

Heygate was home

Resident 1974-2012 Demetrius

I was 7 years old when we moved onto the Heygate. Like many of our neighbours we had been moved from the slum-clearance area across the road, where the Newington estate now stands.

We used to live in Hurlbutt Place just off Crampton street. My parents used to run the fish & chip shop at the end of the street on Newington Butts.

We were one of the first families to move into the estate in 1974 and I remember us being excited about the hot running water, central heating and inside toilets. We had none of these in our previous house.

We also ended up being one of the last families to move out of the estate in 2012. This is because the council wouldn't offer us anything in the area. For a long while we refused to move unless they found us something nearby. A number of times they threatened to take us to court to evict us but we knew our rights and stood our ground.

The turning point in our struggle came when the council turned the heating and hot water off without warning in Winter 2010. They came and dropped off some portable fan heaters, but we were left to spend two years heating our bath water on the stove; they bullied us out.

With my parents in their seventies and other pensioners on the estate in the same position, I asked myself what kind of council does this to its tenants? There are laws against this kind of thing, but they get away with it because no-one can afford to take the council to court.

By 2011 most of our neighbours had given up the fight and we started feeling worn down.



"We really didn't want to move away from the Elephant"

The estate was a mess, the council had stopped all cleaning and rubbish collection and they had even stopped the post. We were forced to go to the Royal Mail depot every few days to collect it ourselves.

My mum started getting really depressed and was put on medication by her doctor.

Our block had been completely emptied except for the Cole family at no. 15 (whose grandad was in his nineties) and there were just a handful of neighbours left on the nearby Cuddington block. A couple of them had gotten together to clear some of the green spaces and start a

gardening project. I would occasionally muck in with some digging and my Mum would often wander over and give gardening tips.

In the end we caved in and accepted a place in Nunhead. We really didn't want to move away from the Elephant and we didn't want a Housing Association property because of the higher rent, but they told us there wasn't any other choice.

I work in blackfriars and used to walk to work; now it's just under an hour's commute. Mum is still really unsettled and Dad gets the bus every day to the Elephant to hang out with his friends at the shopping centre.

The shopping centre was always like a second home to him, they'll meet and sit on the benches there chatting for hours. It's like a social centre for them, I don't know what he is going to do when they knock that down too.

This whole regeneration has been a disgrace from beginning to end, but our faceless council decision makers appear to know no shame.