

Protest movements joined forces to protect area

NICK BAILEY examines 40 years of community activism from the setting up of the Fitzrovia Neighbourhood Centre at 39 Tottenham Street in 1975



39 Tottenham Street when it was a glass shop before becoming the Fitzrovia Neighbourhood Centre in 1975.

The 1970s were an extraordinary period of protest, disruption and change in many major cities. London was no different and it was in this decade that urban redevelopment, slum clearance and road building provoked local communities to form protest movements. Fitzrovia is often compared with its neighbouring 'urban villages' of Soho and Covent Garden. All three are compact, diverse and relatively self-contained. But Fitzrovia was hardly known in the 1970s, the name being a rather tongue-in-cheek reference, invented in the 1940s, to a would-be prestigious area fallen on hard times. The Fitzrovia Neighbourhood Association (FNA) emerged from this period and did much to establish the identity of the neighbourhood.

Looking back now, it appears that Fitzrovia had been in hibernation for at least two decades after the Second World War. There had been some redevelopment of the former Georgian terraces by some of the first property developers such as Max Rayne and his company, London Merchant Securities, but no evidence survives of any concerted community activity at the time. The Post Office (now BT) Tower emerged from the war-time rubble in the early 1960s and quickly became a very significant London landmark. But the area continued to provide relatively low cost, rented housing in what would now be considered slum conditions, as well as attracting waves of immigration from countries such as Cyprus, Spain, Hong Kong and Bangladesh.

The key period of change came with the start of the 1970s. An influx of younger, more affluent and professional residents realised the benefits of living in Fitzrovia but were also concerned about the living conditions of others and the constant threat to the historic fabric of the neighbourhood. There was also a growing realisation in Camden Council

(formed in 1965) that the area contained a very diverse population many of whom were living in dire housing conditions. Thus the appointment of community development workers at about this time provided a major stimulus to launching a series of community initiatives.

There were very few community facilities at the time and the only place for meetings available was the Whitfield Play Centre owned by Camden Council. It had been built soon after the War and was used intermittently as a nursery and a base for Camden's community development workers. The two workers at the time were Marilyn Cosway and Karin Janzon who played an important role in mobilising the community and promoting a number of initiatives which were to bear fruit later. For instance, local residents were encouraged to form the Whitfield Study (later Neighbourhood) Group which was soon to give rise to the FNA, the Tower community newspaper and the Fitzrovia Festival which first took place in 1973.

An early initiative was the formation of the Charlotte Street Association (CSA) which was set up as primarily an amenity society in order to conserve the heritage of the area from Oxford Street in the south to Euston Road in the north and from Tottenham Court Road in the east to Berners Street in the west. Local artist, Roland Collins, was the first secretary of CSA and he wrote in the first edition of *Tower* (March 1973) urging local residents to join in order to campaign for a conservation area to cover Charlotte and surrounding streets. It later faced the severe challenge of the Gort Estate, south of Percy Street, being redeveloped for a major office complex for the music company, EMI. Large amounts of the historic fabric of Tudor Place, Stephen and Gresse Streets and even the south side of Percy Street were about to face the bulldozer. Other residents' groups, such as the Tottenham Street Tenants' Association (TSTA) were also beginning to campaign about the dreadful housing conditions and, in some cases, the refusal of landlords to carry out basic repairs and improvements.



The opening of The Warren playground at Whitfield Street in 1979.

So where did the idea for the FNA come from? Again, it was a product of its time and was one of several community advice centres being established across Camden and other inner London boroughs. The opportunity arose as a result of funding provided by the Home Office to tackle inner city problems particularly where immigration was an issue. This Urban Programme ran from 1968 to 1975 and Camden was one of 34 local authorities which were

eligible for funding. Fortunately Judith Dainton, a leading light of the TSTA, came across the government circular inviting bids while working for the National Council for Social Service then based in Bedford Square. She consulted other local people and, with the help of Camden community workers, an application was submitted by the Whitfield Neighbourhood Group.

The proposal involved establishing a centre in

Fitzrovia which would both provide expert advice on housing, welfare rights and immigration and bring together the twenty or so tenants' associations and community groups representing different parts of Fitzrovia on the Westminster and Camden sides of the borough boundary. It was this function as an umbrella group which was to prove the greatest challenge if Fitzrovia was to speak with one voice. Early in 1975 the steering group was notified that its proposal was successful and that it was being awarded a grant of £54,000 per year over five years. A series of very talented and dedicated workers were appointed to provide the support the area needed.

Judith Dainton was a particularly resourceful person who was later to ensure that 8-12 Tottenham Street was acquired by the Council after the landlord refused to carry out repairs and brought unreasonable pressure to bear on the tenants. Goodge Place and no. 39 Tottenham Street had been under threat of redevelopment by the Middlesex Hospital which in the early 1970s was intent on expanding up to and including Charlotte Street. Financial circumstances changed and it soon withdrew redevelopment plans. Judith stepped in to ask if the hospital would be willing to let no. 39 to provide a home for the FNA.

At the crucial meeting of the Whitfield Study Group on 11 April 1975 she jubilantly reported that the Hospital had agreed to rent the former glass shop, long since boarded up, for a very reasonable £300 per year. At the same meeting a steering group of 25 was elected to manage the new centre. As work began to convert no. 39 under the guidance of local architect, Roger Burrell, two other houses in Goodge Place were included in the deal to provide short-life housing. The whole terrace was later saved when Camden acquired the properties on the east side from the Greater London Council (GLC).

Housing in Fitzrovia in the 1970s was completely different to what it is now. There were no luxury developments of expensive apartments aimed at overseas buyers. Instead, housing was often overcrowded and lacking in modern facilities; landlords would often pressurise tenants to leave if they complained or if redevelopment might provide a higher return. *Tower* regularly included features about the



Tower predecessor of Fitzrovia News, highlighted bad housing.

dire housing conditions in the area and Sue Blundell from Camden's Housing Aid Centre ran regular advice sessions for hard-pressed tenants in the new Centre. In response, local residents carried out a series of housing surveys in order to find out the extent of the problem. The first was carried out by the TSTA in 1974 and this was followed by a wider survey by the FNA in 1977 and a study of East Marylebone in 1981. The results provided the evidence to persuade Camden and Westminster Councils to take action. Key statistics speak for themselves: 60 per cent of the population shared facilities, only 39 per cent lived in self-contained accommodation and 34 per cent shared a bathroom and WC with others. Local authority and housing association accommodation was well below both borough averages. What is more, at that time, landlords would often change the use of housing to office accommodation without planning permission

because the financial returns were higher.

It took until 1979 to persuade Camden Council to take action, with the declaration of two Housing Action Areas, one around Charlotte Street and one covering the streets around Fitzroy Square. Westminster also declared a General Improvement Area in East Marylebone. On the Camden side 61 per cent of properties were in a bad state of repair and 37 per cent vacant or semi-vacant while 66 per cent paid rent of £5 or less per week. By 1984 77 per cent were deemed 'satisfactory'.

The level of community activity was sustained throughout the decade and into the 1980s. The GLC's Community Areas policy brought new opportunities to promote the interests of the local community through the planning system and resources were given to provide much-needed social housing on a former bomb site in Goodge Place. Two notable achievements were the commit-



Crabtree Fields when it was a car park.

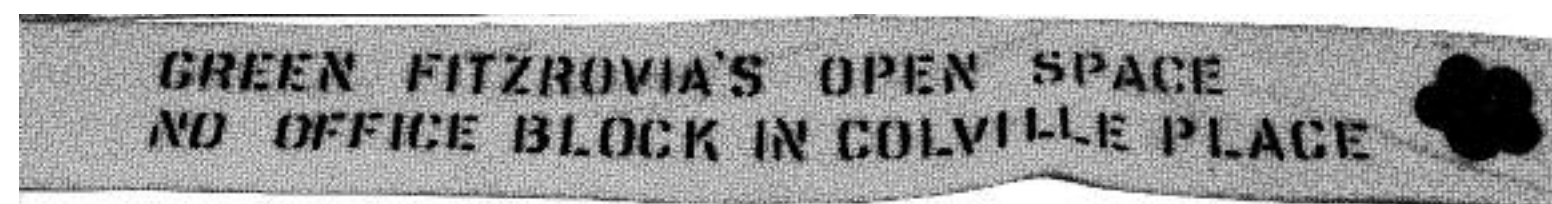
ment of the Fitzrovia Play Association in raising £30,000 for the improvement of 'The Warren' playground and the involvement of the GLC in both acquiring and then landscaping what had been Schmidt's car park in Whitfield Street and then landscaping it as the now green oasis off Colville Place known as Crabtree Fields. Schmidt's restaurant had closed in July 1975; the park was not complete until 1986.

Looking back, the 1970s and early '80s were a period of concerted action in the area which brought longer term benefits which we still enjoy to this day. The Fitzrovia Festival was a genuinely community-based event for at least 10 years and the *Tower* newspaper was published regularly until 1979 before becoming the *Fitzrovia News*. It remains one of the longest running community newspapers in the country. The GLC community areas policy brought a new focus on the needs of the community and these were translated into a neighbourhood plan for Fitzrovia (Camden-side) in 1984 through the Area Consultative Group where residents and officers met regularly to discuss local planning issues. This plan was revised and updated in 2012.

Although there were real achievements, there were also setbacks. EMI got their way in Tottenham Court Road although they never actually occupied the building and other significant planning battles were lost, such as on the Middlesex Hospital site. The quality of housing has improved beyond all recognition although rents and prices have also rocketed as London's economy has prospered and the improvement of public transport has made Fitzrovia a very attractive location in which to live. The decline of shops and the expansion of bars have brought further problems. Residents can certainly look back on the achievements of the past with pride; but there are still many battles to fight in order to ensure Fitzrovia remains a good place to live for what has been, and should always be, a very diverse population.



Sign telling residents about the new park



Not every battle was won, the Gort Estate was bulldozed. All that remained of Tudor Place and the buildings in Gresse Street and Stephen Street. The buildings in the background are still standing today.