



WORKS

this balance shifted, as more and more people started squatting, and the council licensing schemes failed to keep up.

Some of the early groups chose to describe themselves as “self-help” housing groups. Fifty families joined Lambeth Squatters in its first year, and this number continued to grow. They seem to have been well-organised, with one group for North Lambeth and another for South Lambeth meeting every week. They were later able to negotiate short-life housing deals, and became known as Lambeth Self-Help Housing Association (LSHHA). By the end of 1973 they had negotiated 160 licensed squats in the borough (neighbouring Southwark, in comparison, had only forty-six).

The structure of the group was quite interesting. House allocations were done purely on the basis of democratic meetings held every week and attended by those who had applied for housing. They made the decisions themselves, about whose case was most deserving and would get the next available house. The Housing or Social Services departments referred many of the applicants, with at least 70% coming from within the borough. Members of the group then paid a weekly subscription to the group, rather than rent: £1 for a single person and £4 for a family.

As well as the family squatters, more counter-cultural squatting emerged, for example in the West End, in Piccadilly and Covent Garden. The issue wasn't just about homeless families with children, but about single people as well. In some cases, squatters wanted to try living more communally, not just in nuclear families. And some wanted a life more free of convention, work, the rat-race and capitalism. Some of the more hippie squatters were a great source of colourful stories for the mainstream press and probably an embarrassment to the more serious housing activists.

During this time, there had been a massive boom in property prices – over a period of three years the average price of a new home doubled – leading to speculation and rent increases. Speculators often left properties empty until they could make a profit from them; it wasn't necessarily in their interests to rent them to anyone. It was increasingly hard for anyone to find privately-rented accommodation unless they had enough money to cover the high rents and deposits landlords demanded.

From 1971 onwards there was an upsurge of squatting in Lambeth. There were at least 13,000 people on the waiting list for council housing. Thousands more lived in slum-like conditions, which included outside toilets, dodgy plumbing, huge rats, overcrowding and only paraffin heaters for warmth. The latter were particularly dangerous for families with young children and a regular cause of house fires.

