

WHO DECIDES OUR FUTURE?

Communities, or developers?

Wealthy landlords have been extracting colossal profits from Hastings for centuries, but it's got most noticeable for us, perhaps, in the last decade. It's hard not to feel the increase in property prices and rents, see the many building sites, notices of demolition, the vacant lots and empty properties that have been left to languish for years, suddenly being flipped around for a quick sale.

Who gains as a result of this process? A small number of already well-off landowners and the companies and associations they own. That's it. And who suffers? Who has to pay the higher rents, who can't afford to buy a house, who loses their local park, or finds that their home has been slated for demolition? Us. That is the communities of ordinary (and not so ordinary) people who make up Hastings and St Leonards. Government infrastructure and welfare can't keep up with the increased strain, and who gets blamed for that? Us again, for not working hard enough. For not being well enough. It's never the select few profiting off our suffering and the slow destruction of social security in Britain.

Time for that to change, perhaps? Don't worry, this isn't a call for armed insurrection. It's a reminder that if we want things to improve, we need to work together, and look after each other.

A protest and a festival

Last month Grace Lally wrote about residents' dissatisfaction with Hastings Borough Council (HBC) and the way developers are allowed to walk all over community interests. Campaigners from Save Our Bathing pool Site (SOBS) and Save Sandrock Bends visited a council cabinet meeting to demand action – but HBC apparently feel powerless. So

residents decided to take action instead, and prepared a protestival on the bathing pool site, which happened on 13 July.

Residents demand accountability

Simon Lee writes, "the entire event was brought together by people who care deeply about our home town, largely without agendas, without dogma, without party politics. No particular interest groups dominated, just people coming together with a common cause. And the common cause was accountability – or rather it's total lack."

He says, "The site has been left undeveloped for many years until a recent Hastings Borough Council decision to sell the 250-year lease to a private development group, which has its eye on a quick profit. If the development gets the go-ahead, the lease will be sold on to the highest bidder and the developer will walk away with a tidy profit. This is the familiar, tried and tested playbook of our neo-liberal world."

Perfect event space

Ethan Oshoko discusses the broader scope of the festival, "There was live music, a speakers' corner, morris dancing, cheerleading, face-painting, a community versus developers tug of war (guess who won) and free food, including hot dogs and delicious beetroot borscht. The speaker's corner was not simply about the bathing pool site but also discussed issues such as ecology in local spaces, the housing crisis and disability rights. It's also worth noting that the protestival was wheelchair accessible."

Lucille Mason, a founder of SOBS, talked about how West St Leonards doesn't have any other suitable site for "pop-up events that aren't on concrete", and the protestival shows how effectively the space can be used going forward.



THE HASTINGS EXAMINER

Issue Four: Communities Versus Developers

Communities Battling Developers

Gensing Manor

Hastings Rental Health versus Roost in its many and various guises

Hastings Rental Health (HRH) is a campaign organisation for renters rights that, going by the old adage "actions speak louder than words" transformed into a housing co-op. Various of its supporters were being evicted from their homes under section 21 and similarly dubious notices, and in some cases became homeless as a result – so while campaigning on renters' rights remains absolutely necessary, someone also has to find people an affordable, healthy place to live.

Given the state of temporary and social accommodation around Hastings, it's clear the council, the landlords it pays, and our housing associations, are failing to provide much that's healthy and affordable. This is where community alternatives come in, particularly: housing co-ops. They give residents a way to apply for funding, and a structure to buy and own a building, preferably without having to pay off a landlord for the privilege.

As reported in Hastings Independent, HRH tried to acquire the sumptuous but run-down Gensing Manor in St Leonards. They put together a solid plan and arranged an impressive amount of the substantial funding required to buy the property in record time, but the then landlord refused their attempt at purchase, and instead sold the place to Roost.

Roost own a huge amount of the town through a series of companies constructed as legal bunkers to prevent their key members' assets from ever being completely taken from them, and, perhaps obviously, they're a terrible landlord. More to follow on that, dear readers.

Four Courts

Hastings Area Southern Housing Tenants Association (HASHTA) versus Southern Housing

Following waves of complaints from Hastings residents, Southern Housing shut down their local office and seemed to give up on maintaining their already overwhelmed complaints system. Residents met with the CEOs via a video call, and were promised a new

specialised team to deal with their issues, as well as new regional staff to deal with common problems such as damp and mould.

The special complaints team proceeded to do nothing – it's doubtful whether it ever meaningfully existed at all. The damp and mould squad seem to be tearing up all previous knowledge and experience; apparently they're trained in how not to resolve reported problems. Meanwhile, as bedbugs infest Four Courts and cladding falls off one of the towers, Southern Housing decide to demolish and rebuild, except they have no money to rebuild – maybe not even enough money to demolish, and anyway our region doesn't have 400 spare homes for the residents to relocate. Homeless people will have to stay homeless so that people who already have homes can continue to be housed.

Various Southern Housing tenants have written for Hex about their experiences of living under the housing association, and for some time now we've been researching the way they behave more like a developer than a social housing provider. Through "Southern Housing New Homes" they even sell directly to the open market – they're not pretending anymore, and the more you look, the less you believe they ever did pretend.

shortage of genuinely affordable housing for people already living here. Gladman's arguments as to how it would develop the site seem dishonest in places, incompetent in others. Campaigners have been compiling information about the site, including an officially undertaken flood risk report, for quite a while at savesandrockbends.co.uk.

The Old Bathing Pool, West St Leonards

Save Our Bathing pool Site (SOBS) versus West Marina St Leonards Ltd.

Hastings used to have a bathing pool. Although that's understating it. It was a championship, almost Olympic-grade swimming pool, with many diving boards dangling off of concrete towers and ample space for sunbathing. It aspired to great status, but in reality it couldn't acquire the extensive popularity and footfall it sought. After about 60 years as an oversized community amenity, it closed. Then, in 1998, Southern Water used it while building a storm drain, and put storage tanks into the space, covering it over with turf. If you remember any of our recent water crises, you might have also noticed the water tankers temporarily making the spot their home, as they transferred or filled up, or whatever they were doing.



Sandrock Bends

Save Sandrock Bends versus Gladman Ltd

Up on the Ridge, next to one of the oldest Churches in the land, is an area of nature and wildlife that links St Helens Wood and the High Weald. If nature and historical identity aren't really your thing, this site also soaks up a lot of water that would otherwise be likely to flood the town centre, Alexandra Park and the entire Blacklands area. Local transport links are fairly poor, and traffic congestion is unusually high. So it's... interesting that Hastings Council have allocated it for housing in the local plan.

More interesting still that Gladman Ltd want to build there with a focus on private dwellings to house more people from out of town, while Hastings has a 1,000+

And this is the site West Marina St Leonards Ltd – a company by two private interests – wants to 'redevelop'. History suggests that's no easy task. The current water infrastructure suggests likewise. But putting those concerns aside, the local residents have got used to their stretch of green space. Dog walking, football games, bbqs in summer. West St Leonards doesn't really have an open-air event space, except the old bathing pool. Environmental predictions also suggest that, barring extensive and expensive efforts to maintain the beach as is, the site will be underwater before long, as the tides continue their inevitable march.

Residents aren't opposed to something being done with the site, but want changes to be undertaken with genuine community involvement.



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