

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ERL-17

Harlow faces life:
Gypsies Part II

c/o 201 East 28th St.
New York 10016
5 February 1969

Mr. R. H. Nolte
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

At the end of the last heart warming installment of our story, "Harlow faces life and gypsies", the situation was this: the people's elected representatives, the Harlow Urban District Council, seized the spirit of a request from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government to County Councils two years ago and set about finding a place in Harlow for a gypsy caravan site. Although it was not the Council's intention or even within its powers, to purchase and or construct the camp, the HUDC volunteered to maintain and supervise a suitable installation. In October 1968 the HUDC announced its choice of a site. The residents of Tany's Dell, one of the oldest neighborhoods in the new town were furious and grew frenzied with rage and previously untested prejudice at the thought of gypsies at the bottom of their gardens. They petitioned, wrote letters, muttered over coffee clutches and showed little interest in the problem of breaking the poverty cycle which dooms gypsies and other travelers to a nearly fugitive existence at the edge of modern British life. (see ERL-13) The Harlow Development Corporation, which owns the Council "designated" land in Tany's Dell and is ultimately responsible to the Ministry sponsoring gypsy settlement, sat quietly, like Tar Baby, and said nothing. The Essex County Council, noted that the Ministry suggestion had become an order and so took the HUDC position and designation "under advisement."

Nothing happened. During the spring local government elections the Conservative HUDC candidate in Tany's Dell stressed his opposition to a gypsy site in the neighborhood. He won by a reasonable margin. It was a previously firm Labor seat, but no one dared ascribe his victory to the gypsy issue, because in addition to the national swing away from Labor there were Liberal and Communist candidates cutting up the vote in the ward. It rained all summer. Parliament passed the Caravan Sites Act. A national Gypsy Council was formed. Still nothing happened.

Then, in October the HUDC agreed to accept a site it had previously rejected, but which the Harlow Development Corporation was prepared to sell to the County Council for use as a gypsy camp.

THE SITE

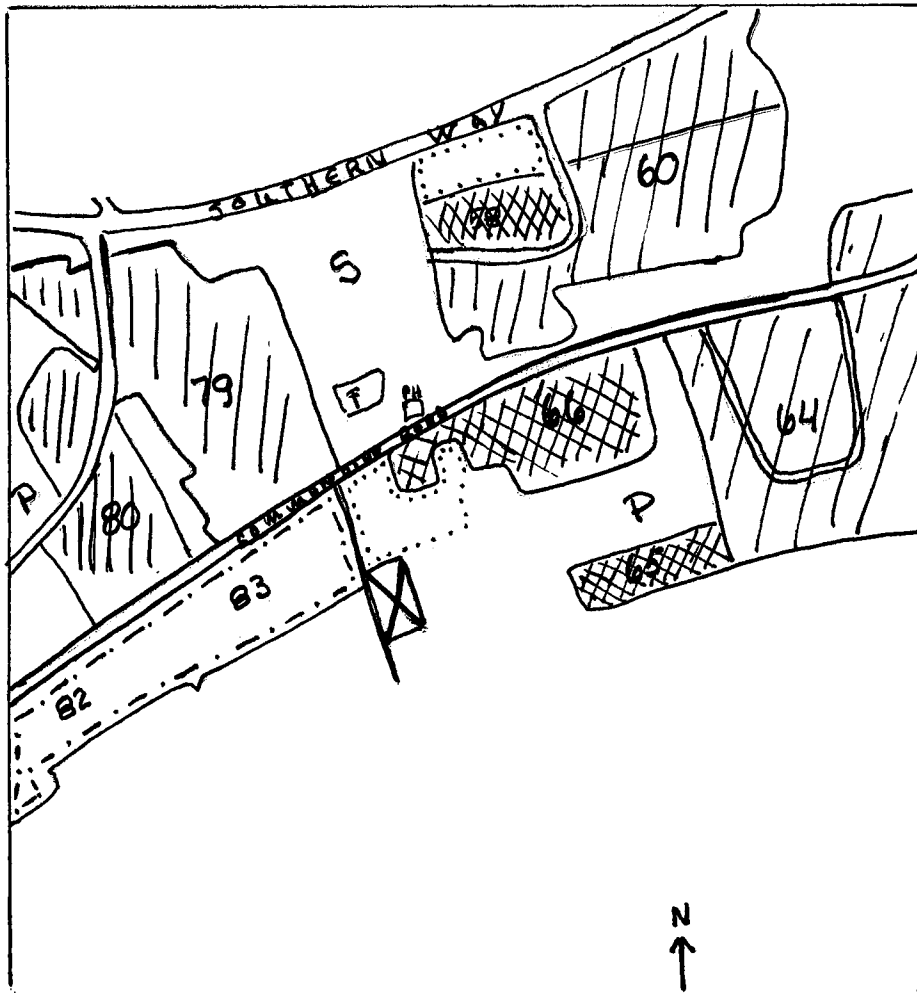
The HUDC had unanimously chosen the Tany's Dell site for plausible reasons. It was a relatively secluded area in a well established neighborhood, close to schools and shopping, with footpath access to an industrial park where there might one day be a (gypsy) scrap dealers' lot. Tany's Dell is mid-town, not far from the Town Center, but the proposed site would have been hidden from street view.

In keeping with its traditional discretion in matters of public controversy, the Development Corporation never issued a statement on gypsy sites. Its private views were known to the County and local councils. The ostensible primary objection to Tany's Dell, or at least the reason Corporation officials used most, was a matter of practical planning. To put hardstandings in Tany's Dell, a very carefully landscaped and now nearly fully grown foliage screen would be destroyed without offsetting (aesthetic) gain. The Corporation did not comment on the merits of placing gypsies in close proximity to an established neighborhood, although some individuals expressed the private view that it was a bad idea. The possibility that the Corporation's objection to Tany's Dell was related to the silent apprehension of industrialists who didn't want gypsies at the bottom of their gardens, either, never quite surfaced. There was some waffling about separating homes and work. Then the Corporation let it be known that it favored placing the gypsy camp at the edge of the new town, beyond existing housing, landscaping, and industrial establishments. This preference was phrased as a concern for gradualism, settling gypsies first in a more rural area where they might adjust quietly to living near townfolk, before coming to live among them, in houses.

The HUDC Public Health Committee rejected the Fern Hill Lane site initially on the magnanimous (magnanimous, since the HUDC was not paying), grounds that it would need expensive power and sewage installations. The Development Corporation persuaded the County Council that Fern Hill Lane was not only suitable, it was available. Eventually, after months of negotiations, the HUDC accepted the site, in order, as it were, to get the show off the road.

Fern Hill Lane cuts off Commonside Road at the southern edge of Harlow. A field of allotment gardens extends south from Commonside Road. Beyond that field will be the gypsy site, and beyond that, fields and pasture roll away into the distance. A new housing area will be built off Commonside Road on the other side of Fern Hill Lane. The designs are almost completed and construction should begin by the end of this year. The new housing area, like the two existing areas nearest the gypsy site, will be owner-occupied.

The Corporation says quietly that it favors the Fern Hill Lane site because no one will be deceived. Gypsies will not be thrust into an existing neighborhood. There is no housing next to the site and anyone buying a house in the new area will do so with the clear understanding that they will be living near gypsies. Privately, the Corporation says it is prepared to take a loss selling the houses in the new area, but doubts that it will be substantial.



X MARKS THE LOCATION OF THE FERN HILL LANE
GYPSY SITE

P	Primary School
S	Latton Bush Secondary School
F	Old Farm buildings
PH	Checquers Public House
60	Spinning Wheel Mead, rental housing completed 1960
64	Rundalls, Radburn Close, rental housing completed 1960
66	Latton Green, private development begun 1955 (West Harlow Residents Assn)
65	Hilly Field, owner built plots sold 1960
58	Sakins Croft, private development, begun 1958
79	Clark Hill - Fern Hill, rental housing completed 1969
80	Lower Meadow, rental housing, completed 1968
82-83	Design stage owner occupancy housing

The major response has come from residents of the nearest owner occupied houses in Hilly Field and, more tendentially, from Latton Green. Latton Green was the first privately developed housing area built in Harlow. The houses sold for around £2000 in the mid-fifties. Most of them are two-family houses. Unfortunately, it is one of the least successful housing areas in a town that is not blessed with much distinguished residential architecture. It has never "taken off", or stabilized into owner-occupied middle class prosperity the way, for example, the Upper Park area in Little Parndon has. There always were "For Sale" signs in Latton Green. Hilly Fields is an owner built area dating to the early sixties, but better designed and more expensive than Latton Green. Most of the houses in Hilly Fields and Latton Green have southerly exposures for the views. Some bathrooms, a few bedrooms, and a stray dormer window here and there face west, across a wide ditch, up through the trees towards the hillside at the top of which will be the gypsy site. The nearest corner of the nearest house, Latton Green to Gypsy Site, is 260 yards. There is a public house on Commonsie Road near some old farm buildings. Neighborhood shopping is less convenient than the pub, but will probably ease up after the new housing is built. Across Commonsie Road to the north a very large, new, rental area, Fern Hill-Clark Hill, has just been completed. The last families, i.e. those closest to the gypsy site, are beginning to move in. Thus far there have been no particular objections to the gypsy site from the rental areas or from the owners of a few pre-new town privately owned homes near by.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT

When I described the first round of hostilities on the gypsy issue, I criticized the Harlow Urban District Council for taking a principled position in an insensitive way. I think the members of the Council knew perfectly well that what they proposed doing was going to be widely unpopular, no matter how right it was. I thought the HUDC made a serious mistake not only by not advising residents of the areas which were being considered for gypsy sites, but by announcing their designation in an offhand way at a Council meeting. Only a few of the Tany's Dell residents understood it to be a rather empty gesture designed to force the other agencies, the Development Corporation and the County Councils to act. Moreover, I thought the Council antagonized the tax paying, law abiding, middle aged Harlowites, lulled into a stupor of complacency by new town living, whose support they most needed.

In bare outline, the procedure followed in announcing the agreed-upon gypsy site was exactly the same as with Tany's Dell. It was mentioned in the report of the HUDC Public Health Committee at the regular Council meeting. Of course this time there were speeches and it made the front page of the local papers. There was no need to pretend that it was a "democratic" decision, openly arrived at, but on the other hand, it was not necessary, although certainly in character, for Cllr. Mrs. Morris to say so bluntly, "Fern Hill is not the best site." Mrs. Morris, a bustling, high-spirited socialist of expansive convictions, had led the fight for a gypsy site

for two years. Instead of expressing satisfaction that a compromise had finally been reached and that, whatever the past had been, there was now unanimity among the agencies concerned about developing the site, she got caught up in her own always vigorous rhetoric and raised doubts about the Fern Hill site. She ended with enthusiasm, though: "Since I first raised the question in this chamber over two years ago, I have been determined, whatever the obstacles, that we, the Council and the town, shall play our part in righting one of the most scandalous wrongs in modern society. Harlow can be proud of its record in the fight for social justice. Now we are going to notch up another victory against prejudice, injustice, and under-privilege."

WHAT IS SOCIAL JUSTICE, ANYWAY?

Along with everything else in Britain nowadays, the battle for social justice manages to scrape along by continually narrowing its goals. Lately, since the rise of Enoch Powell and the admission of the complex phenomena of racism (which, for reasons I have never understood, is always called "racialism"), social justice per se seems to be on the skids. The British have always been very good about alms baskets, and charity drives. The habitual pocket change generosity of the ordinary man in the street is noticeable only to foreigners. Biafra relief, Viet Nam relief, various collection drives - all do well - they appeal to charitable instincts while simultaneously reminding the English of how well off they really are. Commonwealth immigrants, as opposed to the steady stream of white European immigrants, raise hackles, fears, and prices. Gypsies, who, after all, have been in Britain since the beginning of the 16th century, are still another story. Although few in number, they are conspicuous, reviled, patronized, and pushed on. Repeated public insistence that something ought to be done to solve the gypsies' problems always has unanimous approval until it gets down to the nitty gritty of where and how many. Councillor Barry, for example, is all for a gypsy site, just so long as it isn't in Tany's Dell. He greeted the Fern Hill Lane site with a certain over-eager delight, wished publicly that it had been found six months earlier so Tany's Dell need never have been upset, and generally embarrassed his Conservative colleagues with his enthusiasm. Mr. W. A. Palmer, of Latton Green, addressed the problem of numbers in a letter to the Harlow Citizen: "Cllr. Jackson's scientific arithmetic needs overhauling. Not being a scientist I used normal school methods and from a population of Great Britain of 55,000,000, of Harlow of 68,000, of gypsies of 15,000, it comes out that Harlow should have a camp of between 18 and 19 people of all ages, not his figure which I believe was between 40 and 50." Mr. Palmer's view adds a little touch of class antagonism that had hitherto been lacking in the published debate, but was typical among residents.

THE SKY IS FALLING, THE SKY IS FALLING

One characteristic holding the British new towns in a working and lower middle class population pattern is the fact that most housing is built by and then rented from the Development Corporations. Rental housing is the tradition of the working class. The government

has recently issued a report on "The Ownership and Management of Housing in the New Towns" which concludes dimly that the whole problem is complex and before new towns can become normal towns something must be done to create a more balanced home ownership pattern. The major issues the report cited are: housing finance, standards and costs, local government organization, and central-local government relationships. No single agency can solve any single problem. Meanwhile, at least 50% of the new town housing, that which is being built now and is on the boards, is for owner occupancy. Some previously rented housing may be bought by residents from the Development Corporation. Even so, more than 3/4 of the households live in rented quarters. When you buy from the Development Corporation you must pay the going area rate, which will make the price high. However, you can always sell a house back to the Corporation, and therefore you should never lose money on the transaction, especially the way housing costs are skyrocketing. Unfortunately, Latton Green and Hilly Fields were not built by the Development Corporation, so homeowners in those areas do not have the fall-back security of knowing that if they can't find a private buyer, the Corporation will always take their houses off their hands. The Latton Green families are mostly at the edge of the working class. Home ownership is a crucial fact of their lives. News of gypsies settling nearby naturally sent them into a frenzy. Regrettably, and I think, inexplicably, they were given no warning, and no advice by either the Corporation or the Council.

A West Harlow Resident association was formed in Mr. Brian Meerloo's living room in Latton Green. The HUDC's Public Relations man read the notice of the meeting in the newspaper and went along to listen. Before the meeting ended, he identified himself and offered the newborn group use of the Council Chambers to hold a public meeting. The WHRA got together an 850-signature petition opposing the gypsy site, with a few of the signatures coming from interested non-Harlowites, but it did not apply for the Chambers. The Corporation received a copy of the petition. The local papers fairly crackled with outraged letters from citizens for and against the gypsy site.

To the annoyance of pro-gypsy residents of the western parts of Harlow, membership in the WHRA seemed limited to, or at least highly concentrated among, Latton Green householders. The WHRA anti-gypsy letters focused on the property owners fear that mere proximity to the gypsy site would inevitably produce catastrophic devaluation of their investments. The tone of their opposition reveals a Hobbesian view of the harshness of society and the precarious rule of law. Mrs. Meerloo, for example, feels "that it would be an extremely good thing for these people to be made to abide by the same laws and regulations that apply to the rest of the community." What really bothers Mrs. Meerloo about the unsightly condition of the Hertfordshire County gypsy sites, which are along the main A road is that they are an eye-sore "in spite of the fact that one of the sites has an ex-Policeman as a Warden."

In the same bitter spirit Mrs. Coleman, who organized the Tany's Dell opposition last year, proposed "the Council Committee arrange a meeting with 12 representatives (one from each of the gypsy families destined to come to Harlow), and offer each in turn, either a house or a flat, in different parts of town (not all together.) . . . Each family would then become rent and ratepayers like the rest of us. They would also pay rent for either a garage or hard standing for their car or lorry."

The pro gypsy letters ranged widely on the issue. A few dealt with the Christian aspects of turning away travellers at the Christmas season. Mrs. Crossland included some practical information while praising the example of the Bromley, Kent, Council which managed the filth and litter problem by providing a separate work area for gypsies at the local tip (dump.)

An Old Orchard homeowner, Mr Marr, spoke for some of his neighbors in greater West Harlow: "It is deliberately misleading for Mr. Meerloo and company to adopt the grandiose title of West Harlow Residents Association. In no sense can these few people from Latton Green claim to represent the view of the majority of citizens living west of anywhere in Harlow. . . . Devaluation would only occur if this hysterical campaign succeeds in discouraging any prospective house purchaser. The responsibility, should this happen, would lie with the residents, and not the Council or the gypsies."

Mr. Sandman mused: "The gypsies have my most profound sympathy. They are the ideal target for the cowardly attacks of bigots. Due to poor education they cannot answer back. They are poor, and like all the poor, their standards are not those of middle-class snobs. . . . Personally, I like gypsies, trams, trolleybuses and steam radios! They evoke memories of childhood."

The MP, Stan Newens, brought the whole issue back to recent history and political principle: His letter to Mr. Meerloo appeared in both local papers: "Having lived in this area since 1939, I can remember when many of the original inhabitants of this area objected very strongly to those who would move into this area if a new town were created, since their property, which was in many cases more highly rated than yours, would, in fact, be devalued by the creation of a new town. The Labour Party, to which I belong, argued that people would be housed and therefore the town was created and people like yourselves were able to move into a very pleasant area, I am delighted to say."

The second week in December three gypsy caravans settled down in a private field in Roydon, the next village over from Harlow. They were removed without notice after 72 hours by police and the property owner in his tractor. The woman minding the caravans and the small children told the police her daughter was in the County Hospital, but she had no address to give the hospital authorities. She and her family had applied to another gypsy site, but the waiting list there was two years. She asked if she could pay rent to stay in the field. When the gypsy men returned in late afternoon, the caravans were in the ditch and the entryway to the field was barred. They left in the night. The story was reported in the local papers.

THE MEETING

When it was clear that the WHRA was not going to sponsor a public meeting on the gypsy issue, the HUDC took the initiative. There was precedent, of sorts, for a Council run public meeting with no purpose other than the airing of grievances on a specific issue. When the expansion of Stansted airfield into the third London jetport seemed imminent and inevitable, there was a meeting to register Harlow's condemnation. That was two years ago, and the issue has not yet been resolved.

The Council Chambers were re-arranged: the Chairman sat on the dais flanked by the deputy Clerk and the Vice Chairman. Beneath them, facing the audience, sat distinguished speakers: the Labor Leader of the Council, Martin Lawn (replacing Mrs. Morris as Council spokesman on the issue); two members of the WHRA, Mr. Meerloo and Mr. Bumstead; a representative of the Essex County temporary accommodations committee, and Mr. Gratton Puxton, chairman of the newly formed Gypsy Council. Mr. Newens was unable to attend and the Corporation declined to send an official representative.

People started arriving as early as 6:30. The Chair called for order at 7:30 and there was an immediate motion to adjourn because one of the papers incorrectly listed the time as 8:00. Eventually over 300 people crowded into the Council Chambers which are comfortably full with 90. It was, by all accounts, a rip snorting meeting.

Give and take, you might call it. The audience gave the Council an unending and undisciplined shower of verbal abuse, much in the tactical manner of today's collegiate confrontation politics, and the Council took it. While heckling speakers is in the best British tradition, this particular kind of sustained uproar surprised everyone. A friend wrote "I was horrified by the attitudes and ungovernable outbursts of the opponents. The women were especially nasty. At several points the Chairman couldn't raise his voice above the hullabaloo. . . . I gather the police were expecting real trouble as they had a number of plain clothes men in the audience." Another friend wrote "If that is what owning a house does for one, I would rather live in rented property."

The speakers, for the most part, operated at cross purposes. Mr. Puxton, for example, discussed comparative costs, £400-500 for caravan hardstandings as temporary accommodation, as opposed to £4000 for a house. Mr. Bumstead said his wife was now so nervous he would have to move anyway. Mr. Meerloo thought the subject needed more thought because he'd found six other sites in Harlow.

Finally, Martin Lawn, who is a particularly deft speaker, summed up. He was blunt and reasoned. He stressed the universal agreement that gypsies ought to be able to settle down, and explained simply that "someone had to decide." Given the decision, the careful precautions, plans, and procedures anticipated in construction and administration of a 12 caravan site, there was virtually no chance that the Fern Hill Lane gypsy standing could be stopped.

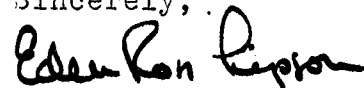
With the melancholy observation that "there is just one week of Human Rights Year left", the Chairman wished the audience a Merry Christmas and adjourned the meeting.

POSTSCRIPT

While I was back in Harlow in January I made a special point of going out to the Fern Hill Lane site. It was a misty grey winter's afternoon. I noticed two "For Sale" signs in Latton Green, no more cars than usual in front of the pub, and a horrible lot of rubbish along Fern Hill Lane. We couldn't decide if it was a lover's lane, a camp site, or being deliberately littered. Looking across the fields we saw blank walls of houses behind the trees. There were ring necked pheasant feeding where the hardstandings will be next year.

There is no doubt in my mind that Harlow can, and will, absorb twelve gypsy families. It won't, however, be easy, and it will take time. I suspect the original twelve families will long since be housed and paying proper rents before people completely forget that they were gypsies. I still think that the battle for social justice in Harlow could have been better planned. The gypsy issue was a case study of how to magnify community anxiety, not allay it. Yet the leadership responsible had the best intentions in the world. One can only wonder if any lessons have been learned.

Sincerely, .



Eden Ross Lipson

Received in New York February 18, 1969.