



## Sir William Benyon

Interview by Peter Day  
Photography by Stuart Clarke

Sir William Benyon lives at Englefield House, Englefield, near Reading, the place from which the road takes its name. The Victoria County History says it's a handsome Elizabethan structure, completely reconstructed inside and out after the fire of 1886. There's an abbreviated street named after the family at the South end of Southgate Road. Sir William is 69, a Navy man who was a Conservative MP from 1964 to 1992, chairman of the Peabody Trust and former High Sherriff of Berkshire.

Sir William says the proper way to pronounce it is "De Beever Town"; the family name used to be Benyon-de Beauvoir and that's how the family still say it. "When James II founded the New River Company, the de Beauvoir family invested in it because they had farmland close by in Hackney. As London expanded, the family started to develop the land about 1830.

"Then came the famous law case. The de Beauvoir of the time went potty, and Cecil Rhodes's grandfather – a very clever speculative builder – persuaded him to pop the lot... to sell all the land. The relatives went to court claiming that the seller was not of sound mind when he did this. The case lasted six years, and the De Beauvoir family won. By then it had been considerably built on, but a lot of it remained farmland for a long time. In fact they milked cows right up to the 1930s on it."

"The original leases ran out about the end of the First World War, and were then regranted (unfortunately) as 75-year leases. They should have been taken in hand and rented."

Sir William enters the picture in 1964, after the death of the widow of Sir Henry Benyon, a cousin; at the time, nobody in

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the family knew who would inherit the de Beauvoir Town estate. "He left it to me; it came as a complete surprise. The Benyon Trust was devised for inheritance tax purposes when I took over; at that time if you had two deaths in a short time you were finished. It was intended to preserve the area for future generations. Whether we shall be successful remains to be seen."

He became a London landlord at what he calls "a crucial time". "The local authority wanted to buy the estate in total and make it into an open space. The choice was to sell it or to modernise the estate. With the threat of compulsory purchase (from the London County Council, originally) hanging over their heads, my predecessors hadn't done any sort of improvements to the property at all.

"There was a tremendous backlog; we had to make this decision. I always think that it was the best decision I ever took; it was extremely satisfying, even though we no longer own a lot of the properties we modernised.

"I took the decision because I actually lived there in what is now Northchurch Terrace and I thought the place was great. There was tremendous potential and I still think there is. There was also a strong family feeling."

Doing up the houses in the 1960s was expensive. "We modernised about 250 rented properties, and in order to pay for this we had to grant a lot of new leases. We're paying for that now, because they're enfranchisable; by law, leaseholders can buy the freehold. The first modernisation I did – on a property that hadn't been touched for some years – was in 1965; it cost £5000 for central heating, new plumbing, brickwork, windows, roof... and it would be ten times

that today.

"The first modernisations were quite easy; it just happened that people got out of their properties; we had a lot of vacant houses and could move quite quickly. As we went on it became more and more difficult. Elderly people in particular didn't want any repairs done; splendid characters resisting electric light and everything. I understood it; but after a bit I had to ask them sign a bit of paper saying they'd been offered modernisation and refused it, because people are always trying to snipe at us.

"The town planning in De Beauvoir was good, but the houses were not well built to start with; no cavity walls and that sort of thing. But that is the case all over London.

"Originally my relations with the local authority were very, very bad, but I've noticed an enormous change over the last 10 or 15 years. There's been a realisation that what our area needs more than anything else is rejuvenation. There is now an inclination to work with private bodies and housing associations which there never was before.

"It is no good ever looking back, but I regret bitterly that properties had to be sold, because I think we could actually produce a better entity than the local council or individual private development."

Ideally, for Sir William, de Beauvoir Town would be entirely rented property, preserving the townscape and the estate as a whole. "That is what I would like to be working towards, as much as I can." A rather unfashionable ambition these days? "We are rather unusual; even the Crown Estates have decided (in their rather plusher parts of London) not to continue with rented property."

Sir William admits that landlords have

not always been the most popular of people. "But I've noticed a tremendous change in attitudes recently. I think people have realised that rented property does have a tremendous value. And we're miles behind the Continent in the amount that is available; that has a bad effect on the mobility of employment."

Some leaseholders have been faced with a big increase in their ground rents, as the leases have fallen due. "These people have a whole amount of choices before them; they can buy the freehold themselves if they can get a mortgage; or they can end the lease and go on as an ordinary rented tenant, with the rent fixed by the rent officer. Or of course they can sell the remains of their lease. There are not very many of these people, and of course they bought the lease with their eyes open; it wasn't the Trust that sold the property, it was the person who had the lease on it in the first place. Caveat emptor: the buyer bought the lease on the basis that it had relatively few years to run.

"This is the weakness of the leasehold system, I freely admit it. That is why I say that if I were left to myself, I would have had the whole estate on ordinary rents, absolutely straightforward and rent controlled. I wouldn't give a new lease now for all the tea in China, and by jove, people are going to pay for it, in the richer parts of London." Has it been worth all the time and trouble, being a London landlord? "Quite definitely; I've had enormous interest in it and it helped me a lot when I took over the chair of the Peabody. I really did know something about property by that time!"