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De Beauvoir Town

De Beauvoir Town is not a big place: not much more than a quarter of a square mile. Nor is it well known. It has no tube station, and its name does not appear on the destination blinds of any London bus. When I asked one south Londoner, steeped in the local history of his own area, whether he knew where De Beauvoir was, he rather thought it was somewhere to the left of Provence. There is in fact a town called Beauvoir in that area, but the London "village" called De Beauvoir lies north of Shoreditch between the Regent's Canal and Ball's Pond Road. Even Cockneys from Clapton, a mile farther into Hackney, have been known to scratch their heads and say they have never heard of it; yet it is a remarkably attractive area of inner London, with a past and a present that mark it out as somewhere special.

De Beauvoir Town is to be found behind the western side of Kingsland Road, whose straightness gives a clue to its origin as a Roman highway north out of London. One of the earliest developments hereabouts was a mansion, Balmes (or Baumes) House, built about 1540 by two Spanish merchants named Baulm, which became a private lunatic asylum in the early 19th century where unscrupulous guardians sometimes incarcerated heirs to large fortunes. Ball's Pond Road, De Beauvoir's northern boundary, has a fine terrace of 1812; that name derives from a disreputable public house, whose landlord, Mr Ball, provided, among other entertainments, duck shooting on his pond.

To the south lay White Mills Common, where lead mills existed as late as the 1820s; and here the Honourable Artillery Company, first promoted by Henry VIII, traditionally had the right to practise archery. In 1786, during one of their periodic forays to break down fences and hedges that interfered with these rights, members of the company encountered a newly built brick wall erected by the proprietors of the white lead mills, Walker, Ward & Company.

They were about to knock this down as well when a Mr Maltby, a partner in the firm, ran up to apologize. He had not known of the archers' royally established rights, he said, but if the wall were spared would certainly accommodate them. So the archers contented themselves with shooting an arrow over the wall and, honour satisfied, left it standing.

By the 1820s, however, more serious development threatened the rights of the HAC. The canal had opened to the south in 1818, and a successful but unscrupulous local entrepreneur, William Rhodes, extracted from the absentee owner of the estate, the eighty-three-year-old Reverend Peter de Beauvoir, an extraordinarily permissive ninety-nine-year building lease on the estate for a fraction of what it was really worth. The lease was obtained from the clergyman on his sick-bed, and Rhodes built relatively little before the heir, Richard Benyon de Beauvoir, started a twenty-two-year-long court case which ended in the setting aside of the lease.

The successful heir then had fresh proposals drawn up for the development of his estate of a rather more straightforward character than Rhodes' ambitious ground-plan, which had envisaged four squares linked by diagonal streets to a central octagon. What then resulted, in the 1840s, was development with an air of spaciousness and architectural quality; and the one square Benyon de Beauvoir built (originally to be called Park Place but in fact named De Beauvoir Square) later formed the corner-stone of the conservation area and of the area's rescue from municipal bulldozery. That square dating from 1840, with its neo-Jacobean villas with ornately shaped "Flemish" gables, is a unique architectural set-piece, a pioneering piece of town planning. Yet only ten years ago Hackney council still intended to demolish it, as part of a massive redevelopment exercise that would have razed every building from the canal to Ball's Pond Road. Stuart Weir, who moved to the area in 1967 and founded the De Beauvoir Association to fight the plan, remembers talking to a Hackney councillor.

"We're planning to keep the square," said the man, who represented the ward but did not live there. "Oh, that's good," replied Weir, brightening. "They're in poor repair, but they're really very attractive houses." "Oh, no. We're knocking down the houses," rejoined the councillor. "We'll just keep the square."

For perhaps eighty years after it was built, De Beauvoir remained a well-to-do and reasonably well-thought-of district. Two miles from the Bank of England, yet on the edge of the Middlesex

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countryside, it attracted prosperous City folk; its spacious, tree-lined streets had an agreeably well planned air; and, unlike the part of Islington immediately to the west, its houses were in pairs or fours rather than the long, high and rather overbearing terraces of the 1860s. In Southgate Road, its western boundary, the houses had tiled drives where carriages would wait to take householders to the City; and Charles Furby, nearly eighty years a De Beauvoirite, recalls that three local authorities were responsible for maintaining this street: Hackney for the east side, Islington for the west, and the London County Council for the strip along the middle.

Two world wars, dilapidations, multi-occupation and, from the 1930s onwards, creeping backyard industrialization, set De Beauvoir on the path of decline. The well-to-do progressively moved out to smarter, greener suburbs such as Stamford Hill (1880s), Wood Green (1880s) and Palmers Green (1920s). The Benyon Estate, which still owns much of the area, found itself forced by death duties to sell off blocks of freeholds; and the requisitions, bombs and lack of maintenance of the last war left De Beauvoir in poor shape to withstand fifteen years of planning blight which followed the publication of Hackney's wholesale redevelopment plan in the early 1950s.

De Beauvoir Square; behind it the towers of the Hackney Council redevelopment originally intended to replace the whole of De Beauvoir.



Mrs Mabel Hall, who has lived in Ufton Road, De Beauvoir, since 1911, remembers the shock and disbelief when residents from the southern part of the area, facing the first wave of demolition proposals, knocked on her door for help. She and some neighbours clubbed together to pay for leaflets, and the case which residents put up convinced the inquiry inspector that southern De Beauvoir should be spared. Unfortunately the Minister who took the final decision, Henry Brooke, seems to have been more influenced by the political game of housing numbers than by consideration of architectural or social worth. Something between a quarter and a third of De Beauvoir Town, including such streets as Benyon Road, Balmes Road and the canalside De Beauvoir Crescent, was razed to the ground to make way for municipal tower blocks nineteen storeys high and slabs of maisonettes.

By 1967 the climate was changing. People in the rest of De Beauvoir were now all too conscious of the inhumanity and enormity of the redevelopment plan; the Civic Amenities Act had

Racked by heavy traffic, but still elegant and comfortable homes, these early-19th-century terrace-houses in Ball's Pond Road were among the first to be built in De Beauvoir.



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familiarized the public with the concept of conservation of areas as distinct from preservation of individual buildings; and two young journalists working on *The Times'* newly created PHS diary column (as I was at the time), had moved into attractive but down-at-heel Regency houses in Ball's Pond Road. Robin Young, sometime Liberal candidate for Orpington, came first "because it was an attractive house and it was all I could afford"; then Stuart Weir.

They and a number of others, including an architect, Graham Parsey, gave the residents' fight an extra punch and *savoir faire* which it previously lacked; they unearthed and presented the facts, argued and goaded; and councillors and officials, accustomed in Hackney's traditionally one-party state to steam-rolling opposition, began to groan at the very mention of De Beauvoir.

De Beauvoir fought resourcefully, arguing that improvement and conservation were the right answer, not destructive, sterilizing demolition. The climate in Whitehall was indeed changing; and the GLC's historic buildings men, alerted by the association, set in motion the machinery for listing at least the square and the best adjoining streets. But in 1968 came the local government election landslide which swept the Conservatives to power in Hackney as in almost every inner London borough. This political aberration was timely for De Beauvoir, for during the Tories' three years of control they stopped the bulldozers and set up two general improvement areas. When Labour, once more in power, attempted to retreat from this, the De Beauvoir Association – aided by surveys of the area made by students from the Central London Polytechnic – was able at a further public inquiry to show itself better briefed and in command of the facts than the men from the Town Hall.

Just as the initiative for a general improvement area came from the residents, so did the plan for road closures designed to cut down the use of minor roads to avoid traffic. But the association, in concert with two tenants' associations on the new council estate, has firmly held to the view that blocking roads is not enough. Advantage must be taken of closures to provide much needed play and amenity space. The residents elected a steering group for the general improvement area, whose improvements sub-committee took the initiative in drawing up plans for a "mini park" and community centre carved out of closed roads and empty sites and buildings close to the new estate. Hackney council is paying for the park, and work has started on converting a disused factory into a community centre, which residents will equip from their own resources. A

separate association representing both council tenants from the New Town Estate and residents of old De Beauvoir are now managing this scheme. Local people have also been pushing proposals to turn over Kingsland Canal Basin for children's boat clubs along the lines of the successful scheme at Islington's nearby City Basin.

Some residents and firms objected when it was proposed to make permanent experimental road blocks designed to remove through traffic. De Beauvoir generally backs the plan, however. People recognize the justice of the case argued by tenants' leader, Reg Crowfoot, that the New Town Estate, built to densities of around 130 persons per acre with little play space for noisy, energetic children, has a claim on whatever amenity can be created without destruction from the more spacious Victorian acres immediately to its north. This and other road closures will provide amenity and play space which De Beauvoir as a whole sorely needs. The inquiry inspector accepted the case for the closures, which have now been made permanent.

Indeed, what distinguishes the De Beauvoir Association from most other amenity bodies is that, having won its initial battle, it has not sat back and contented itself with self-congratulation and environmental cosmetic. To the annoyance of some newcomers, it ran a campaign for tenants' rights and raised the temperature in the area enough to discourage "winklers". Easing tenants out was simpler in other areas, so they curtailed their depredations in De Beauvoir. Compared with Barnsbury or Islington, gentrification here has been limited and of a mild variety. Weir started a free newspaper, *de Beaver*, which circulates to 3,000 households as well as to councillors and officials, again informing, arguing, goading. Launched in 1971, it must be one of London's longest-running community newspapers.

Improvement progressed in the area for two other reasons. The Benyon Estate, which still owns much of the area and is managed by a solid, long-established firm of agents, Brown & Brown, of Islington, entered into the improvement plans with enthusiasm. Eric Brown, senior partner in the firm, told me: "The trustees had the imagination to see what should be done, and to say: 'Go ahead and do it'. They haven't had a penny back from it yet." Naturally, they hope to reap their material reward in the longer term. The estate has returned many of the more attractive houses to single-family occupation on remunerative leases, but has matched this by converting other houses into self-contained flats for tenants. Improvement



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The Hackney council estate which covers the southern part of De Beauvoir, seen from the Regent's Canal.

has succeeded so well and parts of the area now look so smart and elegant that two members of the Benyon family – Tory MP William Benyon, of Abortion Bill fame, and a cousin – returned to live at least part of their lives in De Beauvoir.

The other big factor in improvement was the foundation of a housing association, the De Beauvoir Trust, run as a part-time operation by Robin Young. In its six years of independent operation it bought forty-two houses, some of them as cheaply as £500 or £600 each, for conversion into some hundred rented flats and maisonettes. The trust has now been absorbed into the bigger and more professional Circle 33 Housing Trust, but its rescue operations undoubtedly filled a vacuum which would otherwise have been filled only by decay or the attentions of speculators.

What is it that attracts people to De Beauvoir and holds them there? Derek Humphry, a journalist on the *Sunday Times*, used to commute from a village in Wiltshire. Moving to London, he concluded: "If we were going to live in the city, we should really live right in it." From his attractive, end-of-terrace 1840s house, it takes him ten to fifteen minutes to cycle to his Gray's Inn Road office. He likes De Beauvoir, he told me, because it is handy, attractive, but unpretentious. His wife Ann, who comes from Boston, Massachusetts, generally dislikes London but finds De Beauvoir an exception in its friendliness.

Round the corner, her neighbour Mabel Hall, De Beauvoirite for sixty-six years, agrees. "We don't live in each other's pockets," she says, "but if anyone needs help, it's there." She cites recent instances of children looked after while mothers were in hospital; a

blind woman helped daily by another tenant in the same house; and regular visiting of old people in nearby almshouses. But she also pays tribute to relative newcomers like Weir, Young and Parsey, who have devoted a staggering amount of their spare time and effort to the interests of their adopted village.

Weir, who left *The Times* to work for Shelter and the Child Poverty Action Group, also became a (very independently minded) Labour councillor. His grass-roots "community" politics are, locals tell you, of the kind that has him taking a deserted wife to the supplementary benefit office before he goes to work in the morning. Parsey, as chairman of the general improvement area's sub-committee and co-editor of *de Beaver*, reckons to devote fifteen or more evenings a month to voluntary activities in the area; his wife, Jo, in between looking after three children, has managed also to raise some £3,000 worth of advertising to keep *de Beaver* running as a free newspaper. Long established De Beauvoirites cannot but admire the wholeheartedness of this effort, even when, like printer George Shephard, they oppose particular policies such as the road closures.

Shephard, in his fifties, comes from a family of printers – though his son went to university to study dentistry. His printing workshop with its linotype machines stands alongside his house, bounded on two other sides by gardens, and exemplifies the generally happy mixture of homes and employment in the area. He and his wife Betty point with pride to their prolific back garden: there are owls in the area these days, they said, and the summer tree cover in some De Beauvoir roads is really quite rustic. But the Shephards do not think the place is quite what it once was, and regret that local opposition blocked the Benyon Estate's management proposals when freeholds were enfranchised.

Not all industry, however, is as inoffensive as George Shephard's printing shop. Steve Allen, a BBC radio producer, can point from the windows of his charming 1840s house near the blocked end of Hertford Road to three neighbouring firms. One, which reconditions sewing machines, is quiet and totally inoffensive; a second, a car sales firm with a floodlit compound, is tolerable; but the third, a glass factor, who has spread his operations into empty lots all about, causes resentment.

Allen, a founder member of the De Beauvoir Association and chairman of the general improvement area steering group, draws a distinction between quiet, job-creating pockets of industry which

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the inner city should welcome, and industry which, either by its nature or because of the way it operates, is unacceptable as a neighbour. De Beauvoir suffers he says, from some "cowboys" who service vehicles and spill oil across pavements or carry out noisy activities such as stapling packing cases at weekends and late into the night.

A De Beauvoirite since 1952, Allen is not really an outsider: he grew up in Highbury and his wife Diane hails from Shoreditch. They do not have the airs or accents of "gentry". Though Mary Toomey, who keeps a general store and off-licence in the middle of De Beauvoir, remarks that the area is smartening up and there are "surgeons and solicitors moving into the square", on the whole the incomers are keeping a low profile. Many of them like the area just because it is not "smart". Thus, although it has a wealth of pubs – eleven in the square quarter of a mile, a recent *de Beaver* survey showed – happily none of them has yet succumbed to brewers' formica and gimmickry. At least one, the Sussex, does a good line in lunches, but without fancy Islington menus or prices. Another, the Duke of Wellington, boasts a small amateur theatre-cum-music hall behind its fine and recently redecorated high Victorian bar.

The Duke of Wellington public house, kept by former Irish banker Jerry O'Neill, who created the Sugawn Folk Kitchen and Theatre at the back.



The landlord, Irish former banker Jerry O'Neill, created the theatre and wrote one of its recent plays, a piece which dealt with the problems of housing stress in the area; it won an enthusiastic review in *The Stage* and rejoiced in the title *God is dead on Ball's Pond Road*. Yet the success of his Sugawn Theatre, of the De Beauvoir Association and the improvement programme, all go to show that God is *not* dead in De Beauvoir Town. Some property advertisements have talked recently of "fash de Beauvoir Town". Mercifully, De Beauvoir is still far from being "fash". That is one of its chief assets; long may it remain that way.