

# Home, not so sweet home

When the Church of England's commissioners forced through the sale of part of the historic Octavia Hill social housing estates, they said tenants would be protected. Now the new private owners plan to sell the properties on the open market

**M**itre Road in Waterloo, south London, is a street of handsome, pale brick terraces, the kind of sturdy-looking homes that suggest stability and safety in a turbulent city. On each home is a mark – a sign that would once have reinforced the sense of stability. For the mark is that of the Church Commissioners, the body responsible for the Church of England's investments.

But on 20 March, that sense of stability came to an end for the tenants of Mitre Road, when the commissioners sold the properties – part of the historic Octavia Hill Estates – to a private/social-housing consortium. There are 1,000 homes in the estates – in Waterloo, Vauxhall, Pimlico and Walworth – which for the past century have housed low-income earners, families and “key workers” such as teachers and nurses.

The controversial sale was bitterly contested by the residents, who were supported by the local churches and politicians, including their MPs, and feared huge rent rises and even of being forced out of their homes. At the time they were assured by the Church Commissioners, who were responsible for the sale to Grainger GenInvest, that this would not happen.

Now, less than a month after the transaction was completed, Grainger has admitted to considering the sale of a substantial percentage of the estates' homes to cover the cost of the £167-million purchase. Local MPs have seen Grainger's “working projections”, which forecast a possible sale of some 419 properties. Homes would be sold off at commercial rates as they became vacant. As much as 40 per cent of the estates would, over time, be up for grabs.

Ninety-seven per cent of respondents to a petition on the Waterloo estate opposed the sale. But if the sale were to go through, they made plain their desire for a registered social landlord to take on the Octavia Hill Estates. This desire chimed with the Church of England's own recommendation, set out

in its ground-breaking *Faith in the City* document 20 years ago, which said that Church involvement in housing should be developed in the future through non-profit-making housing associations. The commissioners made it clear in reply that it was their duty to provide maximum returns on their investments in order to fund the work of the Church.

Octavia Hill (1838-1912), a co-founder of the National Trust, devoted her life to improving the housing of the poor. She managed the south London estates for the Church of England. Residents now claim that the commissioners have betrayed her legacy and have breached the spirit of a covenant which protected them. A 1937 agreement transferred Octavia Hill Estates land from what was then London County Council to the commissioners in order to build “flats or maisonettes suitable for the accommodation of persons of the working classes [i.e. of slender means]”. The commissioners maintain that the covenant expired in the 1970s.

Gary Kirk, the former chairman of the Vauxhall estate's residents' association, said: “The Church Commissioners stated many times that the sale to Grainger GenInvest was in the best interest of the tenants. How can the projected sale of a third of the properties within 10 years in any way be in the best interest of tenants? These affordable homes will be lost to the community for ever.”

This is not the first time that former Church of England property has been sold off and lost as affordable housing. Last year, the commissioners sold a first batch of 500 Octavia Hill dwellings in Stoke Newington, Maida Vale and Waterloo to Grainger and the Genesis Housing Group for £70 million. Flats falling empty were subsequently let at full market rent and sitting tenants' rents have risen by 6 per cent above the rate of inflation. Octavia Hill residents have said that, in recent years, the commissioners had even started to let certain vacant dwellings at the going commercial rate themselves.



While some, particularly older, residents have “secure tenure”, others are fearful of being forced out by rent rises. Brendan Mooney, a palliative-care social worker, whose pay is below the London average, has lived in Mitre Road for 12 years and was a leading activist in the residents' opposition to the sale. Mr Mooney said: “I pay £462 a month, but other one-bedroom flats in this area can go for triple that sum. The commissioners have separated the pastoral role of affordable housing provision from their financial work of supporting the clergy. Where does this fit in with the Church's concern for ethical investment?” He added that it was clear that Grainger would need to keep its shareholders happy.

The Church's sale of its remaining social housing stock in London has proved to be an acute embarrassment. It has also created profound turmoil within the Church itself. Peter Selby, the Bishop of Worcester, who sits on the Commissioners' Assets Committee, went public to say he had opposed the sale but he and one other dissident had been outvoted by seven votes to two.

He condemned the sell-off, saying the commissioners had abandoned a century of good work. “This decision contributes to the quiet despair people feel about the Church and will lead them to ask whether it really cares,” he said. “It raises vital concerns about how the Church organises its life and about who is accountable to whom. The Church Commissioners are accountable to nobody.” (They are in fact accountable to the Commissioners' Board of Governors, on which the Archbishops of Canterbury and York sit.) He added that the sale had destroyed the missionary work of the Church in the local community.

And yet the local churches, the Southwark Diocese, clergy and faithful have been adamant in their opposition. Canon Richard Truss of St John's Church, Waterloo, said: “We met people; we marched; we protested outside

Lambeth Palace and the General Synod. We did what we could. But the unthinkable has happened.” He said that he had provided pastoral care to one or two distressed residents before adding: “The loss of affordable places in the centre of London will be bad for the mix of our communities. There is significant loss in that.”

Robina Rafferty, chief executive of the ecumenical housing charity Housing Justice (which incorporates the Catholic Housing Aid Society), recalled how the Octavia Hill Estates had been praised 20 years ago in *Faith in the City*. “This report recorded with pride the Church of England’s long tradition of being both ‘a provider of homes for the poorer sections of society and an agitator for reform in the conditions in which the poor were housed’. This sale reduces such housing in an area of acute need and undermines that vital witness.”

The fate of the estates has sparked a political row about the quantity of affordable housing stock in the capital. Before the sale, Ken Livingstone, the mayor of London, wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury asking him to reconsider the sale. Local MPs Simon Hughes, Kate Hoey and Harriet Harman asked the Commissioners to recognise “the historical and social aspects of its portfolio” and to express their dismay “regarding the inevitable loss in affordable rented housing”.

Mr Hughes told *The Tablet* on Tuesday that the MPs and tenants have requested, after a series of “robust meetings” with Grainger, that it go away and think how it could retain all the properties without making any imminent sales. “The tenants have asked for a seat on the board of the new owner and we support them in this. We are determined to do all we can to get the support of the Housing Corporation and government so that none of these properties are lost in the foreseeable future from the valuable but insufficient stock of rented, affordable homes in our boroughs,” said Mr Hughes.

In recent years, the Commissioners have been withdrawing from the residential property market in order to invest in better-performing assets. In 2004, their investment portfolio’s capital was valued at £4.3 billion – far short of the sums in the early 1990s, when they were criticised for losing hundreds of millions of pounds in property speculation.

A Church of England spokesman said: “The Church Commissioners believe that the sale is a good outcome for tenants, as the new owners are likely to be in a better place to invest in the properties for the long term. The Commissioners have a duty to contribute towards funding the clergy and the good work of the Church. We believe that we have fulfilled this duty, and we have done so in a way that ensures security and investment for the future of the estates.”

Grainger were unavailable for comment but said last week that, while they sought to “safeguard the current tenancies” and keep rents at reasonable levels, homes might indeed be sold in the future.

## PETER STANFORD

# ‘I can’t help thinking that I must sound like a latter-day Victoria Gillick’



It’s the little childhood landmarks of my children Kit and Orla, I’m slowly beginning to realise, that will stick with me, rather than the big ones. So first day at school, first solo journey, first time on the altar as a server will, of course, remain important, the standard points of reference by which to navigate memories of their childhood in years to come, common experiences to match up against those of others’ same initiations. But the little landmarks, I have a feeling, will stay more exactly fixed in my memory because they give the best clues to their emerging characters.

We’ve had quite a few of them over Easter. There was, on Palm Sunday, Orla’s first bike ride on the road. It only took us the 45 minutes to do the 10-minute cycle ride to church. Luckily I’d set out well in advance, figuring that at six she was about ready to give it a try. So we still got there in time for our palms, but only just. She insisted on having her brakes full on as she coasted down the hill into our Norfolk village where, as I had anticipated, there was hardly a car to bother us.

And then just when she had finally developed a head of steam, she produced a carrot from her pocket, dismounted in her usual, bizarre way – more a throwing away of the bike than an elegant getting off, which often leaves her lying underneath it, giggling on the grass verge – and then proceeded to feed her favourite horses over a nearby gate. They needed breakfast too, she explained to me patiently. Even they looked bemused.

Kit meanwhile has had what I think was the first glimmer of a thought that his parents might be fallible. Or at least he’s voiced it for the first time. I seem to remember it took me until I was about 14 to realise my late parents couldn’t make everything right – and even now at 44 in mourning them I have to fight myself to remember their faults as well as their virtues.

It slipped out when an old friend came to see us. She was talking to me about her work as a psychotherapist. What’s that, Kit asked, his ears as ever flapping. On the principle that if they ask, you should answer, she gave him a brief description of how people came to talk to her when they were troubled. About what, he enquired.

Well, sometimes they want to talk to her because they couldn’t with their mummy and daddy, she responded. “Oh, I’d have plenty to tell you then,” Kit said, beaming straight at me.

And finally – and I’m not sure quite how to define this little landmark – there was the children’s response to Kit’s school trip made just before the Easter holidays to the Jewish Museum. Wanting to spare him too much shock, I tried to have a gentle chat with him beforehand about the Holocaust. As it happened that hardly came up on the visit, and probably quite right too since at nine it is impossible for him to get his head round. At any age, indeed.

But I did briefly mention Anne Frank and her diary and for some reason this lodged in Orla’s mind as she listened to me talking. She wants a copy of the diary, she says, but again it’s too soon. She’s too young. In case I hadn’t realised that, as I talked to her in the most general terms about the story, she followed everything I said, looking very serious indeed.

You may be wondering what the point of all of this is. It’s innocence. Every conceivable commercial pressure seems to be put on our children today to discard their innocence as quickly and as clumsily as Orla discards her bike. From ads on TV to boys of Kit’s age in the playground boasting that they’ve got in to the cinema to see a “12” film.

We can blame everyone else for this erosion of innocence – and some quite rightly – but most of all we can blame ourselves. I was wrong to mention Anne Frank. It was too soon. But they will survive. Sometimes it means making yourself unpopular with other parents. I can’t help thinking that I must sound like a latter-day Victoria Gillick when I say that I don’t want my kids to watch the too-grown-up video all the other children are settling down to at the end of a party.

But their innocence will pass quickly enough and it can never be regained, even if I store up as many of the little landmarks as I can as bricks in a dam. So slowly, cautiously, is the only way to do it – which is precisely what I told Orla on that landmark bike ride.