



Squatting In Brixton In The 1970s

Olive Morris is remembered – amongst other things – as a squatter. Like many other people, she began squatting because she needed somewhere to live and there were houses sitting empty all over Brixton. Squatting – moving into empty properties without the owner's consent – has a long history and a new squatting movement was taking hold at the same time that Olive was getting politically active.

After the Second World War and the Blitz, squatting was an obvious, natural reaction to the lack of housing. According to 1946 government figures, over 50,000 people occupied disused army camps and squatting was spreading to other under-used buildings, including hotels and luxury flats in London. Eventually 850 of the camps were handed over to squatters, with some still being occupied up till the 1960s, but other prominent empties were sealed up and guarded.

Squatting kept a low profile until 1968 when a group of activists who had been watching the influential BBC drama about homelessness, *Cathy Come Home* (Ken Loach, 1966), set up the London Squatters Campaign. Their first, high-profile actions took place in December: symbolic short occupations of various empty apartment blocks. Soon after these media stunts, it became known that the Council gave one family in Notting Hill tenancy for the flat they'd squatted. Homeless families started moving into empty flats with the intention of staying.

Lots of families moved into council properties in Ilford, led by a group that became the East London Squatters. They garnered public support, especially after Redbridge Council hired heavies to beat them up and evict them. A lot of the early squatting groups emphasised the fact that they were helping families with children – people who the councils often already had an obligation to help – house themselves. They adopted names like the Lewisham Family Squatting Association, the Family Squatting Movement (who published the newsletter *Squat!*), and the Family Squatting Advisory Service established in September 1970. They tended to target publicly-owned housing to highlight the incompetence of councils in managing their housing stock. The local borough councils weren't the only ones with vast stocks of empty public housing. The Greater London Council (GLC) also owned many properties across the city. The GLC was allegedly the first to offer squatters licences, that is, permission to stay but not a proper tenancy. Some of the boroughs copied this strategy, for example, the South East London Squatters group was successful in negotiating short-life deals with Lewisham Council.

These short-life licences depended on both the generosity and efficiency of the local authority. By the end of 1971 there were an estimated 1,000 people living in licensed squats, and far fewer in unlicensed squats. Over the course of 1972,

