinion, one of the main factors behind their behaviour is their class position in society. As far as we know all of them have left school or will leave school at 16 without qualifications. Those of them who have left are on the dole. They live in council flats on council estates. All their lives they have grown up with the knowledge that all of these aspects of their lives are, in our society, seen as being of low status. They know, consciously and unconsciously that other people look down on them and see them as inferior. In the eyes of society, having left school at 16 without qualifications, they are failures; similarly, being on the dole is seen to signify failure and personal inadequacy. As a result of these and other factors, their confidence and self-esteem is very low. Their own opinion of their abilities, their own expectations of themselves, of their skills and consequently their aspirations is very limited. Since the day they were born, they have been seen by society as people who would have limited intelligence and limited skills and not surprisingly their own opinion of themselves reflects that view. In effect, their skills, their creativity and their energy has been stunted and blocked from being expressed in useful and constructive ways. Consequently, it is expressed in destructive ways.

## A DOUBLE BIND.

Denied respect, they are not able to show it to others; denied status, they seek to gain it by abusing, humiliating or distancing themselves from other groups who are seen to be of even lower status than themselves. (Black people, gays, squatters, homeless) Subject to the same materialistic pressures as everybody else from advertising and the media etc., and yet denied legitimate ways of earning the money required to meet what would be seen to be an adequate material standard of living according to our cultural norms, they turn to illegitimate "illegal" ways of making that money. This is accentuated by the fact that often they feel an even more urgent need than say some professional middle-class people, to meet that norm because they don't want to provide yet more opportunities for people to ridicule and scorn them. Furthermore, bored and alienated, the escapism of drugs seems to have considerable appeal. Yet illegal drugs especially, (some of them have told us they take heroin and cannabis) are very expensive. The dole won't buy any-one much of these and pay for alcohol, tobacco, clothes, discos, food, and other basics.

They are caught in a double bind; on the one hand their class position in society is one of the main reasons why they are bored and alienated; whilst on the other that same class



position is largely (wholly) responsible for their inability to earn the sort of money that would buy, legally, the kind of materialistic 'props' that most (all) of us would turn to if faced with a similar situation. (Another irony is that drugs and other 'props' are one of the factors which help to explain why people don't act to change the unjust situation they find themselves in.) If they do turn to illegal ways of making the money, and they are caught, it just seems to lead to more alienation and anger, lower status and self-esteem; even less likelihood of earning sufficient money legally and therefore a corresponding increase in the likelihood that they will use illegal ways of making the money.

### MALE CONDITIONING.

This is the institutionalised violence of class exploitation. This violence against them is converted into their personal destructive behaviour towards others including ourselves. To get at the root of this behaviour would necessitate challenging the violence of the class inequalities in this country. Yet there are also other important factors. On the whole, the destructive behaviour towards others is carried out by the young men, not the young women. I feel/believe that this means there is another main element in their behaviour in addition to class, which is male conditioning. In our culture, men are seen as 'naturally aggressive'; that it is inevitable, for example, that boys will engage in physical fights. In fact, it's possible to say that our culture goes beyond seeing this as inevitable and actually encourages them through films, toys, stories, literature etc.. (e.g. male heroes are physically strong and tough and 'prove themselves' by physically 'beating up' or killing people they don't like (are in conflict with) i.e. 'enemies', 'opponents' etc.. As men we are encouraged to deny all our emotions except anger; to deny anything traditionally regarded as female such as caring, responsibility for other people's feelings, sensitivity etc., as "cissy". Additionally, young men will be expected by society, their families and peer groups to be 'gainfully employed' once they've left school. This expectation would not be so great on the young women as their approved role does not involve entering into 'waged employment' to provide financially for themselves or a family on an equal basis with a male. Not being able to fulfill this expectation is a further blow to their sense of identity and self-esteem.

### SEX ROLE DIVISIONS.

Thus, the pressures of the sexual stereotypes put a great deal of stress on the young, working class men. However, the young women suffer even more. Women's sense of identity and self-esteem is severely shaken by the fact that society sees their role as the provider of unwaged domestic and child bearing/rearing, labour. This is definitely seen as an inferior role to being in waged employment. Furthermore, such sex role divisions create a financial dependancy of women on men which places them in an extremely vulnerable position. The reverse of this is that men are not expected to have any (or at least as many) domestic responsibilities as women. This further removes them from their own empathetic or caring emotions and makes it easier for them to indulge in irresponsible behaviour than it would be for women. Allied to this is an overall feeling that conflicts can only be resolved by force, or by the use of power and authority backed up by the threat or potential use of force. These, I believe are some of the other main elements in explaining their behaviour.

Again the young men did not ask to be socialised in this way, nor, probably, are they aware of the sexual stereotyping that has conditioned their behaviour. In this sense they are victims of their social conditioning. Yet, in another sense, they are also oppressors; they have absorbed the cultural value that women's domestic and sexual role is inferior to men's; that women are seen as of less value and less important than men. Their behaviour reflects this value; both in terms of the sexual harassment and abuse of the women in their own group and of Maria. This is the institutionalised violence of sexism (or what is sometimes termed 'Patriarchy'.) It results in personal, individual acts of violence by men against women.

### RACISM

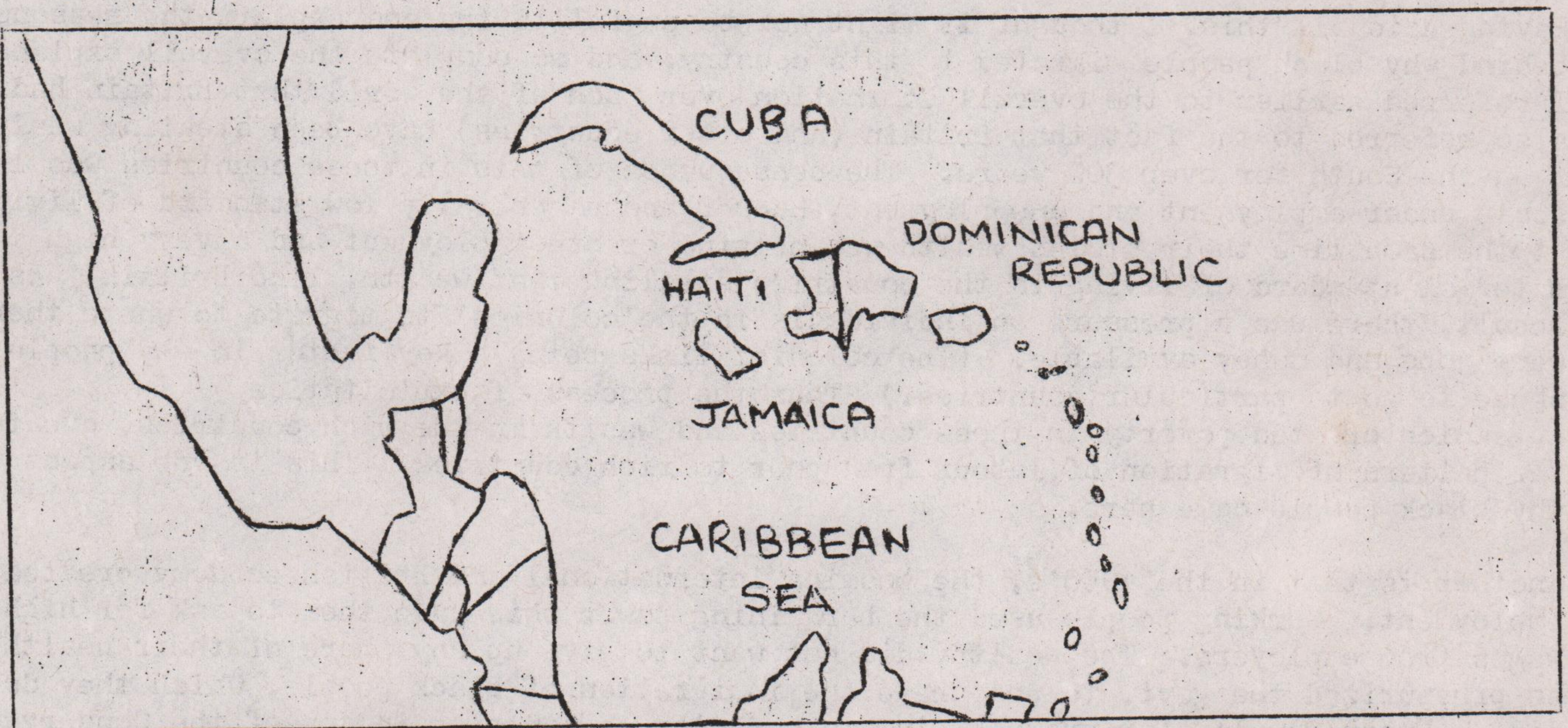
IN part 1 I mentioned that in my opinion, aspects of their behaviour and attitudes were racist. So I now want to try and outline where I feel this has come from in an attempt to try and explain this aspect of their behaviour. All of us have been brought up in a



country which has, as a major part of its recent history, the complete economic and political domination and control over a huge part of the world. The people of this country took part (and eventually played the major part) in taking African people to countries which today are known as the West Indies and the Americas, (The Europeans had invaded these countries and established them as colonies.) as slaves. Racist justifications for this white, European control of the world soon appeared in the form of 'explanations' that there were 'natural' differences between 'white' and 'black' people which were such that white people were 'naturally' more intellectually gifted, had 'naturally' greater organisational ability and superior technical ability; 'white' people were 'naturally' destined to rule the world etc..

### "SUPERIOR CULTURE!"

As white people in this country, the young people and ourselves have been brought up in this climate and both consciously and unconsciously, we have absorbed the values that white people and their culture are superior to black people and their culture. It is also the case that the control of white British people over these countries they were exploiting, gave them the power to take resources and use them to add to the material standard of living of people in this country. For over 300 years, the people of this country, have in part, lived off resources 'stolen' from the people of the South. Without this we could not have had the material standard of living we have today. Meanwhile, 50 million black people die of starvation every year and thousands of millions go without basic needs being met. This situation, too, has brought with it an attitude that we in this country expect and are entitled to this standard of living, and often using explanations for this situation which put the blame on black people themselves:-ie "they" are over-populated etc.. (I'll say more about this standard of living a little later on in the section on materialism.) This is the sort of cultural background of racism which the young people and all of us in this country have been brought up on.



### RACIAL DIVISIONS

However, in the young people's situation there is the additional factor that the economic insecurity and powerlessness of their class position in society makes them prone to 'propaganda' promoting racism and racial divisions. The sort of jobs they are likely to get frequently lack a guarantee of security. Any competition for these jobs can only make their position more insecure. Similarly for housing and other social facilities. This is in fact what happens when new people, who are themselves poor, arrive in this country from elsewhere. They provide extra labour so that wages will become lower; extra people means more people to be housed, which means longer council waiting lists or higher rents or more overcrowding, in existing homes as people have to make do with what they have. In other words, all the people in that area will experience a drop in their material standard of living.



This needn't be the case; there are enough resources in this country and in the world for everyone to be able to have useful and creative work to do and for everyone to have a home to live in and all their other basic needs met. It happens to be the case, though, because the rich and powerful everywhere refuse to distribute the resources fairly. However, as it is the case in this country and elsewhere, that resources aren't distributed fairly, it is the poor who will feel materially threatened by new arrivals. In that situation, the rich don't hand over any more resources so the same quantity of resources (jobs, housing etc) now has to be distributed between a larger number of people. Some of these new people arriving in this country were black people. Given the combination of racism and class insecurities/inequalities many working class people blame black people for their situation. (This combination of factors is why I feel that the National Front and other Fascist groups are able to obtain a hard core of support from working class areas.) Black people aren't to blame for class inequalities; rather they are even bigger victims of it than their white working class counterparts. In theory, the two groups would gain a lot from supporting each other in trying to obtain justice for working class people in this country, but, on the whole, so effectively, has racism been used as a divide and rule tactic by the rich and powerful, that many white working class people see black people as a threat and not as friends.

One reason for this I feel is our racist expectations of enjoying and being entitled to a higher standard of living than black people. This, I think, is what is behind the jealousy and resentment that the young people feel towards black people who have more wealth than they do (whilst apparently being unconcerned about wealthier white people.) In my opinion, this aspect of their behaviour and this aspect of the conflict would only be resolved by working towards an equalisation of wealth and power both within this country and internationally which is sustainable for all. To achieve this would require challenging both racism and class inequality.

#### MIGRATION

Having said all this, I thought it might now be useful to try and explain the reasons behind why black people migrated to this country, and so complete the overall explanation. I referred earlier to the overall domination over much of the world that Britain had. I also referred to the fact that Britain (and other countries) have been stealing wealth from the South for over 300 years. The consequence of this in these countries was large scale under-employment and unemployment, hunger and a generally low standard of living. At the same time their stolen wealth was helping create employment and a very high material standard of living in the countries stealing that wealth, like Britain. As a result, there was a pressure on individuals in the 'colonies' to migrate to where there were jobs and money available. (The colonial links being a key factor in why people chose to go to particular countries.) Thus the process of exploitation which created poverty in those countries and wealth in the rich countries, created the pattern of migration of labour from poor to rich countries. This is one aspect of why black people came here.

Another is that in the 1950's, the booming international and British economy created full employment. Working people used the bargaining power this gave them to ask for higher wages from employers. The wealthy did not want to give up any share of their wealth and so pressurized the govt. to encourage the immigration of black people, which they duly did. (Enoch Powell, for example, in his capacity as Minister in one of the Conservative Govts. of the 50's went to the West Indies to invite people to come to Britain to look for work.) Their aim was to use black people as a cheap source of labour; to provide competition for jobs so that wages were kept down by bringing in people from the 'colonies' whose standard of living was so low at home that almost any wage here would give them a higher standard of living than they had at home.. (This is the process I outlined earlier.) The policy of the wealthy was to undermine the workers by divide and rule tactics. Black people were not only exploited in the 'colonies' but also were brought here to be used by the wealthy as cheap labour and as part of their struggle to hold onto their wealth. With the rise in unemployment in the late 60's and 70's, so the need to import cheap labour has declined and with it comes an increase in pressure to stop the immigration of black people. Hence the Immigration and Nationality Acts. (Without going into these in detail, their purpose was to restrict immigration from the 'New Commonwealth countries' - essentially Britain's former colonies in Africa and Asia without affecting immigration from 'the Old Commonwealth countries' - Australia, Canada, New Zealand; South Africa, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, USA were also unaffected. The issue was not



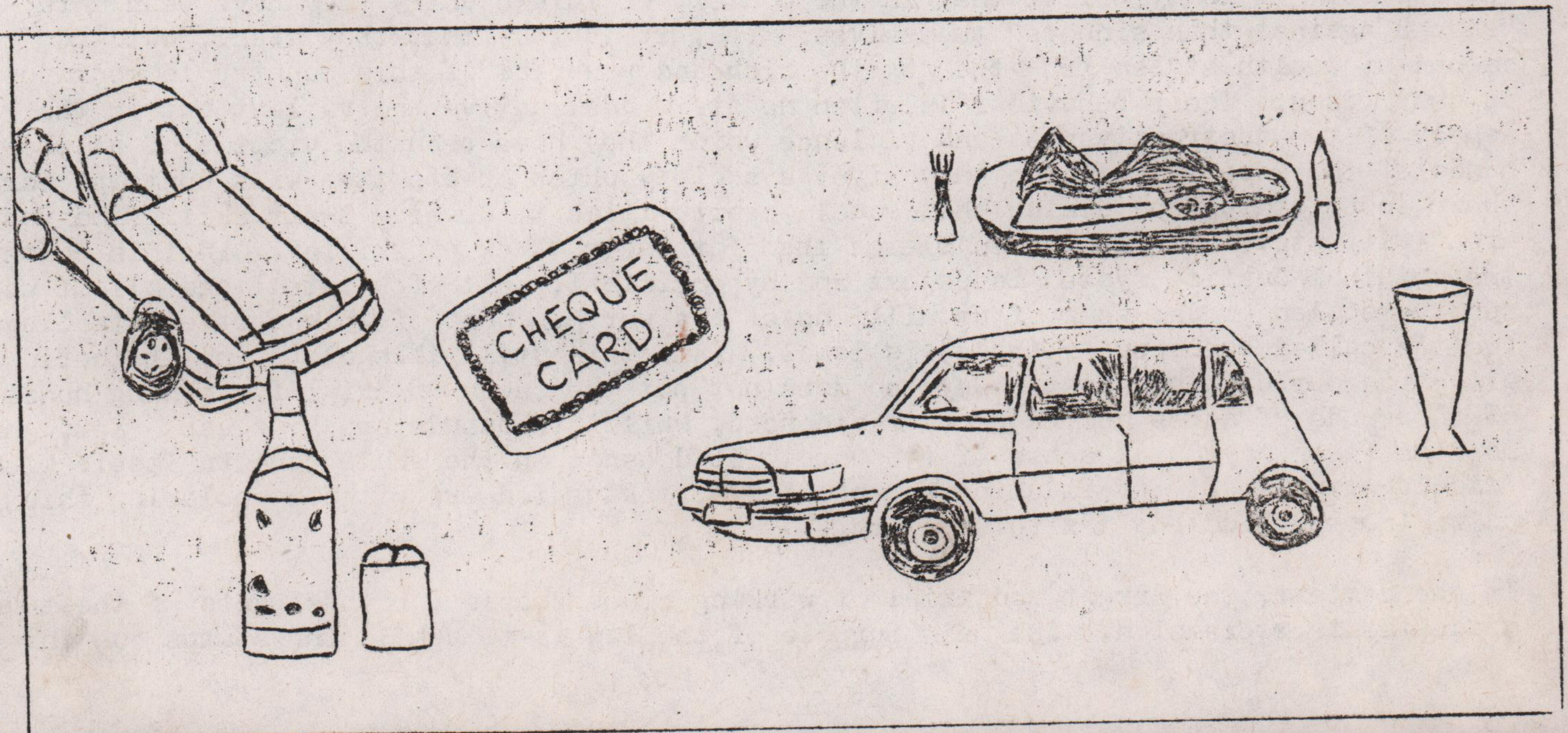
numbers but 'blackness'. For example, by 1973, 3 Immigration Acts aiming to curb black immigration had already been passed. Yet, in that year Mr. Heath's Conservative Govt. took Britain into the EEC. One of the conditions of entry was that any European would have the right to settle in this country if they so wished; some hundreds of millions of Europeans now have that right.)

This is the overall context in which the young people live. Again they did not ask to be brought up in a racist culture and they are probably unaware of how this affects their behaviour and how their insecurity is played on by those in power. In this sense they are victims. In another sense they are part of the institutionalised violence of racism. They are part of the white majority culture which sees black people and culture as inferior. This attitude results in the personal and individual violence of these young white people on the black people living in their area.

### MATERIALISM.

Another element in the overall context is the issue of materialism, the competition experienced in all areas of our lives, economic, social and political and the hierarchies this creates of "winners" and "Losers"; 'success and failure'; the 'in' groups and the 'outcasts'. I see materialism as the value in our culture which encourages us to measure success and status in terms of the quantity or value of material goods that an individual owns. It is a value which implies that happiness and contentment comes from the ownership of material goods; the more we have, the happier, the more contented, the more successful we will be and the higher our status becomes.. It is a value which encourages us to ignore or be unconcerned with how these goods are produced and whether that is a good thing or not. In fact, the opposite is true; it is a value which encourages us to compete with other human beings the object being to show yourself as more successful than others by having more material goods. It is a value which says there is nothing wrong or immoral or harmful in owning and consuming material goods regardless of whether other people round about us have those same goods or, even, whether they have anything at all. It is a value which says that what we have is ours and we are entitled to spend on ourselves as we wish.

In my opinion, virtually all of us (or maybe even all of us) in this country consume an unfair share of the world's resources. This deprives others of their fair share. As most of 'us' are white and the overwhelming majority of the 'others' are 'black' (in the political meaning of the term.) our material standard of living is racist. Materialism has encouraged and continues to promote and encourage this racism by constantly urging us to increase our consumption of goods. Like all of us, the teenagers have been imbued with this cultural value of materialism. They want and expect a high standard of living. Yet, on the other hand, their class position effectively denies them any chance of legitimately earning the sort of money that would meet their aspirations. (Although part of materialism is the creation of more and more 'wants' so that people's aspirations can never be satisfied.)





To gain status and be accepted in this culture requires us to have a certain standard of dress, certain types of job, and possess various consumer items. (T.V's videos, cars, washing machines, phone's vacuum cleaners etc.) If you haven't got these, you are seen as having a low status and so would generally be looked down on. People don't want to be looked down on and desperately want to become wealthy so that they are not looked down on anymore. Sometimes the poorer you are the more desperate will be your attempts to 'be respectable' and dress well etc., in an attempt to gain acceptance. This process creates jealousy and competition. It also means that people like ourselves are looked down on because we are so obviously materially poor. They have picked up the values of society and wish to distance themselves from people who would obviously be classed as having low status. Homeless, gays, travellers, blacks, squatters etc are all of low status and our culture has a contempt (often overt, sometimes covert) for those of low status which makes it possible and acceptable to abuse them. Often, if a person feels of low status themselves, they feel more need to abuse people even lower down the ladder than themselves in order to be reassured that there is someone lower than them. As squatters and as materially poor people we were the victims of this process. (I hasten to add at this point that Maria and I have many advantages which other people in the category of 'outcasts' haven't got, such as our university education. We are not powerless in the same sense because we have chosen our situation; it has not been forced on us. It's possible that some of their attitudes came from their resentment or whatever of our middle-class education. It's possible that working class squatters wouldn't have received the same treatment. It's also true that some of them have on some occasions expressed support for squatting. This suggests that it's the lifestyle that's the main problem although no doubt, opinions about squatters probably vary.)

#### SOLUTION?

Their materialism like all of ours is racist; it exploits the people of the South. I don't believe higher welfare benefits or higher wages is a solution to the exploitation of these young working class people, as such solutions can only lead to a higher consumption of resources by people here at the expense of the people of the South. Their and everyone else's materialism needs to be challenged but in the context of the insecurities that partly fuel it. Their exploitation at the hands of more powerful groups in this country needs to be challenged and they are entitled to our support and solidarity. The sexism of the young males needs to be challenged whilst, in this context, the young women need our support and solidarity. Their racism needs to be challenged whilst recognising the way they've been manipulated and their insecurities which partly help to explain it. Their personal behaviour towards ourselves and other people needs to be challenged where necessary though we need to do that with an understanding and empathy of their situation.

#### THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.

One of the most important things we have tried to do is not to report their behaviour to the Police. It is my belief that in the context of this country they have been more "sinned against than sinners" themselves. Yes, it is true that they steal, but the amount of wealth stolen from them by the rich and powerful of this country is enormous in comparison. Their behaviour is often negative destructive and violent but is the legacy of the destructiveness and violence which they have been the victims of at the hands of the society in which they live; a society which treats them with contempt for their lower status and denies them equal opportunities to develop their skills and their creativity etc., and which then blames them for their "lack of skills". In this context, the criminal Justice system is unjust and hypocritical. All of us steal and all of us receive stolen goods; some of us millions of £'s worth. Most of this sort of stealing (what's called business or trade) is legal. (A lot is still illegal but not bothered with) So our Criminal Justice system does not put the Queen on trial for owning hundreds of thousands of acres and numerous residences, whilst thousands are homeless. Yet, this is a theft in any moral sense of the word. It doesn't on the whole concern itself with 'middle-class' theft of fiddling expense forms, taking lodgers without declaring this extra income, fiddling tax returns etc..

In the context, the arrest and trial of working class people for these acts of theft and vandalism is repression. The main purpose of the law is to uphold the status quo in