

# A history of De Beauvoir Part 1

This article, which will be continued in the next issue of *De Beaver*, first appeared in the paper in March 1972 (issue 6). It was based on the work of Frank Kelsall of the GLC Historic Buildings division and Susan Strachan, a former resident. We'd like people who have lived in De Beauvoir for 30 years or more to tell us what life was like in their day. Please contact Hilary Hockman, 7 De Beauvoir Square (249 5866).



De Beauvoir Town stands on the west side of what was the old Roman road north out of London; west of what is now called Kingsland Road. In 1821 the land here was known locally as white mills common (from the white lead mills which were still standing). We don't have a map of it at this time, but it was probably much as John Rocque showed it in 1745; wild, open country, fields, and a few tracks leading to a large mansion, Balmes, or Baumes, House. We know that ribbon development had started along the road, or track, from Dalston to Balls Pond, a hamlet which took its name from a disreputable public house nearby. The proprietor was a certain John Ball; as well as bull-baiting, he laid on duck-shooting on his pond for the entertainment of his clients.

Along what is now Balls Pond Road, a Regency terrace, Brunswick Place, dated 1812, and an older two storey block of stuccoed cottages with a huge pediment, still survive.

This common was actually the Hackney estate — about 150 acres in all — of the Reverend Peter Beauvoir, an aged bachelor clergyman. From 1802 he had leased it to a Mr. William Rhodes, one of three brothers who were brickmakers and speculative builders in north London at the time. William and Thomas, the eldest, were partners in a brickmaking business which seems to have supplied the Regents Canal Co. with bricks. They were a big concern. Naturally, William was influential in Hackney which was still a small parish. He was also a scoundrel. He swindled the old clergyman and started to build on the estate what is now known as De Beauvoir Town.

At the time of Rhodes's first offer to buy the estate — in March 1818 — the Rev. Peter Beauvoir was about 83 years old; he had been vicar of Downham in Essex since 1760. He led a retired existence. He was visited only rarely by his relatives, and on alternate Sundays by his curate. He had no business sense, and, as far as we know, he never visited

his Hackney estate. In 1818 he could still manage his affairs, but was occasionally very ill. He was totally dependent on his trusted agent and solicitor, Thomas Tebbutt. Tebbutt was also Rhodes's solicitor.

In 1818 the Regents Canal had just been cut through the southern end of the estate, and the land thus became ripe for development rather earlier than the rest of this part of London. When Rhodes made his offer the old clergyman called in William Ashpitel, a local surveyor. Such was the power of Rhodes, the surveyor advised him in confidence — he wrote 'I should not wish to offend Mr. Rhodes who has great influence in our parish and might do me some injury.' The surveyor told him that with proper attention the estate would let on a building lease of £4,000 per annum. Beauvoir, who had already refused to sell, offered to negotiate a fresh non-building lease, but Rhodes did not reply.

All went quietly until Tebbutt's son proposed a partnership with Ashpitel to negotiate a building lease on the estate in 1820. His father (this again shows how powerful Rhodes was in Hackney) scotched this for fear of offending Rhodes, and the two men got together to force through a scheme on Rhodes's behalf, before the aged owner died, or received a more realistic offer.

Throughout the renewed negotiations the Rev. Beauvoir, who was now very ill, was confined to his bed. Rhodes offered to take a 99-year building lease on the estate, yielding a total rent of £1,200 from Christmas, 1827, onwards. The old gentleman was so ill that he made no reply. Tebbutt thereupon took himself down to Downham (and, incidentally, charged his expenses for his journey to both clients) and advised him that Rhodes's terms were too low: the lease should be for £1,300 rent by Christmas 1826. Beauvoir had forgotten the surveyor's good advice only two years before that the lease should yield at least £4,000 a year, and four days later signed the lease. It was an extraordinary lease; there were none of the restrictions usual at the time on the number or size of buildings, and it took in all 150 acres of the estate. Even James Burton, London's most active speculative builder, who was called in by Rhodes at once, later confessed that he knew of no other instance in London of so much land being let in one 'take' for speculative building. Burton, who was also a surveyor and architect, drew up a plan immediately, and building started almost at once. Local people disliked the first houses. They complained that they were 'small and mean and predicted that they would not see out the 99-year leases. In fact they have; some still stand.

## 40-THREAT OR PROMISE?

Is this a cliché, or a truism, a threat or a promise? Is there life after 40?

From the safe and starry-eyed distance of 20, reaching age 40 seemed, like no other rite of passage — except perhaps death — to be the point of no return. It was the time at which grey hair, senility, menopause and mid-life crisis (though not necessarily in that order) would creep up on me.

My sometimes smooth, sometimes bumpy, but inexorably accelerating voyage through my 20's and 30's didn't change this quaint notion of mine. Now, as my doomsday draws nearer, I occasionally find solace in the pages of the glossy women's magazines. After all, didn't they report on that actress? The one who had the passionate affair with the Identikit MP, then became a barefoot doctor in China and finally wrote two best-sellers. And, what is more, she did it all *after* her fortieth birthday.

The trouble with us post-war babies, my spouse keeps telling me, is we've had it too soft. *We* didn't have to endure the rigours of war-time food rationing. We were the over-indulged, carefully nourished adolescents for whom the word "teenager" was coined. We went from school to a world of work where jobs were plentiful and promotional opportunities turned us into the socially mobile generation. Now we have the nerve to expect that, for the first time in history, a generation — our generation — will be exempt from ever growing old.

Will people say about us what Winston Smith said in George Orwell's *1984*, "It is impossible to tell the age of anything nowadays"? I live in hope.

Happy 40th issue, *De Beaver*!

Happy 40th birthday, me?

Anon

### ANOTHER THEATRE SUPPER — NOT TO BE MISSED

On Tuesday 13 March at 7 for 7.30 p.m. at the Ufton Community Centre, the De Beauvoir Association are arranging a performance by the Inner City Theatre Company of a new musical

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