

DE BEAUVOIR TOWN
AND
THE DE BEAUVOIR ASSOCIATION

Historical

The De Beauvoir Town Estate covers an area of about 150 acres, and is bounded by the Regent's Canal, Southgate Road, Ball's Pond Road, and Kingsland Road (the old Roman Road to the north out of London).

The development of De Beauvoir started in the 1820s, soon after the Regent's Canal had been cut through the estate. The owner of the land, Rev Peter De Beauvoir, vicar of Downham in Essex, let the whole estate to a developer, William Rhodes, on an extremely favourable lease. But before Rhodes had put up many buildings, the Rev De Beauvoir died, and his heir, Richard Benyon of Englefield in Berkshire, quickly brought a lawsuit, claiming that the Rev De Beauvoir had been cheated in his dotage. The case was a long one, but was finally settled in Benyon's favour in 1835. Benyon altered Rhodes' layout, and built more spacious houses, with shorter terraces and some semi-detached villas. St Peter's Church was consecrated in 1841, and the whole development was completed around 1870 (although it was later continued, in a different style, over Southgate Road into Islington).

It is believed to have been one of the largest estates ever let for development at one time in the 19th Century. The resulting unity of style, and the leasehold system of tenure which meant that many families remained in the ^{same houses} ~~area~~ for generations, are two factors contributing to the unique character of the area.

Over the years, particularly between the wars, small industries began to infiltrate the area, without however altering its essential character. It was only in the 1950's and 60's, when Hackney Council announced its intention to buy out and redevelop the area, that the rot, in the form of 'planning blight', really set in: no one, whether landlord, leaseholder or tenant, is going to spend money on property that is likely to be knocked down within a few years.

The Council's plan was to demolish the whole of the De Beauvoir Estate in a rolling programme starting at the Canal and working north, replacing the existing housing by a mixture of high-rise and low-rise flats and maisonettes.

It was in 1968, when the Council's first phase - from the Canal to Downham Road - was already under way, that the De Beauvoir Association was formed by a group of local residents.

The Association

The Association's first aim was to retain the historic residential character of De Beauvoir Town, while actively campaigning to improve the standards of housing ⁱⁿ the area. In the face of the total destruction of the community and its architectural heritage, the Association maintained that an increase in the population density could be achieved far more satisfactorily by converting and restoring most existing properties than by wholesale demolition and rebuilding. More important, an improvement programme is much less disruptive to the community than a rebuilding programme, which often leads to a gap of about 8 years between a tenant vacating a CPO'd house and being permanently rehoused in the new

building.

The Association's view held the day, and demolition stopped at Downham Road, although indecision about the 'Southern Area' (the section between Downham Road and Northchurch Road) continued until the outcome of a public enquiry in 1973. Here, the Association and its offshoot formed for the purpose - the Southern Area Action Group - submitted a powerful case to the public enquiry pointing out the shortcomings of the Council's plans.

Today, the conservation of what remains of the Estate seems assured, with most of the area between Downham Road and Englefield Road declared a General Improvement Area, and much of the northern part of the town being improved both by owner-occupiers, private landlords, the De Beauvoir Trust (see below) and the Council.

Yet there still remains much for the Association to do. A registered charity, the Association exists to help and represent everyone living in De Beauvoir Town: here are some of the ways it works.

- * Campaigning to ensure that local residents are allowed a fair say in the future of the area in which they have their homes.
- * Taking up the cases of tenants living in bad conditions, and advising tenants of their legal rights.
- * Providing free advice to local residents on legal and environmental problems, grants and planning permission.
- * Fighting for Council action against industrial nuisances (while recognizing that much local industry is neutral or beneficial to the area).

- * Campaigning for the opening up of the Hackney section of the Canal towpath, and for the development of the Kingsland Basin for boating and angling, etc.
- * Further development of play facilities in the area, following the successful establishment by the Association of an Adventure Playground in Ufton Road, and a playgroup for pre-school children.
- * Pressing for environmental improvements in the area, such as streets closed to traffic, tree-planting, improved pedestrian crossings, etc.
- * Organizing of outings and parties for pensioners.
- * Commenting to the Council on all planning applications submitted to it, thus helping to ensure that all alterations, changes of use, and redevelopment are in keeping with the existing character of the neighbourhood.

The Association's progress and plans are reported in "De Beaver", a free community newspaper sponsored by the Association and distributed through the neighbourhood.