

LAST ONE OUT PLEASE CLOSE THE GATEWAY

A report looking into the causes, effects and remedies of the problems of abandonment and decline in our neighbourhood in West Hull.

With the South of the country unable to meet the demand for housing, and with property prices reaching new highs across the country, should we be considering pulling down thousands of houses in the North?

Can we stop the sprawl of new housing development outside the City's boundaries that so often destroys both the inner city and the countryside simultaneously?

How can we arrest the deterioration that anti-social behaviour and an out of control private rented housing market are causing in West Hull?

As demolition and new build will be so expensive, disruptive and destructive why not renovate and reinvigorate our legacy of Victorian houses to create attractive and genuinely mixed communities?

demolish, *dī-mol'ish*, v.t. to lay in ruins: to destroy, put an end to.—*n.* **demoli'tion** (*dem-ō-*), act of pulling down: ruin. [Fr. *démolir*—L. *dēmōliri*, to throw down—*dē*, down, and *mōliri*, to build—*mōlēs*, a heap.]

renovate, *ren'ō-vāt*, v.t. to renew or make new again: to make as if new: to regenerate.—*ns.* **renovā'tion; ren'ovātor.** [L. *re-*, again, *novāre*, -*ātum*, to make new—*novus*, new.]

PROLOGUE

If you take the time to wander around West Hull it soon becomes apparent that our city has taken little care of its architectural heritage. You could take a walk to the waterfront and see the mess that has been made where once was a dock. Part has been filled in and built on, the other part left to rot along with many fine old buildings. A pile of huge monoliths of York stone block a road which goes nowhere. Closer inspection reveals that these were once part of the wall of St. Andrew's Dock. Our last regeneration in the eighties bought us a new cinema and associated leisure outlets; these are already boarded up and due for demolition. The rest of the old dock is covered in the ubiquitous retail warehouses, only accessible by car, and slowly draining the lifeblood out of the city's more central shopping areas.

Walk back towards Hessle Road past the outsized retail silo that is ASDA, built on the site of old tram sheds. From here you can see the façade of the Eureka cinema, a building that had its roof deliberately removed some years ago to hasten its demise. Soon it will be pulled down to make way for a budget supermarket, buildings famed for their ugly low grade architecture. Continue down Hessle Road to Wellsted Street, one of the streets facing a very uncertain future in the latest phase of the demolition of West Hull. Some of the best quality smaller type houses are to be found here. Notice the courts, off-road terraces of houses, a rare sight anywhere in the UK. Wellsted Street today is a sorry sight; neglect, botched renovation and mess. As you head out of the neighbourhood take a peek over Argyll Street Bridge and see two old railway cottages in a small oasis of green. The plan? To demolish them of course!

Nostalgia? Times must move on, buildings must be renewed, new facilities provided for an ever changing world. Absolutely. But which other cities would have filled in their docks to build shoe warehouses? New houses, urban parkland, cafes and bars could have been incorporated around this expanse of water, old dock buildings could have been transformed into housing, shops and leisure facilities. Tram sheds? Well other cities have used such buildings for hosting markets or even theatre space. For the Eureka cinema it is probably too late, but surely the façade could have fronted some new building. As for our housing heritage there is still time, sure work will have to be done, but to demolish whole streets? Who will step forward and point to the fine new buildings and houses that have been constructed in the last thirty years? The UCI cinema? ASDA? St. Andrew's Square? Various clusters of Neo-Georgian semis scattered here and there.

And surely this is the rub. If we are going to rip down whole neighbourhoods then we have to be very certain that what we replace them with will be better. Look better, be made of better materials, relate to the landscape better and age better. With buildings we have to take the long view, a view longer than even that of our own lives. The Sixties are there to haunt us. People easily persuaded out of their terraces by the appeal of central heating and homes in the sky. Some of these new developments worked, some of the houses demolished certainly needed to be. Much of what happened was an unmitigated disaster, leaving local authorities still paying off the construction costs of flats that they had already demolished. Have the lessons of those times already been forgotten? We cannot resort to radical surgery on our neighbourhood based on present conditions, and projections about future trends and patterns that often prove to be wrong. Do we have the right to pull down hundreds of houses just because today many are empty?

HOW WE GOT HERE

It is most important that we understand why so many houses have become empty and why parts of our neighbourhood have become so degraded. It is important because if the houses were full and the neighbourhood was flourishing (or even just plodding along) then would anyone really be talking about demolition?

We are told that the condition that we are suffering from is "Market Failure". Strictly speaking this is not the case as houses prices have continued to rise, even in the most troubled streets. Houses in Wellsted Street for instance are currently not far off their highest ever values achieved in the late Eighties. Prices were at their lowest two to three years ago.

Problems have arisen due to very local factors and also more regional factors. Dealing with the latter first, we are all aware of the drift of population from the city to the East Riding. New housing developments in towns such as Brough have exacerbated this situation, not to mention the upset that they have caused to the residents in these small towns and villages. People have chosen to live outside the city, pay their council tax to East Riding, send their kids to East Riding schools but drive into Hull for work and leisure. This is a situation that clearly has a very detrimental effect on the city.

The local factors are probably best summed up with the words "tenure" and "ownership". A symbiotic relationship has developed between slum landlords and anti social tenants. Councils have rightly decided that they are no longer prepared to house people who cause serious nuisance and distress to their neighbours. Consequently these people have looked elsewhere for accommodation and found the answer in the private rented sector. Anti social behaviour has in a sense been privatised.

For reasons that remain unclear the local authority and police force chose not to act when the problems created by anti-social people began to adversely affect our neighbourhood. Early and decisive action would have prevented first Woodcock Street and later Wellsted Street descending into what is locally referred to as "Beirut". As is widely accepted it is very difficult to deal with these problems once they have been allowed to get so out of hand. The council had a duty to take action against bad landlords and maintain the infrastructure of our neighbourhood. The police had a duty to police the area and treat its residents with the respect accorded to the rest of the region's population. Every action was taken too late. Take for instance the "100 day clear up"; everyone appreciated the hard work put in by the council workers removing all the rubbish, but it should never have been allowed to get into this mess in the first place. Basic services have not been provided in a consistent and organised way. The council behaved like a child that just tidies their room once a year when their parents have finally had enough.

Into this vacuum have come property investors. Some decent, if naïve people investing their money in the 'buy to Let' craze. Other more rapacious companies such as PPP Ltd. left a trail of fraud, anti social tenants and empty properties behind them. Many investors do not care if their properties are let or left empty, and many do not care to whom they rent their houses. As long as Housing Benefit pay up, to hell with the consequences. The council have now introduced a landlord accreditation scheme, and this is to be commended. As it is only voluntary however, the worst of the property speculators will not be regulated.

People may disagree with our analysis, or consider that other factors not mentioned here have contributed to the desertion and dereliction of parts of our neighbourhood. Whatever the case, the solution cannot lie in the wholesale destruction of streets. Sure if houses are genuinely unfit or too tightly packed together then maybe some need pulling down. As any decent builder will tell you most of these houses can soon be restored to a high standard or even adapted to incorporate some more modern features such as green energy technology. As we and many people have shown the problems have arisen due to social, political and economic reasons. Therefore the solutions must be social, economic and political: The problem is not with the houses! As said above, if the houses were fully occupied and maintained they would not be subject to demolition.

WHAT TO DO?

First off we need to start with basics. With the little things, not big radical plans or 'iconic' this or 'excellence' that. Let us make our neighbourhood okay first, then we can move forward from there. For the sake of this document let us concentrate at a street level. We will use Wellsted Street as our example of a very stressed street with the likely threat of demolition hanging over it.

1. Using the Land Registry as a resource, construct a map of ownership of the entire street. I believe they charge £2 a property but maybe a bulk discount could be negotiated. This need not take very long. This is our starting point and gives us an overall picture of ownership and to some extent tenure.
2. With every empty and neglected property contact the owners and issue them with an action plan to bring the property back into use. If need be provide grant assistance. If properties remain neglected or empty then negotiate purchase or utilise Compulsory Purchase Orders. The local authority already has the powers to do this. Grant assistance could also be offered to existing residents as an incentive for them to stay.
3. Existing residents who have been causing anti social behaviour will be required to sign up to a 'good behaviour' contract. If this is breached, after due process, they will be evicted in the same way that tenants are from council estates. The local authority already has the power to do this. They cannot be 'dumped' elsewhere but need to be given the help they need. This will almost certainly mean utilising support services provided by the council. The use of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders and Dispersal Orders may also be necessary. It should be the people who cause the problems who are removed from our streets and not as is currently the case, everyone else.
4. Co-ordinate council provided services so that rubbish is removed, graffiti cleaned, drains kept cleared, bushes pruned, grass cut, street lights/Belisha beacons maintained.... on a daily or weekly basis as appropriate. Not big clear ups once in a while.
5. Look at the whole street; can selective demolition of a house or two make things better. Can a park be relayed, a tree planted, a new light installed, a bin, a seat?
6. Look at.....

.....TENURE & OWNERSHIP

It has become apparent that in poorer neighbourhoods with a high level of private rented accommodation things cannot be left entirely to the vagaries of the free market. We have slum landlords in the traditional Rachman sense who neglect their properties and care little for who they house. We have large property investment companies taking peoples' money and investing it in properties that are managed for them. In these cases prices are often inflated and the investor is kept in the dark about what is going on with their property. As any visit to a national or local property auction will reveal we now have the investors who "buy to let" as a kind of money making hobby. Houses are bought, sometimes unseen, by people who live in other parts of the country (or world in some cases) with a view to renovating and letting them to provide a return on their money that beats the stock market or the building society. Unfortunately without any local knowledge the plan often goes horribly wrong. They either cannot let the houses at all or let them to problem tenants. Just like writing a novel or being a football manager, letting appears to be one of those lines of work that people think anyone can turn their hand to. We have been doing it for twenty years and still make mistakes!

The constantly changing ownership of properties in West Hull cannot be good for the welfare of the community. People who buy houses at auctions often realise the error of their ways and re-auction the properties. This has led to the bizarre sight of houses having their fronts painted, curtains being put in the windows and then a photo taken. After the picture has been taken the houses are boarded up and the curtains taken to the next property. The purpose of this strange exercise is to produce a good photo for the auction catalogue. Giroscope attends many property auctions and has seen the same houses sold over and over again.

Maybe when people talk in terms of radical solutions, instead of this meaning wholesale demolition we need to be radical about ownership and tenure. Can we restrict the ownership of houses in stressed neighbourhoods to locally based landlords and companies? Maybe landlord accreditation needs to be compulsory. Locally run housing companies could be set up to manage properties that have been left empty or bought off negligent and absentee landlords. Local labour could be used to renovate properties incorporating training and volunteering opportunities. These housing companies could also offer properties for owner occupation as well as to let. With the average price of houses for first time buyers going up and up attractive schemes could be offered whereby people are offered high specification renovated properties in our neighbourhood at attractive prices. For the more adventurous, derelict properties could be offered to prospective buyers committed to renovating their own property to live in. The housing company could provide back up expertise and help. Let's have lots of options and flexibility to create a genuinely mixed community.

Such schemes as above will only work of course if people feel secure. You cannot spend the day building a boundary wall for example only to come back next morning and find it destroyed. By establishing some such housing company (or companies) we will be able to locally manage tenure and help other people to own their own house. This would greatly reduce the number of anti social occupants in the neighbourhood. As for its structure? Maybe a charity, that could raise additional funding from the charitable sector, or some form of co-operative, or maybe some other not for profit community business. You create jobs, you bring in funding to a poor neighbourhood, you provide training and volunteering opportunities and best of all decent housing with a choice of tenure/ownership.

In the worst streets the few people that remain are often at their wits' end. Resignedly they think that the only solutions are to move, or for their house to be demolished. With the plans outlined above existing residents could stay in their street if they so desired or could move out, returning later when things have started to improve.

Included in this document are several maps showing the location of Wellsied Street, a close up of its present layout and a suggested layout following some very selective demolition. As cannot be stated enough the future of the street depends on issues other than the houses themselves. That said we have tried to show how maybe a small amount of work could enhance the street.

We propose removing ten houses facing on to the street to open up the entrances to the nine courts. This will also provide each court with a small occasional garden area as is already the case with Raywood Villas. Some people have proposed removing one whole terrace from each court. Although this would provide the remaining terrace with gardens it destroys the integrity of the court and the journey of two rows of houses facing each other. Contrary to popular belief not all city dwellers really want gardens and often do not have the time to maintain them.

A problem with Wellsied Street arises from the way it was laid out a hundred or so years ago. As Gee Street and Wellsied Street join at an acute angle, houses on the South West side of Gee Street 'run into' the houses on the North side of Victoria Avenue. This causes a situation where houses are just too congested. We propose demolishing ten houses on Gee Street to resolve this situation. The resultant irregular shape could be hard surfaced and perhaps used to provide some off-road parking. This would also let more light into Gee Street, which because of its orientation and height, is often considered a

WELLSTED STREET

We are led to understand that to access Pathfinder money Wellsted Street may be offered up for demolition. The street is in a shocking state and many of its houses lie empty. It will be seen in the current "newspeak" of regeneration as an "easy win" to flatten this fascinating street. The fact is that the houses on Wellsted Street are generally bigger and better than many other properties in the neighbourhood. It also has nine courts.

The courts are off-road terraces that provide exciting potential for renovation. Having lived down one for many years, I found that when they are thriving they create a wonderful little community where people look out for each other as they face out onto their neighbours. Being off-road they are ideal accommodation for young families, giving toddlers a safe environment in which to play. As the map shows, with some space created at the street end of each terrace (by demolition of one or two houses on the street) and the addition of a gate, a safe and pleasant little close is created. Raywood Villas, off Wellsted Street is a good example of the possibilities of the courts.

Maybe with its own housing company and by renovating the courts, Wellsted Street could be brought back to life. Further ideas such as 'Homezone' could be considered to make the street a more pleasant environment in which to live. The residents of Albany Street, Spring Bank could help with their experiences of being a 'Homezone'. The park down Wellsted Street is a cheerless place and should be relayed to provide an area for little kids to play and also an astroturf sports pitch for older children; even if they do not play football on it, it provides a place to 'hang out' that is not immediately outside anyone's house.

As well as superior houses Wellsted Street also boasts a corner shop. This provides a good meeting place, a useful service and valuable employment opportunities for the local residents. The street also has other non-residential buildings that offer all sorts of possibilities. Best of all you can walk to the city centre in twenty minutes, you have the shops of Hessle Road round the corner and you can be on the main road out of Hull in minutes (Should you need to go!). The Street also has pedestrian access to a very good primary school.

THE MAPS

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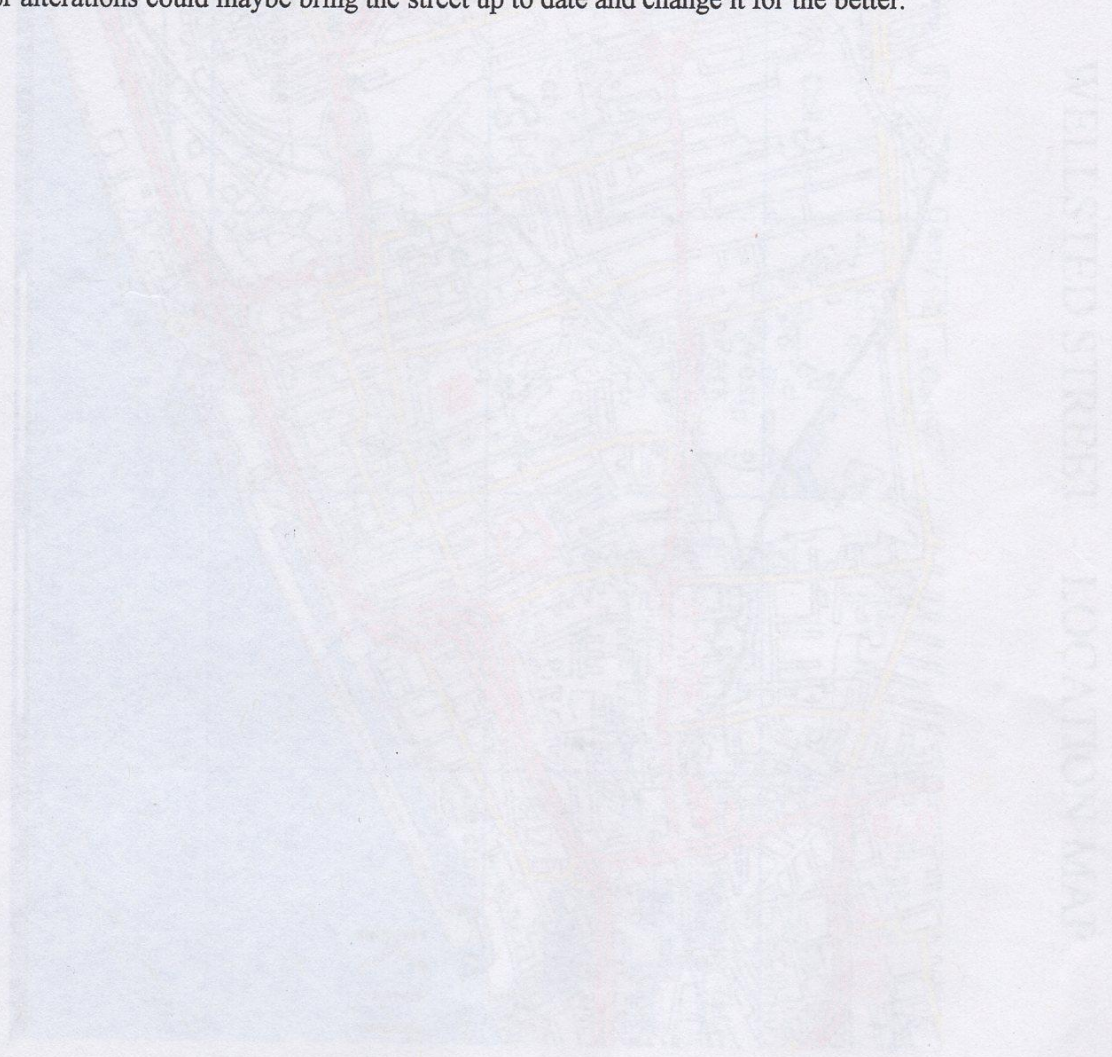
We propose removing ten houses fronting on to the street to open up the entrances to the nine courts. This will also provide each court with a small communal garden area as is already the case with Raywood Villas. Some people have proposed removing one whole terrace from each court. Although this would provide the remaining terrace with gardens it destroys the integrity of the court and the intimacy of two rows of houses facing each other. Contrary to popular belief not all city dwellers really want gardens and often do not have the time to maintain them.

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little gloomy. We also propose removing three houses from the North West corner of Gee Street. These houses are very small and are perennially vacant. The resultant space would be small but could perhaps be used for off-road parking or even seating. Alternatively the houses could be left and knocked together to provide accommodation for a larger family.

As mentioned elsewhere, the park is improved by the addition of an astroturf sports pitch and a play area for younger children. The school could reconnect a little more with the street by sharing another astroturf pitch, maybe having sole use during school time. We believe that Wellsted Street should also have an access to Constable Street, to open things up and stop people cutting across the school grounds. In the past the residents of Constable/Riston Street have objected to being connected to Wellsted Street. As our plan is to improve the Street and eradicate anti social behaviour hopefully these objections would subside.

We have not considered 'Homezoning' on the map but feel that both Wellsted and Gee Street could well benefit from such a concept. What we have forwarded is just one idea. We just mean to show that a few minor alterations could maybe bring the street up to date and change it for the better.



While