

## The Birth of a Dream

### Origins

In 1936 the London County Council (LCC) was committed to providing decent housing for working class families living in unhygienic and overcrowded accommodation. They pledged to clear slums across London and replace them with newly built council housing. A report of an area by Manor House concluded this was the perfect spot:

“It is desirable that every opportunity should be taken of securing fresh sites in the County of London for the erection of working-class dwellings, particularly having regards to the amount of accommodation that will be required for the relief of overcrowding. In this connection our attention has been drawn to a site about 64 acres in extent to the north and south of Seven Sisters Road, Stoke Newington, which in our view, is suitable for redevelopment on a large scale as a housing estate. The site is close to the large public open spaces of Finsbury Park and Clissold Park, and is served by excellent tramway, omnibus and tube railway routes.”

London County Council Report



Before the estate - New River (left). Tunneling and building Manor House Tube (right).

### Objections

The well-to-do residents of the area and the Conservative leaders of the Stoke Newington council bitterly opposed the plan.

“The displacement of the present inhabitants is not required for the accommodation of any residents of Stoke Newington, and the introduction of 12,000 to 15,000 persons of the poorer working classes from other boroughs would detrimentally affect the whole of this small borough.”

Stoke Newington Ratepayers Association, 1936



Aerial photograph before the estate 1930.



Woodberry Grove before Second World War.

### A radical experiment

Despite the objection, planning for the new estate went ahead. The outbreak of the Second World War slowed the progress of Woodberry Down. Yet, at the same time, the bombing of London - concentrated largely in working-class areas - made the need for decent public housing more urgent than ever.

What was planned was not just the building of a housing estate, but the moulding of a self-sufficient community. There was to be 1,790 new homes. Work started in August 1946, and Woodberry Down quickly became one of the largest and most prestigious housing estates in Europe.

“As far as possible the blocks or dwellings will be parallel, running north and south, so that all rooms receive the benefit of sunlight sometime during the day. Sites are reserved for schools, a community centre, a library, a clinic, shops, together with a shop for licensed premises. A small area is also reserved for the development by the social welfare committee for the purposes of a home for aged persons.”

Report of the LCC Housing and Public Welfare Committee, January 1946.

## Home at Last!



Peter and June Gosnell moved into Bewdly House in April 1955. 'We'd never had our own home).

### Moving in

In the summer of 1948 the first tenants moved in to brand new Woodberry Down. Many had been living in some of London's most squalid conditions. Others had been bombed out during the Blitz. There were also ex-soldiers.

For those lucky enough to secure a flat on London's newest estate, Woodberry Down offered the very latest amenities. The homes were all self-contained with a kitchen and a bathroom and had hot running water – a real luxury at the time.

“It was unbelievable luxury! We had our own front door... and we were the first in the family to have our own bathroom. Previously, we – me as a baby, my mother, father and my aunt who had terminal tuberculosis - had just two rooms in a tenement block, sharing one gas ring, one cold water sink and one lavatory with everyone else in the block.

‘My aunt was moved to an isolation hospital, and about three weeks after that we were in Dovedale House on the top floor. My parents were absolutely over the moon to be given a flat on this beautiful new estate.

Stuart Goodman, who moved to Dovedale House in 1949.



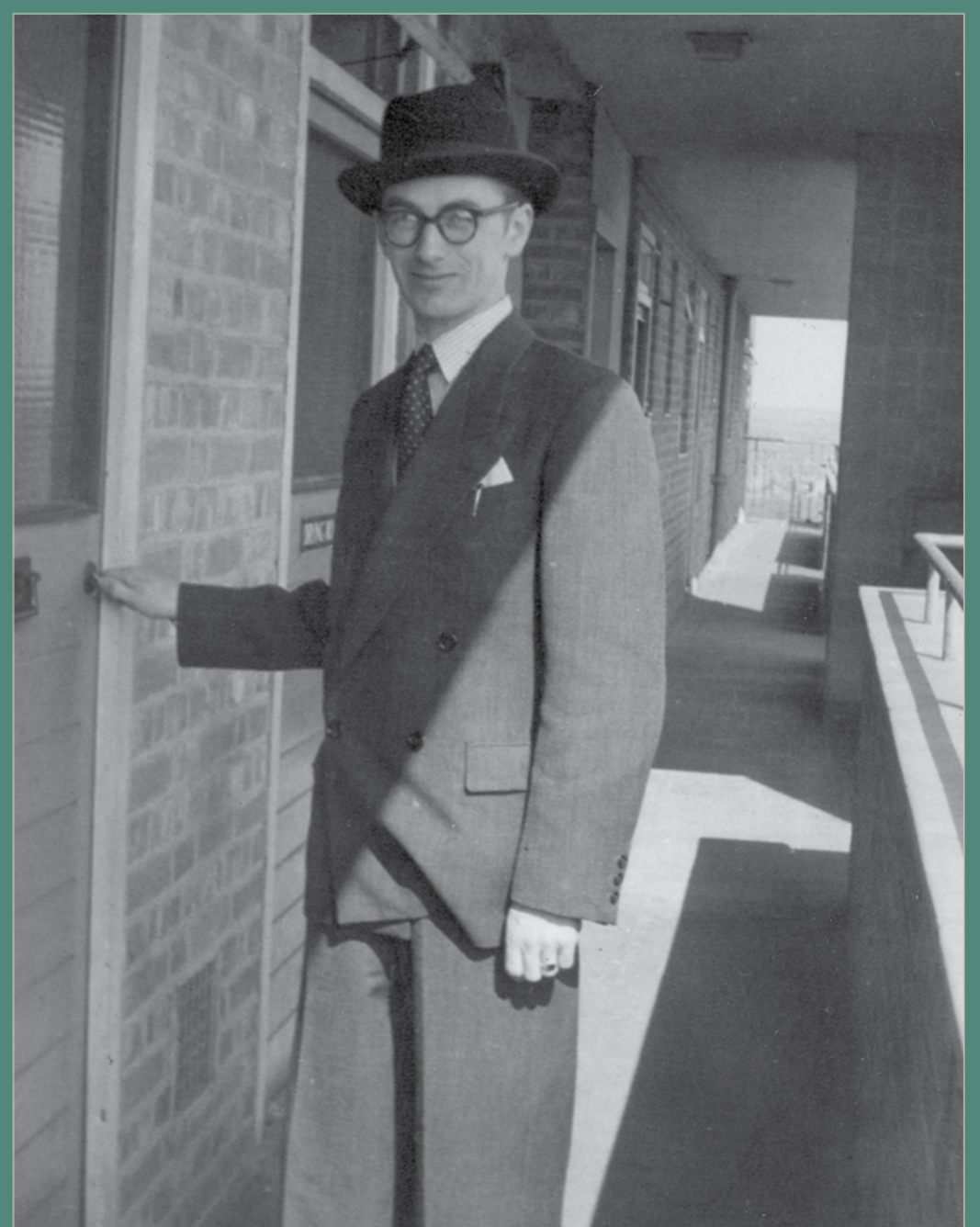
Stuart on balcony of Dovedale House.

### Mind Your Manners!

By 1953 the first phase of construction was complete and by the early 1960s the last phase, Rowley Gardens was finished. Becoming a council tenant on the new estate was not easy and there were strict rules and conditions. There were rotas for using the drying rooms in each block and tenants had to take it in turn to clean the stairs, landings and balconies. Rents were collected weekly by the council rent collector and in the early 1950s ranged from 14/6 (72.5p) for a one-bed flat to 51/10 (£2.59) for a centrally-heated five room flat in the superior eight storey block.

“The estate was so well taken care of. There was a sort of rolling programme of maintenance, painting, gardening and we saw the same people cutting the grass. The two men who were the gardeners you saw at home in Rowley Gardens and then at the school. They were employed all the time so they were obviously moving around the estate. All of the problems now associated with tower blocks and council estates didn't apply at all. It was a good place to be, I mean it still is... I'm still here!

Elaine Gosnell



## The Estate of the Future



Toddlers at Woodberry Down Health Centre nursery, 24th February 1954.



Exterior of Woodberry Down Library on Seven Sisters Rd, c. 1958.

### The Health Centre

Woodberry Down Health Centre was the first purpose-built health centre in Britain. On 16 March 1949, Nye Bevan, architect of the National Health Service, inaugurated the scheme onsite. Owing to shortages of steel, the centre took three years to build and was finally opened in October 1952 by the MP Somerville Hastings. Later renamed the John Scott Health Centre after the Council's doctor, it offered the latest specialist treatments as well as infant welfare and ante-natal clinics, and a day nursery.



### The shops

The parade of shops on Woodberry Grove was the beating heart of the estate, where the community met and mingled.



I used to go to the Health Centre, the John Scott Health Centre, often. In fact, my first ever memory is being there - being put on the scales to be weighed. I must have been twelve months old, but I still remember it! And I went to the pre-school, the nursery; that was in the same building as the health centre with a little courtyard. Then later on my memories of being there are of having lots of teeth extracted, in the early 1970s. They had everything there.

Keith Winter

### Building the community

In the 1950s, Woodberry Down was heralded as 'the Estate of the Future'. Dignitaries and experts from around the world visited, eager to learn the lessons of this grandiose scheme of community development. As well as good quality housing residents were to have everything they needed within walking distance, including the first purpose built comprehensive school in London opened in 1955.

My mum used to send me over to the shops and the laundrette all the time. I remember going over to Bishops, you used to have to line up one side for your bread and then you'd have to go the other side, line up all over again and get the cheese. My mum would send me for a Wonder Loaf, and she used to say "You make sure it's todays, you say to him, 'Is it todays please?'" and I used to get so embarrassed. I'd go up and whisper "Is it todays?" And I used to do all the neighbours shopping, they used to call down, 'cos I always used to be playing out.

Lesley Crockley



## Days of Hope



Shopping on the Estate c.1960.

### Building a community

Among Woodberry Down's first tenants were people who had come to London from all around the World; descendants of Huguenots, Jews from East and Central Europe, people from the British colonies, Austria, Italy, Ireland and from boroughs right across London. Many of the new residents had endured significant hardships both during and after the Second World War and were eager to set up new homes in a safe and friendly environment.

The war was over, and at last there wasn't a day-to-day threat, and people were able to relax a little. I think in some ways, although people were a lot poorer, it was something of a golden age, compared to now. You had the feeling that there was going to be an increasingly narrow gap between the well off and the not so well off. And people were optimistic that things could only get better. Parents felt that their children would stand a chance of doing better in life, and they did.

Harry Davis, whose family moved to Woodberry Down in 1948.



Keith Winter and friends on bikes, Summer 1966; Golden Age?



Club party c.1960.

### More than just neighbours

Residents brought with them a pioneering and hardworking spirit. There was a shared communal spirit amongst neighbours in the different blocks.

We all helped each other out however we could. Mr Hampton worked at Smithfield, meat market, and the people next door to him worked at Covent Garden. An Italian couple, Mr and Mrs Despot, he did something in a steel or construction place, and another chap he was doing television.

So what used to happen was Mr Hampton used to get us cheap meat from Smithfield, the other chap next door would get us vegetables from Covent Garden, and so on. We'd get the very best of everything! The other chap would fix everybody's televisions if they went wrong. My dad would decorate the neighbours' flats, and the Italian who used to work in the steel place he used to do all the knockers and the plaques

One of the neighbours in Cannock House, I think he must have been injured in the Second World War and he was paralysed and had a wheelchair in later life. People like my dad and somebody else built him a ramp so he could go up into the lift. Everybody used to go and visit him every day with the paper and have a chat. So we were very community orientated.

Sheila Coxon, whose family moved to Savernake House in 1949.



Festival of Britain 1951.

## Growing up



Festival of Britain party, 1951.

### A child's life

For children growing up on Woodberry Down in the early, post-war years it was an exciting experience. Not only were the facilities of the flats so much better than the housing that their parents had previously lived in, but there were plenty of areas to play, and different ways to keep entertained. With few cars around, the many outdoor spaces of Woodberry Down were safe places.



Family christening, 1956.



Growing up on the Estate c.1960.



Party on the Estate c.1970.

### Special Events

There have been many special events held on Woodberry Down over the years, from outdoor national celebrations to weddings in St Olave's Church. There was the Festival of Britain in 1951 and the Queen's coronation in 1953. And the children made the most of these.

“All the kids got on with one another. Alright, we had fights, we had arguments but then we made up and it's forgotten. And some of the mums used to look out for you, they'd bring you in and do you a sandwich or instead they'd give you a dinner. I's go home and go, “I don't want dinner mum; I had some in my auntie Mary's.”

Valerie Goff

“I enjoyed my childhood days living in Pickering House. It was like one big happy family. We looked out for each other and helped one another. And we all seemed to stay to our own blocks, you know, we'd belong to our own blocks like a little clan. I belonged to Pickering House, so others would say to me “You're in the next block, you're not in our block!” We had so much good fun in the courtyard. When called in for meals, we'd protest because we didn't want to miss out on any games. On wet and cold days, we'd sit in the drying room until the porter made us leave. Many children from the private residents came to play in the flats because there was so much more to do.”

Teresa Berger, on her first day at the school in 1956.



Students from Woodberry Down School at a Party c.1970.

“My mother helped organise the coronation party in Dovedale House, and of course it rained so we had to have it inside, in the drying room. And because we were one of the few families to have a television, everybody then crammed into our flat to watch it on our tiny television. That's how I remember it anyway!”

Madeleine Michaelson, who moved to Woodberry Down with her parents as a young child in 1951.



Valerie Goff on the grass outside the flats, c.1958.

## A 'showpiece school'



Woodberry Down comprehensive school Head Boy and 4 prefects 1963/4 – Linda on the far left.



It had two separate assembly halls. The geography rooms were big rooms and had purpose design tables for map work. The English rooms had an inter-connecting room into the resource room, where there was a store of text books and reading books. It had a purpose built library, and all the labs were purpose built, one for biology, a separate one for chemistry and another for physics. In the art section we had a printing press, and pottery rooms.

The floor underneath had purpose built rooms for needle work and embroidery and I think the floor below was domestic science, where they had a flat. A flat! Nobody lived there, but it was to learn how to manage a flat. Of course there was a theatre as well, a proper theatre, and music rooms with purpose built practice rooms. It was exceptional, really exceptional.

Elaine Gosnell, who attended the school from 1966.

The Woodberry Down School badge was specially designed to represent the local area. The Red Griffin was the Stoke Newington Borough Arms, the Green Trees symbolised the Seven Sisters, and the Blue Water represented the nearby reservoirs. Pictured on the top: Elaine Gosnell on her first day at Woodberry Down Comprehensive School c.1970.

### Ground-breaking

Woodberry Down Comprehensive School, opened in 1955, was the first purpose-built mixed comprehensive school in London and helped set the standard of such education nation-wide. It was committed to principles of fairness and equality between pupils, regardless of their parents' income or previous achievements.

### A school for everyone

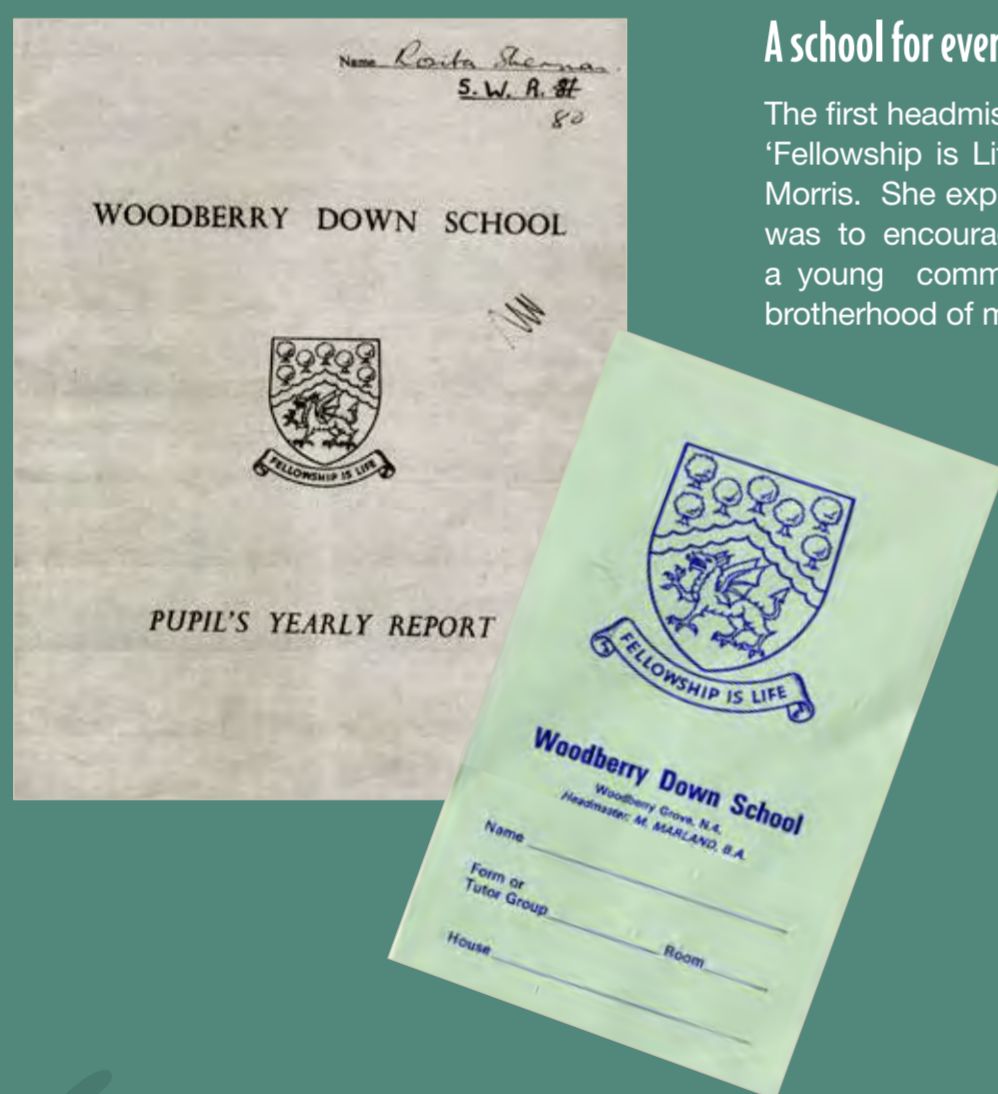
The first headmistress Harriet Chetwynd chose as the school motto, 'Fellowship is Life', taken from 'A Dream of John Ball' by William Morris. She explained, 'One of the fundamental aims of the school was to encourage religious and racial toleration and to develop a young community which practised as well as proclaimed the brotherhood of man.'

### Closure

Eventually, the school merged with Clissold Park School to form Stoke Newington School on the Clissold site. In 1986 the school doors were closed.

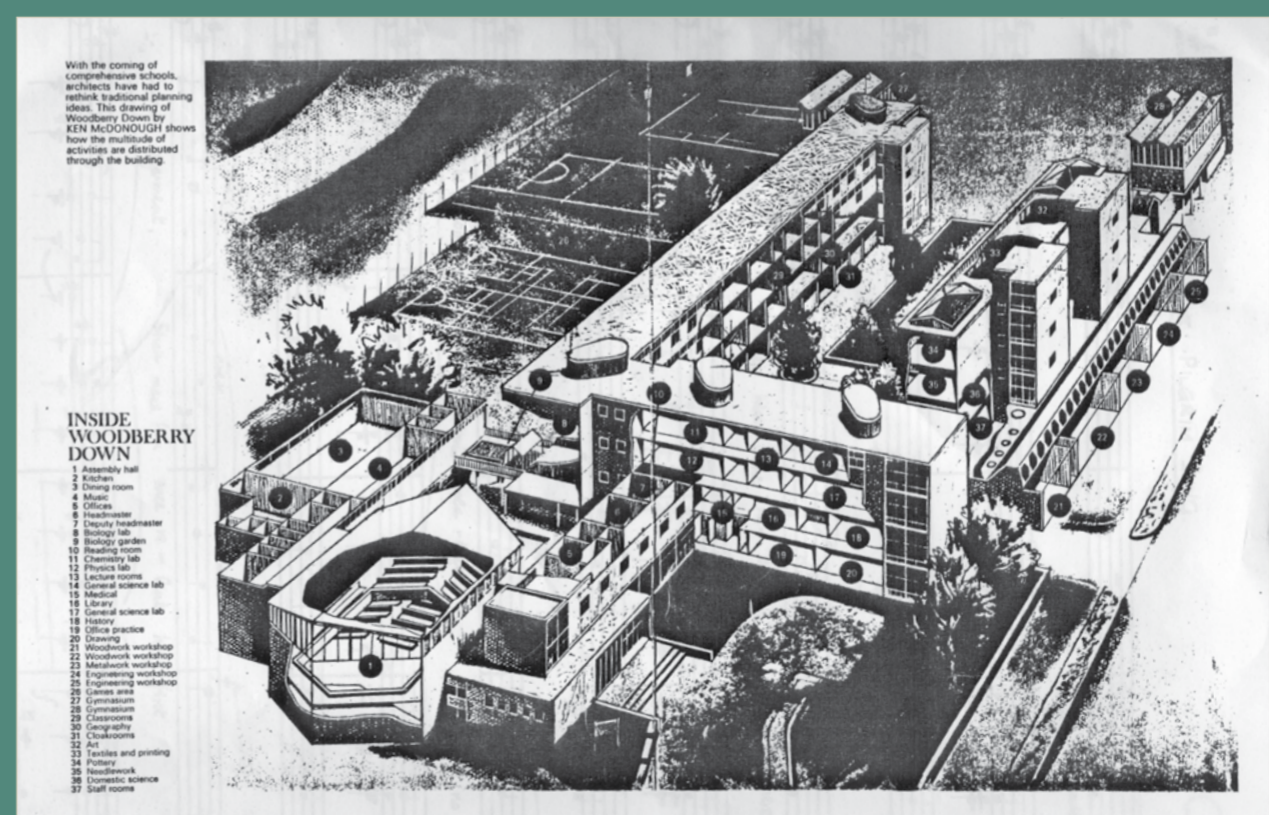
I was sitting next to this boy who's talking and he was, I think of it now it seems silly, he was marvelling "aren't we lucky?" I mean, he couldn't get over how lucky he was to get in. You felt privileged to get in there!

Teresa Berger, on her first day at the school in 1956.



We used to have Jewish assembly, which being Jewish, I would often go to. I don't remember any hostility back then and I really do put it down to how tolerant the school was. I remember we only had one Black boy in our class and he found it quite difficult at first; his parents come from Jamaica. He must have found it quite strange, but he came and sat next to us and I said to him "Oh, don't worry you know you'll fit in, I'm Jewish". We just made nothing of it.

Marilyn Mandell.



Map of the Woodberry Down school campus, from the Souvenir programme of the Woodberry Down school closing celebration event held on 21 June 1986.

## Standing Up

### The Protest Tradition

Since the first residents moved into Woodberry Down Estate in the late 1940s residents have played an active role in working together to improve the estate.

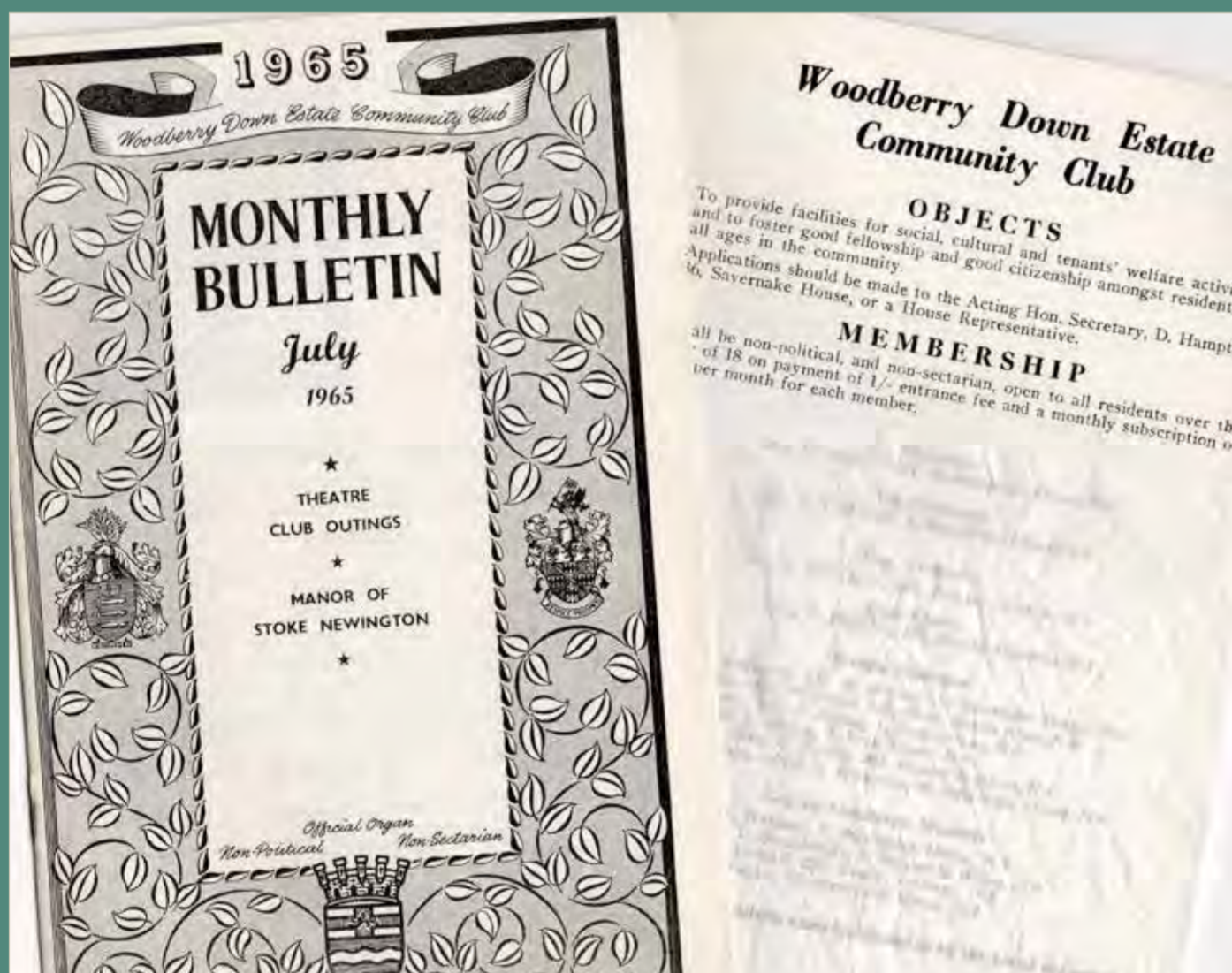
By the early 1950s the tenants committee had over a thousand paid-up members. The committee organised social activities such as days out, but, when necessary, its members were also committed campaigners. In February 1953, tenants of Woodberry Down organised a protest against London County Council rent increases. A large meeting was held. Every seat was taken, with many men and women forced to stand in the gangways and at the back of the hall.

*The cost of living plus the cost of school dinners is making life intolerable for the housewife...With the rent increases, the woman in the home is having to cut down on essentials such as food and clothes.*

Mrs Doris Hampton, secretary of the Community Club, 1953.



Trolley bus on Seven Sisters road, 1959 – heavy traffic was always a problem for local residents.



### Safer Roads

Making roads safe is something residents have tried to do many times over the years. In 1954 Woodberry Down had its own permanent representative on the council's road safety committee. There were protests about the heavy traffic on Seven Sisters Road, and there were others about the dangers in Woodberry Grove.

*There is a real problem, on the estate. The cars in Woodberry Grove come up from the bridge very fast. It's difficult for the drivers to see the youngsters – and it's difficult for the children to see the oncoming cars. It is a worry to all mothers on the estate. Several have asked me to mention the road outside the shops. Something should be done.*

Resident Geraldine Murray: extract from a speech to the council's road safety committee, 1954.

### No Sell Off

More recently, as regeneration was discussed, residents got involved in the Estate Development Committee (EDC) to discuss ways to improve the estate. At one point, Hackney proposed selling off the old school site to private developers for a reported £17 million.

*After I moved on to the estate the secondary school was closed down, turned into an adult education and then suddenly they closed it down. It remained unused for a long time until the Jewish girls school was built. When we were working on the regeneration proposal at that time as part of the EDC we heard that there had been interest from certain organisations, certain businesses to buy the piece of land, including Sainsbury's.*

*'So we set up a major campaign against the land being sold off. We demonstrated and actually closed down Seven Sisters Road and Manor House: we were up there with our placards saying that we didn't want that land to be sold off. We wanted it to be used as part of the regeneration and used for homes for people on the estate.'*



Veronica Mensah.

Veronica Mensah.

## 'Save the Reservoirs'

### Madness, badness or both?

In 1985 the recently privatised Thames Water declared it was going to fill in the East and West reservoirs, drain New River, flatten the Filter Beds and sell off all the land to private developers. The community mounted a large scale campaign against the plans.

There was a big public meeting in the Woodberry Down School. I went to various public events dressed up as Hugh Myddelton, the founder of the New River. But Thames Water announced its plans to put up a hyper-market! Oh they were proud of it, parking space for four hundred cars. Ridiculous! What nutters come up with plans like that?

Peter Gosnell, Secretary, Save the Resident Campaign and Rowley Garden tenant.



### Oh no you don't!

By the end of the 1980s the campaign had notched up two big victories: Thames Water had dropped plans both to develop the East Reservoir and shut down New River.

But the threat to West Reservoir and the Filter Beds remained. The campaign went on. Activists bought shares in Thames Water and made their presence felt at the company's annual general meetings. There were demonstrations, articles in the national press and local television coverage. A video was made and 'Save the Reservoir' T-shirts were produced.

Eventually a deal was done. Thames Water agreed to hand over the West Reservoir to the council to develop as a leisure facility, but with the reservoir intact. In return, Thames Water was allowed to build houses in the old Filter Beds site.

At the 1995 AGM of the Save the Reservoirs Campaign, ten years after Thames Water had announced plans to call in the bulldozers, they were finally stopped in their tracks for good.

The loss of the Filter Beds is a great blow... On the other hand, we must acknowledge what we have achieved. Thames Water original plans were for superstores on the Filter Beds, housing on the East Reservoir. There was also to be an impossible combination of leisure and nature conservation on the West Reservoir, as well as the loss of the New River.

'Now New River has been saved, along with the East Reservoir, and Thames Water is to draw up a nature management plan for the East Reservoir. West Reservoir has been saved and will become a Hackney Council sailing centre. The Castle pumping station has found a good future as a climbing centre. The struggle has been worthwhile.

David Martyn, Chair, Save the Reservoirs, 1995.



Peter Gosnell dressed as Hugh Myddelton demonstrating against the closure of the New River, with Kenneth Baker MP, 1986.



The t-shirt says it all.



Save the Reservoirs Newsletter, 1995.



## Still Home for Some



### Decline

By the 1980s council housing everywhere was deteriorating, and Woodberry Down, like other estates, was suffering from a lack of funding. The caretakers and porters who had maintained the estate and kept an eye on things had gone and the once luxury flats had become run-down, with some of the blocks falling into disrepair, and even sinking.

The area was clearly quite run down but the advice I was given was that I had to accept it, and that then I could transfer in 18 months, but once I'd settled in I got to know my neighbours I liked it and ended up staying.

Veronica Mensah, who in 1979 was homeless and offered accommodation on Woodberry Down.

It was deemed a problem area and it had a bad reputation, but I needed somewhere to live and wanted to stay local. So I moved in to Chattenden House in September 1999. But up until then I'd never had a place to call my own, so for me having my own home was really special. But the flat was really run down, and it was quite embarrassing having guests over. I used to apologise to people for the state of it, and they'd have to remind me they were there to see me and not the flat.

Daryl Strawson



The once proud 'Grey Blocks' just before demolition (above and left).



### Newcomers

By the 1990s Woodberry Down had become a 'hard-to-let' estate, but people desperate from overseas and elsewhere still came.

I'm from Monserrat which is a small island in the Caribbean and had to move after the Volcanic Crisis in 1995 when I lost my home. And because England is the mother country of Montserrat we were given the opportunity to move here, and so I came in 1998 to start a new life.

I was eventually offered a flat in Bayhurst House. When I first saw it I couldn't believe it – I really didn't know places like that existed in England. I had to do a lot of work in that flat to get it made into a home. With the help of friends we did over the whole place – wallpaper, floors, carpet, everything. And crime was definitely an issue on the estate. But as soon as I moved in I liked the area, and having all the shops nearby was really good. I've been on the estate ever since. I've had so many disasters living here, but it's my home now.

Yvonne Richards



# Looking back, looking forward



A community at ease with itself: watching Wimbledon by the Reservoirs, Woodberry Down, 2014.

## Traditions

The rich history of Woodberry Down is testament to the many thousands of people that have come to call Woodberry Down home since the first blocks were built in 1948.

The estate was built at a time of optimism, when there was the idea that governments could improve the lives of its citizens and were responsible for ensuring a happier and healthier future for all. The first residents of Woodberry Down Estate had all the amenities they needed to have a decent life, including access to one of the best comprehensive schools and health centres.

Some things have not changed, most notably the diversity of people who came to live here. Over the years, the original networks of Woodberry Down shifted as older tenants moved out or passed away, and their children moved away from the estate. The significant Jewish and Irish communities have largely moved on and other communities have since come to call Woodberry Down home, including those with African and Caribbean heritage. Woodberry Down has also become a place where Turkish speaking communities could feel welcome.



West Reservoir.

## Futures

Just as it was when it was built, Woodberry Down Estate is an experiment once again. Currently experiencing the largest housing regeneration programme in the UK, the present and upcoming years will bear witness to a dramatic change in the physical and social composition of the area as the 2,000 flats are replaced by a mixture of social and private housing.

Who knows what the future holds, but one thing is for sure. Buildings may come and go, but the memories and stories of people who have lived will be celebrated for many years to come.

**I think one of the lessons from our involvement in the regeneration process is that there needs to be resident control; they need to have a significant bit of community oversight or involvement. It's not something that should simply be left to a provider, or that a community only gets involved when somethings are broken down; or that you need to have a riot to get somebody's attention. There are still things which require continuing oversight, continuing involvement if people are going to get the homes and communities they deserve.**

Peter Naughton, former chair, Woodberry Down Community Organisation, 2014.



Enjoying the peace and quiet of New River.

Thank you to all the residents past and present who contributed with their photographs and memories. Other photographs courtesy of Hackney Archives, Getty Images, Britain From Above, London Transport Museum and Berkeley Homes. This exhibition was put together by Woodberry Down Community Organisation and Eastside Community Heritage. For a full list of participants and those who worked on the exhibition please see our book 'Woodberry Down, the People's Story', on which this exhibition is based.

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