

Doreen Gee, Chairperson - Heygate Tenants & Residents Association



Interview - June 2010

It was a very nice estate when we moved in - really nice. And for a good many years it was a really desirable estate.

We had a few squatters who were dealt with very quickly, but it's only in these last years since the regeneration has been going on that we've had a real bad problem with squatters and drug dealers.

People used to ask to get on this estate it was that nice. And there was no trouble. As far as crime was concerned **it had the lowest crime rate of the area.**

There was a big mix of people: all the time we had more and more different nationalities coming onto the estate, and everyone just got on with their lives and got on with the neighbours. You could find that the neighbour next door might come from Africa, Eastern Europe or Latin America - and they were people who would actually look after the older people as well. So it was nice and everybody seemed to be there for one another to keep an eye on one another.

It wasn't a lot of communities within a community: rather just **one big community; and it got destroyed by the regeneration.**

We had some very good neighbours here. In the flat next door I had a Filipino family and they were very kind to everybody. The woman who lives there Murna used to look after the old lady next door and make sure that she was okay; and on the other side there was a guy living there who if anyone needed any help you only had to call on him and he'd be there. Everybody looked out for everybody else. Until this regeneration thing started up, which was all right to begin with and then it started breaking down.



People didn't want to move because they liked the estate. They liked the flats, they liked the maisonettes. Particularly in the maisonettes they didn't want to move. But as the regeneration went on - this is the third set of development proposals that we've had - people started to be moved out and properties were left empty. People started thinking '*well I don't like it like this, I'd rather move somewhere with a nice settled community again.*'

And when you're left with just a few of us as you are now it's not nice to live here on your own, and it has been left to deteriorate. In fact, **the council has not done any scheduled maintenance to the properties on this estate since 1979**. All they've ever done is really fire-fighting: if there has been a problem they have dealt with it. Quite often only after a lot of complaints, and a lot of hard work from the TRA getting them to deal with things. It seems like they knew back then that they were going to do something with the estate like pull it down... **They've always had these plans in mind I think.**

It has really badly affected me and it has affected other people as well. It is not a good situation to be in - not for anybody. Plus it's a well known that when you're moving people who are elderly and a bit frail - that **there's going to be a quite a high death rate**. The neighbour along the landing here - she wasn't well, and I remember she said to me '*well I'll never move out of here I'll be dead before I do.*' She had given up - she actually did die: about two years ago she died. She couldn't cope with all of this even though she had family living down in the maisonettes. I think she just gave up in the end.

We have got the council people all the time saying '*you've got to find somewhere you've got to move, you have no choice you know you have to move out.*' We get bullied, we get threats - **'We'll take you to court if you don't take this property we'll take you to court.** Oh this is suitable therefore - *if you don't accept it you'll go to court*'. It's not fair to do that to anybody of any age - particularly if people are old and vulnerable.

We hear '*oh yes we're going to do this for you and that for you.*' And it didn't happen and it's, '*oh yes you must understand this council's got to do this council's got to do that.*' You know, and '*if you don't move this will happen, and that will happen and you'll end up with no where to go and find your own property somewhere else*', which means going out on the open market. Which they know you can't do if you're on a limited income. The properties they built across the road, the private ones, they start at £250 a week rent - well... People like myself can't afford that. There are some of us locked in to a position where we can't get any housing benefit because we're just above the limits but when you're only just above the limits it means things are very tight. **So you're between a rock and a hard place.**



The only times we get knives or guns on the estate is when they're filming 'The Bill' or when they're filming other films. We used to have a youth group over on the shops who would do some filming and they quite often had mock fights with knives. On one occasion a group got reported to the police saying 'there's a gang on the estate fighting with knives!'. The sirens came, the police turned up and it was actually this youth group filming!

I used to be able to walk through this estate at 2 or 3 'o' clock in the morning on my own in the dark and not have a single worry. Not until we got the regeneration deterioration during the last few years.

I feel quite angry when people call the estate a slum. It's not a slum and it never has been. It's run down because of the regeneration. **It's the council's fault for allowing it to deteriorate and they've not helped by going in and destroying the gardens** in the maisonettes and pulling up all the fences: just throwing them down anywhere; pulling up all the plants and everything. They didn't need to do that they could've left the gardens as they were until the developers move in with the bulldozers. That would've made the estate look reasonable. But since they've done that they have made it look a lot worse. The majority of people who have lived on this estate would never say it's deteriorated into a slum. They would blame the council for allowing it to deteriorate the way it is. And helping it to deteriorate the way it is.



When it's rebuilt it's going to be drastically different because – I said this many years ago: you will either have people with a lot of money living here, who can afford to buy, or you will have people who are on full housing, council tax state benefits, because they'll be the only ones who can afford to stay if there's any social housing. If they are going to have to pay something like £250 a week rent then the state will be paying it

so one way or the other they will be able to stay. But other people in between that bracket won't be able to stay; so you'll basically get rich people and poor people but nobody in between. And what they're trying to do - what we were told once at the beginning of the regeneration - what they are trying to do is **'introduce a better class of people to the elephant and castle.'** We were told this by a council director who's no longer with us, who left some years ago [Fred Manson]. **'A better class of people'.** Well I said **'you can't get a better class of people than us.'**

The replacement the council is envisaging are shops and on top of that will be private homes. And the bit in the middle will be a park. Now they're saying that the park will be a public park which we all doubt, because if you've got all the private homes built around it those people aren't going to want just anybody going in that very small area that's going to be the park - **they'll probably try and keep it private for themselves.**



Personally I very much doubt it. I very much doubt that this side of the Heygate estate will ever be social housing; it will all be private. Because it's got the shopping centre nearby it's got the two main roads - it's got all the facilities for the buses the transport. And this was something we were told at the beginning: the reason they wanted to redevelop the area and the shopping centre was because it's got all the tube facilities, the bus and the train facilities - we're close to all the mainline stations. When the council guy had finished talking about this at one of the meetings - it's the same one who said they wanted to attract a better class of people - I said to him **'you've just listed all the reasons why the people on the Heygate estate want to stay here.'**

We are all being pushed off the estate - most people in the maisonettes didn't want to go because it's like a little village there. A lot of people in the flats didn't want to go either - all they wanted was renovation.