

Written Testimony – Elizabeth Grace, Heygate resident 1974 – 2009



I moved into the estate on the 4th July, American Independence Day, 1974. It was like heaven, and I mean that. Once all the families started moving in and they had similar age children, it was absolutely beautiful. The children played out together in the evening when they came home from school and once the homework was done. It was lovely because you could see the children play happily outside. They all mixed well you know, because children were children in those days.

It was like moving into a village: there was a great sense of community and you knew all your neighbours. You knew everybody and you got to know them by name. You had a huge huge sense of being one big happy family.

And then there was the decline of the estate: in 34-years Southwark Council redecorated the outside of my house once in all those 34 years. On at least a five-yearly basis you normally need to be looking after the paint-work on the outside and painting the front door. And that's the bottom line – the properties just started to decline as money was not being spent.

The only reason, in my opinion, that this is estate is coming down is that this land is worth millions. Millions to who? The developers? To Southwark Council? Also it is a policy, I believe, that all councils in due course will get rid of social housing. And hey presto do you know they got rid of almost a thousand two hundred properties in this area over the last two years. So who's going to build on here? Who's going to buy the properties? You know, it's people who work in the city who have got the money – or the likes of those footballers – and that's Southwark Council's claim to fame – oh you know John Terry – he's brought a property across the road. He has – it's his pension fund: they buy them to rent them out. They're certainly not for the working class.

I believe at one stage they were even going to change the name of the Elephant & Castle to something else – I can't remember now. Yes, they were actually thinking about changing the name of the place because the Elephant & Castle was too common.

When people were being moved off the estate all I thought of was *"I hope I'll move soon. I hope I'll be offered something that's suitable to me because I don't want to be the last to move off"*. That would have been the most petrifying thing to happen, with my daughter and my granddaughter because we were all women in the house. There were times that I was actually taking medication for my nerves because that's what it did to me. The not knowing of if you're going to get a suitable property – not knowing are you going to be here right to the end. And there were a couple of times that I thought what's life all about? You know – I'd be better off dead. And I think that a lot of people went through the same experience. But then you pull your socks up and say come on you shouldn't think like that and you just keep going. And thank god I did.

I don't know what life is like on the estate now. I don't even want to imagine what it's like for those poor people left behind. Like poor Mr and Mrs Tilki who lived next door at 49 Chearsley – they still do. I went back to see them recently – I can't bear to go back and see them again. They're both in their 80s. And it makes me feel in a way a little bit like a traitor. That they were so good as neighbours and we looked out for one another. To see them in their early 80s completely destroyed by this enforced move. They're leaseholders; now at the age of 83 who's going to give you a mortgage? Nobody! So I don't know what's going to happen to them and that's the bit that's the coward in me – I think I can't go back and talk to them because all they do is cry. The date we moved out Mr Tilki came next door to see me for one last time and he just broke down. You know it's sad sad sad. I wish I could take them to live next door – where we're living now. That's the great respect I have for that family.

Most people only spend a short period of time in their home: they might buy 3 or 4 houses in their lifetime, but we lived there for 35 years, four months, and twenty days. That's a lifespan to a lot of people, and then to be forcibly moved out of it. Why? because this land is worth millions. They want to get rid of the social housing and build properties for the rich, like the famous Strata Tower across the way.

What they should have done is kept these properties and kept them up to standard. But then of course you see it would all be social housing, and that's what they definitely want rid of.

There were a large number of elderly people living on the estate, many in the sheltered housing unit. They were collected by ambulances and their clothing and belongings in black plastic sacks. They were sent all over the place to different nursing homes wherever there was a vacancy. I believe a lot of them went to Camberwell but I don't know where the others went to.

I remember the day that we moved out my daughter was with me, and the council make you sign to give up your tenancy. I had decided I wasn't going to be a council tenant any longer and move to a housing association property. So one of the rules is when you vacate a property that you hand back all sets of keys.

My daughter didn't want to: she said *'mum they're my memories'*. She never wanted to move out anyway. Well I thought at one stage she was going to hit me, because I said *'I must have the keys to give to the housing officer'*. She literally threw them across the kitchen and went out screaming. That's how it has affected us. And to this day my daughter cannot bear to talk about 50 Chearsley, and she's in her forties. I certainly won't be visiting 50 chearsley again, that's for sure – I would rather run a mile, and that's almost impossible with my spinal problems.