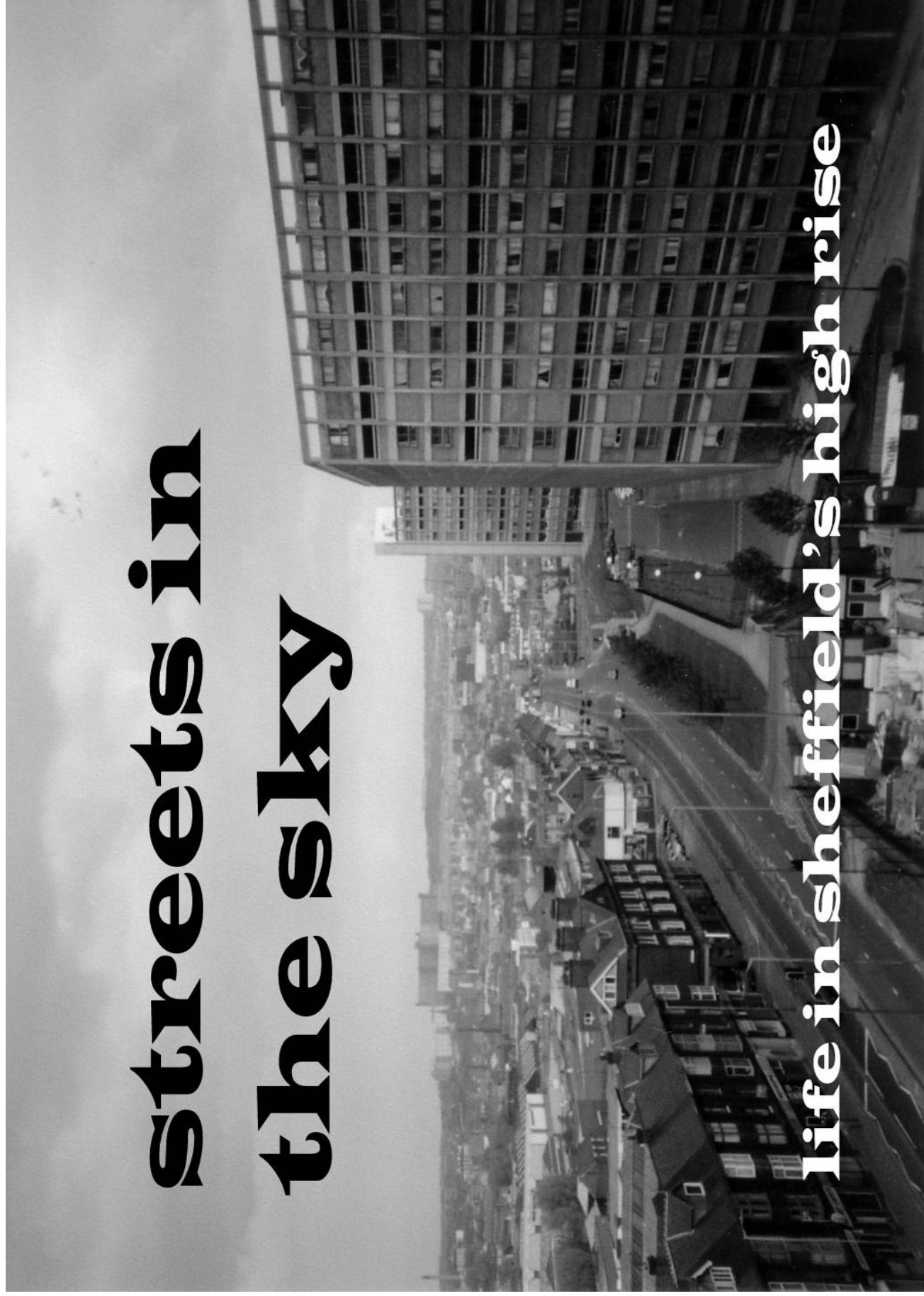


streets in the sky

life in sheffield's high rise



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Sheffield-born photographer and musician Peter Jones lived for ten years on Sheffield's three infamous estates: Kelvin, Hyde Park and Park Hill.

Now for the first time you can read the inside story of life on Sheffield's high rise.

Part one: Kelvin Flats is the no-holds barred story of three years spent surviving one of Sheffield's most notorious estates.

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more information: kelvin_flats@yahoo.co.uk

Streets in the Sky

For the first time ever, the story of Sheffield's three deck-access estates of Park Hill, Kelvin and Hyde Park are told here, in depth, from the inside, no holds barred.

This is not an academic report. This isn't a study. This is the real thing: a decade of life in the sky, told by someone who was there, with his camera and his sketchbook: like an unpaid artist in residence.

In the pages ahead you will discover why I had a breakdown at Park Hill. How I had to battle with what I considered a dictatorial management at Hyde Park. You will find out how I survived Kelvin flats by losing myself in a world of rock 'n' roll and shoplifting.

You will hear the true stories of neighbours who threw the furniture around night after night. Tenants who jumped from the roof. Even one who murdered her own husband.

On a lighter side, get inside those tenants meetings that tried to put things right. See the outside community grant-aided organisations from the point of view of a tenant. Discover what made people want to stay on places like Sheffield's notorious Kelvin flats, and what made others want to leave.

And why did I find it necessary to flit from one estate to the next, forever in search of the utopia of English council estates?

Why was it so difficult to adapt to life on the ground after ten years of streets in the sky? So difficult in fact that I eventually bought a twelfth floor flat and gave up a two bedroom semi?

In the pages ahead you shall discover the answers to all these questions. You will find out, perhaps for the first time, what living in a block of flats designed for 2,000 people does to a person; what the effect is of living on £28; how creating a sense of community and belonging became essential to survive, and how feeling isolated from the rest of society meant there was a close bond between all the members and tenants of the various estates.

You will discover how the complete refurbishment of an estate led to a seismic change in the character and atmosphere of its surroundings. You will read arguments that debunk the myths about council estate living: for instance, many people in fact not only choose places like Kelvin flats, but they move back there after moving away. You will discover why places such as Kelvin have their own atmosphere that cannot be created in normal housing estates.

You will read this book and never be the same again: somewhere, a council flat awaits you.

Peter Jones

Hull June 2007

Chapter one: Moving In



It was a cold and foggy February morning the day I moved in to Kelvin flats.

Well it was cold anyway. And it was probable foggy. It was definitely moody, memorable and a bit scary.

The man who helped me move, the local man-with-a-van, was very quiet that day, and deadly quiet as he helped move my belongings along the landing. He was more scared than I was!

Me, I'd done my research on the place. I'd hung around the landings, and asked people if Kelvin flats was okay as I was thinking of moving in.

One old geezer told me it was fine...:

“I've just divorced from my wife” he told me, “the council gave me a flat on Kelvin”.

He took a key from his pocket, showed it me and said: “I've got my own key”. In fact he said it about three times, as if to emphasise his new found freedom.

Just then a tramp walked past, pissed out of his head. My new friend with the key turned to me and conceded: “Of course there are one or two problems....but they're closing in all the landings to make 'em more secure, to stop just anyone wandering in”.

That was okay then . I was sold. I was moving to Kelvin flats.

Not that I had much choice: I had deliberately made myself homeless in order to get a council flat. I knew the choice would be Kelvin, Kelvin or Kelvin. But I told the housing officer that that was fine as I liked high rise. The officer sighed in disbelief, turned away and said “there's always one isn't there!”

What he didn't know was that I was only moving there to write a book about it ten years later, and to take some photographs,

In fact seriously I didn't expect to be there more than a year...it was just a way of getting my foot in the council door, of becoming a council tenant, of acquiring a cherished Sheffield city council rent book, along with all the rights and with all the very few obligations.

So few obligations that you didn't even have to pay your rent in those days! If you got behind by say £1000, the naïve socialist council just wrote you a polite letter saying they understood your circumstances (i.e. that you were spending all your money down the Halfpenny pub) and could you please pay the rent or....or.....or....well or nothing really!

So in I moved.

End of chapter one

Chapter Two: Tenants Association

Kelvin flats was a lonely place to move to: 1,000 flats and almost 2,500 people, yet I only knew two of those people back in February 1989 when I moved in.

But good news: through my letter-box arrived the Kelvin tenants' news sheet. I was not alone. There were thousands of other lonely people, who by hook or by crook at also ended up at this godforsaken place.

I spent many an hour in my new very warm bathroom reading that Kelvin news sheet: suddenly I was part of something. I had a future. People would understand. I belonged.

What's more the community had a photographic darkroom, a recording studio, cafe, local library, tenants' meeting rooms, trips to the seaside, and trips abroad (these had been halted due to bad publicity from the national press regarding wasting taxpayers' money: no more trips abroad!).

Yes I decided, I was going to enjoy my stay at Costa-del-Kelvin. The tenants' association associated alright....most of them were related, and if they weren't now they would be soon!

After a year or so I was well-know enough to get myself elected onto the committee. At the election meeting I was recommended by the lady who cleaned everybody's windows. With just one mutter of "Oh yes, Pete's alright," forty other hands followed hers up into the air and I was in.

And what a wasps' nest I had walked into! There was a backlog of years of in-fighting and accusations of thefts, corruption and inappropriate use of funds. The new committee I was on felt like New Labour in 1997, trying to clean up years of sleaze and neglect!

On a lighter side, we dished out free butter and free EEC meat, held meetings, and re-audited the books (the accounts had been illegally censored with tip-ex!). But what thanks did we get? Just a load of hassle and veiled threats off some of the people who HADN'T been elected!

Nor were the freebies we dished out appreciated either: we once took a delivery of hundreds of tins of EEC meat, the surplus stuff that was probably due to be turned into fertiliser. I gave mine to a stray dog which wandered into my flat. The dog was just skin and bone but the meat must have been just fat and gristle because even the dying dog spat it out!

So that's just what I had to do with the tenants' association: I had to spit 'em out! Luckily I managed to resign without making any enemies. In fact I seemed to have more friends now that I was free again to speak my political mind. No wonder politicians resign to spend more time with their family. And I didn't even have a family.

Although if I stayed on the flats much longer I'd soon have on of them too!

Chapter three: Free trips abroad

One thing i noticed on Kelvin was that pretty much everything was free, even the goods in the supermarket next door (more of that later).

But the most exciting freebie-story even made it into the national papers: tenants on estates like Kelvin were being given free trips abroad, all at the taxpayers' expense. These were curbed. You could now still go to the seaside, but you had to stop at, say, Dover, and pay your own way to say, Calais.

And the fun didn't stop there: there were funds for everything, from community music equipment to community video cameras, community televisions and video recorders....in fact any consumer item that had the word "community" tagged in front could be bought with a grant.

The grants were controlled by the tenants themselves: part of the patronising phoney democracy of the eighties: let the tenants vote on what to spent the regeneration money on.

Not that it was called regeneration money. In fact I'm not sure what it was called, where it came from or why. All I know is video cameras, video recorders, multi-track recording studios and the like just seemed to appear out of nowhere and were made available to everyone.

It was all something to do with Kelvin being labelled as "an area of acute poverty". I laughed when I first heard that term. Looking back it was an accurate description, but in the thick of it you hardly noticed the kids going to the shops in their slippers to buy one teabag for 2p or a cigarette for 12p.

It was almost as if just because the building was more than four stories tall, and a bit big, you automatically qualified for charity. It was as if everyone outside Kelvin was singing, in the words of Band Aid, "Tonight thank God it's them in stead of yooooo," and pouring the contents of their purses and wallets into a collection tray marked "new colour TV for the tenants of Kelvin flats".

In fact I know for certain this is what happened, because twice I had visits from two nice ladies from the Prince's trust. They sat on my moth-ridden settee, whilst I sat on my non-carpeted floor and explained why I wanted £250 to build a community recording studio in my bedroom.

They made some notes, did some research and my cheque arrived three weeks later. Almost as quick as a Giro.

I did actually build a studio. I recorded a total of 30 different people, mostly unemployed and mostly from Kelvin, so Prince Charles actually got good value out of me...

end of chapter three

Chapter Four: Free Rehearsal Space

Rehearsal



One of the best thing about living on Kelvin flats was that everything was free...including rehearsal space for punk rock bands.

My band was called the Fuck City Shitters. We shortened this to F.C.S. whenever we played community events like carnivals and fetes. We told everyone that F.C.S. stood for freshly cut sandwiches, and we dropped the dirtier songs like *One Fuck and You're Dead* and *You can't catch A.I.D.S. from rock 'n' roll*.

We told everyone we were a nice covers band.

The rehearsal rooms were at an old, now-demolished school off Infirmary Road called the Philadelphia Centre. In those days Sheffield was awash with abandoned schools, standing isolated on cobbled streets where the houses had been long since been demolished. Bright sparks in the council would come along and rescue them for community use.

Not such a good idea to let the Fuck City Shitters use them though: we often practiced next door to the group who had driven from Hunters Bar for their yoga class. Not so

easy to meditate on peace and harmony whilst the Fuck City Shitters were yelling “I’ve got rock ‘n’ roll running through my veins” in the next room.

All the practice rooms were those nice wooden high-ceilinged Victorian classrooms, which sounded great when you stuck a drum kit on the middle and bashed it loudly.

The rooms were also used for music workshops, a sort of free-for-all where people of varying ability (or no ability) were thrown together in a room to see what would happen....sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't!

In return for use of the rooms, I had to agree to offer my skills, which back then was for publicity and P.R. work, so I became the official unpaid publicist for Kelvin Music Productions...still going strong today as Kelvin Media Productions.

I even got us onto Rony Robinson's 'live' morning show on the BBC. I invited Rony to wander the landings talking to people. He turned up early one morning. He hadn't rung to check I was in as people didn't have phones on Kelvin in the 1980's and 1990's. He knocked on my door whilst broadcasting 'live'. No answer. I was out. End of programme.

He came back the next day and we did the show, starting off by broadcasting 'live' from my bedroom, which he described as “extraordinary”.

“What's extraordinary about it?” I asked Rony. For the benefit of listeners, Rony described the bare wall at one end of the room, stripped of wallpaper, which every visitor had to sign in thick felt tips, including the council workmen, and at the floor-to-ceiling posters from my various gigs pasted onto every other wall.

The programme went well, and I have ever since been ringing his phone in. I even once got to play my keyboard on the show, doing cover versions of TV theme tunes. Although that's nothing to do with Kelvin flats. I've got to leave that bit out....

End of Chapter four

Chapter Five: Plans, plans, plans



Kelvin flats was constantly one big building site. Diggers would dig, repair men would repair, abseilers would abseil down the sides of the flats, chipping out the loose concrete before it fell off and killed someone.

Kelvin Walk, the lower landing, was made secure: the open landings were enclosed with glass and posh rubber flooring put in...and benches! It became known as the “submarine” due to its claustrophobic and bizarre design. It was an experiment to move away from the concept of a street in the sky, and instead become a corridor in hell: all the noise became trapped, kids playing could now be heard in every flat, and new fire regulations meant that the whole project had to be abandoned. Meanwhile vandals discovered that the new fibre-glass fittings weren't as tough as they looked, and with a bit of bashing you could crack 'em and pull out all that odd-looking itchy wool stuff from underneath.

Meetings were held day and night to co-ordinate the efforts to make Kelvin desirable to live in. The tenants were asked what they wanted painting on the giant lift shaft. There were proposals from the council for some sort of mural. Typical! If there's a crap estate, paint a mural on it and no-one will notice! In fact where ever you see a mural, you can be sure that social problems are just around the corner.

The tenants realised this, and sensibly opted for a nice, modernist, striped blue design, which nicely emphasised the impressive height of the building, rather than foolishly trying to disguise it.

It looked great while it lasted, but the whole building was condemned to demolition about three years later.

However, while the decisions about the future of the flats were still being made, another ten million pounds was poured into making a CCTV system and reception area, which was constantly breaking down.

With hindsight I think the council were treated unfairly by the tenants: everything the council tried to do to improve things, the tenants “pooh-poohed” and found fault.

In my opinion, just the sight of the constant work and effort at least raised morale, and you always felt that somehow Kelvin was just about to turn the corner and get better. Tomorrow...or the day after...or the day after....

End of Chapter Five

Chapter Six: New Doors

New doors for old! If you saw the old front doors on Kelvin you would realise why years were spent planning their replacement: the original front doors were hollow, strengthened inside by cardboard. The locks were two-lever, which meant that, given that there were nearly 1,000 flats, each person's front door key fitted about three other doors. Useful if you've got friends. Terrifying if you've got enemies!

On top of that, there used to be a little hatch for the milk delivery. This was meant to be used by the milkman, and they enabled a person to fetch the milk out of the hatch without bending down or even going outside.

It also meant that any robber small enough to crawl through, or cruel enough to send their little five year old brother through, could gain access to your flat, *and* steal the milk on the way out!

So meetings were held, imaginatively titled the New Doors Meetings.

We all ended up with doors set in concrete, made out of virtually unbreakable materials and with security locks which alone cost around £100 each.

The total cost of filling in the milk hatch and the glass with concrete and fitting the new doors and locks was...wait for it.....£1,000!

PER DOOR!!!

Not only that, but from the day of removing the old door to the new one being completely finished and repainted was SIX MONTHS!

And to add to the fun, tenants were PAID for having them! The going rate was £56 gift with each door, to “compensate” for the hassle of having the work done for you for nothing!

And did people stop complaining? Not on yer nelly! Here's a rundown of reasons why people's lives were blighted by their free new £1,000 doors:

- 1: the letter boxes snapped shut too quickly
- 2: anyone could smash the so-called security glass, reach through, turn the security lock and rob your house. (This was a valid gripe: fire regulations meant it had to be easy to gain access. May as well have kept the old cardboard doors then!)
- 3: the door knobs were difficult to turn.
- 4: they were too heavy to open
- 5: your kids could escape at night whereas before they needed a key to get out.

While all these complaints had some truth in them, the reason some people became so irate about them was, in my opinion, because there was a general lack of feeling of control over your own life on Kelvin.

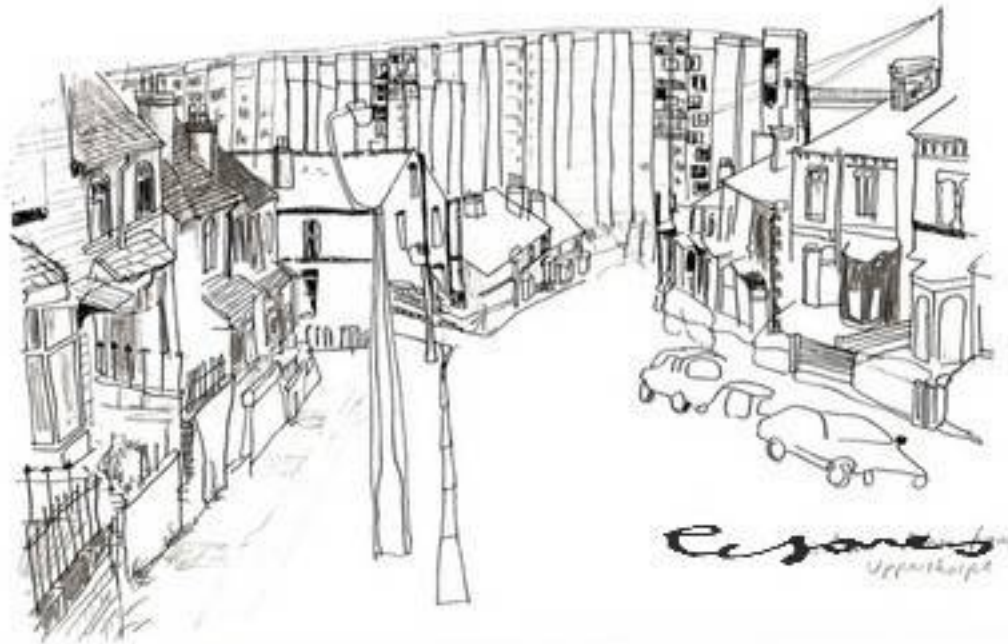
Many of Kelvin problems weren't the flats, which inside were lovely, or the surroundings, which at the back were nicer still, or the facilities, which were a-plenty...no, it was more a feeling of not being in charge, of not being King of your own castle. This had more to do with lack of available paid work, and the stigma attached to living on the estate, which was caused by the press demonising the place and by Kelvin being the first port of call for people with problems or a criminal history.

New doors or not, most of the people behind them were the most down to earth, trustworthy and friendly people you would ever be likely to meet.

I've lived on five other estates since I left, and I have never found the same strong sense of community that Kelvin flats had.

End of chapter six

Chapter Seven: Whose kid is that?



Not that I want to give the impression that Kelvin flats was one big knocking shop but....it was.

Here's an example of a real-life chat-up line leading to shag and possible sprog:

Scene: back of Kelvin. Two lads on top floor balcony. Two girls walking along the path at the bottom of the flats.

Lads: Hey you, y' slags!

Lasses (looking up interested): What?

Lads: You y' slaaags! Come up t' flat!

Lasses: you got any blow?

Lads: yeah.

Lasses: Okay, what number?

And that's it. Don't even have to buy a drink.

In fact the longer I stayed at Kelvin, the more I realised that somewhere along the line, almost everybody was related. Or at the very least, most people were somebody else's ex, and their ex also lived next door. A lot of the rivalries were between one

extended family and another. Even after a family split, the parents would just get separate flats on the same block, and Kelvin became more and more like one big happy family.

Why live in misery together when you can live happily on the next landing up!

Another conversation I remember was with a neighbour on the landing:

Woman: That John [name changed] thinks I don't know that he's been messing about with other women. He's down that f***ing pub every night. I know what he's up to. He thinks I can't do the same. Well I f***ing am doing. He thinks I'm not having my way but I am.

Me (just listening quietly): Hmmmm

And another:

My friend Daz (another name change): I know that girl down the landing.

Me: Really? How come you know her?

Friend: I knew her at school. She asked me to be her pimp.

Now I'm probably giving an unfair impression here of Kelvin being a place of loose morals. Well it kind of was and it wasn't. It was somewhere that was very tolerant, very open and which also could be very rough and nasty at times.

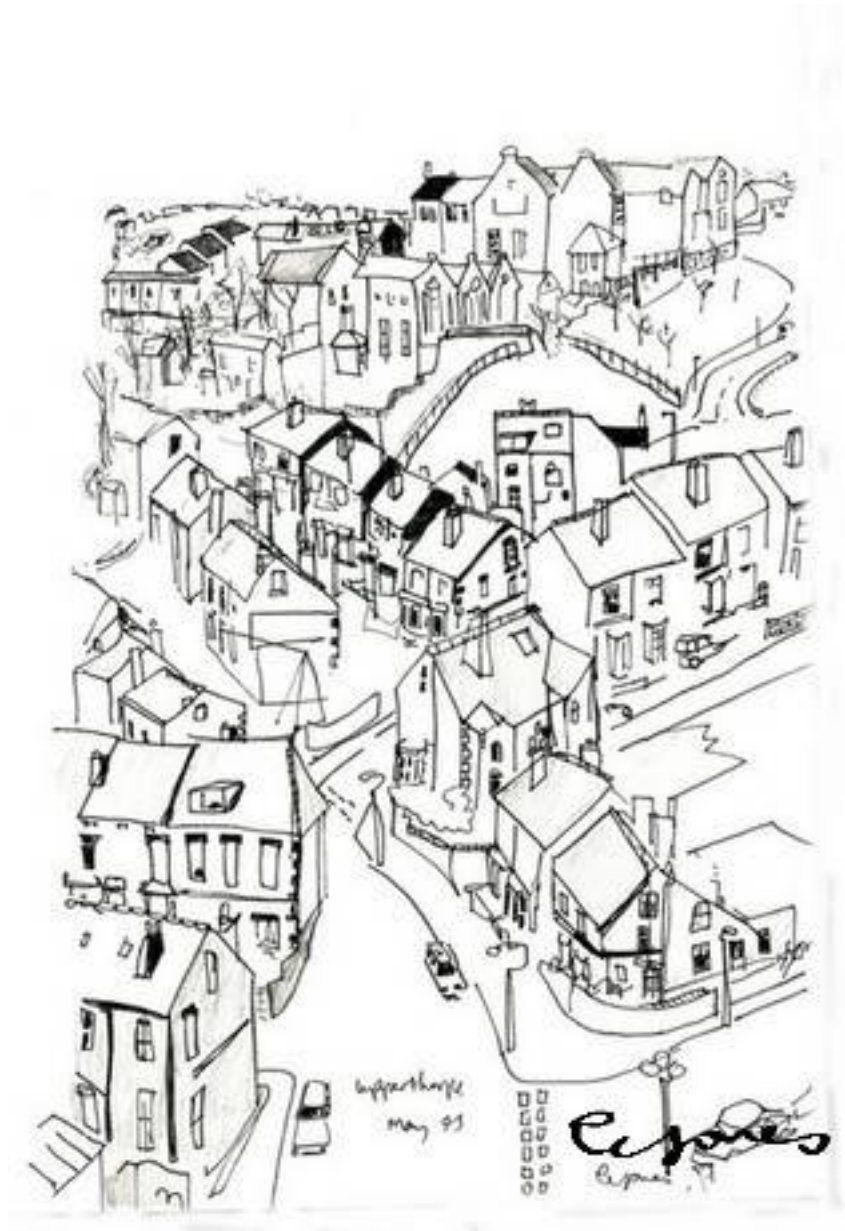
But I was only there for three years, and there was nothing about it that was any different to anywhere else, except the fact that everyone seemed to know everything that was going on. It was the gossip and openness that let you see what was happening underneath the surface. These things happen everywhere but they are usually covered up in some sort of Victorian-style hypocrisy.

In that sense Kelvin was a very honest progressive place to live.

And great if you just fancied a shag.

End of chapter seven

Chapter Eight: Betty's Shop



Betty's shop in my opinion was the real centre of the community. While the council provided community rooms and workshops, Betty provided single tea bags if you only had 2p, and single cigarettes back in the days when it was legal to split a pack of twenty.

On top of that she was concerned about your health. Most shopkeepers would sell you fags and grab your money. Not Betty. Me and a friend went in for two cigarettes and she advised us not to smoke 'em! Perhaps we should just not inhale.

Not everyone got on with Betty: if you owed her money your name would go up in the window. It is said that this is how she ended up with a boulder through the glass one night. In fact I was amazed that, for all the stories of Kelvin being rough, Betty's shop for the most part of my living on Kelvin, never had grills over the window.

Although why anyone would want to break in and steal a quarter of sherbet lemons was beyond me.

But let's not neglect the other shopkeepers, all of whom were pillars of the community in their own unknowing and unrecognised way:

There was Andy's freezer centre. Everyone I have spoken to says he *always* had something special laid aside, *just* for them!

And the pizza shop: the owner bought his ingredients in the nearby co-op, which meant he earned co-op stamps. He saved all his thousands of co-op dividend stamps just for me! This made me King of co-op stamp collectors, coming home every Sunday with two pizzas and reams and reams of stamps....and not those poxy "5's" but those luscious great big "40's", of which you only needed five or six to complete a page of a dividend book. Complete 20 pages and it was worth a pound. Exchange it on double-value day at Castle House, and it was worth two pounds, which in those days was the price of a blank video tape. Onto that tape you could fit two Norman Wisdom films. That's a whole afternoon's entertainment free with a few co-op bags of flour!

There was the little grocer's, which sold Farmer's Boy Friendly Bread cheaper than the horrible Safeway next door. And it was *friendly* bread. I once asked the owner if all those other loaves of bread were unfriendly.....

But the real boon to Kelvin shoppers came with the opening of a new Danish shop called "Netto", who's first Sheffield store opened at Walkley in 1990.

Suddenly you didn't have to be ripped-off by Safeway as you pocketed their tins of tuna: you could actually catch a bus to Walkley and be honest and *pay* for your goods!

Safeway once became the subject of a Kelvin tenants' boycott, after Safeway openly said in the local paper that a lot of Kelvin tenants were stealing from their store. There was uproar! The Kelvin newsletter told everyone to catch the 31 bus to Walkley Netto.

The funny thing was, a lot of people *were* pinching from Safeway!

Living at Kelvin made you poor: there was a compulsory flat-rate heating charge, ranging from £8 to £14 per week depending on number of bedrooms, all through the year. This was when a single person out of work received £28. Also out of that £28 came water rates and poll tax, plus electric. This left about £16 a week to live on, and this was when jobs were *very* hard to come by, especially if your address was Kelvin flats.

Safeway next door just made your income stretch that little bit further (as pushchairs became loaded up with "free" nappies in their carry-basket, and pockets filled with tins of tuna).

As did Betty's shop, and her single 2p teabags.

Chapter Nine: Exodus

All good things come to an end. Although whether or not Kelvin was a good thing or not I am still not sure of.

The inevitable happened: all the regeneration work by the council was just a smoke-screen. It gave the impression that Kelvin was there to stay, when in fact the rumours about the demolition had been drifting around the council offices since 1990. I first heard this rumour when an architect from the council, a friend of mine, visited my flat and said in no uncertain terms that Kelvin was going to go the way of all flesh.

No-one believed these rumours: this place was home. It was where your kids had been born, where you had your first married home, your first divorced home and maybe your first refuge from the street when you were homeless.

The place wasn't just a Stalinist monstrosity To you it was home: ugly from the outside, but beautiful, warm, cosy and safe on the inside.

All your friends lived there. No one across the street spoke to you. You didn't speak to those across the street. You were, to them, some sort of swamp-creature thanks to your address of "Kelvin flats".

This isolation meant you were forced to look inward, to those flat-dwellers in the same boat who knew the truth about Kelvin flats. It was like a cult.

But the state always smashes a cult: cults are unhealthy and are usually plotting revolution! It was time to move everybody out.

The decision was announced in the town hall, at a meeting in September 1992. The tenants present gave a loud cheer.

But the actual act of exodus was tinged with sadness. And how would someone who had got used to having all their friends (and enemies) around them adapt to a new life in a house on some isolated estate, where the neighbours might not talk to you anyway because of your old address?

I knew from experience how difficult it was to leave Kelvin: I had left in 1992, enticed by the glimmer and glitter of the newly-refurbished Hyde Park flats, only to find the sense of community had gone, along with the sense of ownership and sense of belonging.

All the improvements at Hyde Park, like the enclosed landings, security, and CCTV cameras all added a kind of impersonal chill to the place, yet these were the exact things that a lot of Kelvin tenants had been campaigning for for years!

So it was that around 2,500 people had to leave behind everything they had known for many years.

It was to be an unsettling, frightening and sad experience....although to be fair, to those that got decent re-housing, many also never looked back.

Chapter Ten: Farewell Kelvin



The day they began to demolish Kelvin flats was like some kind of sick, bizarre celebration, akin to a public hanging.

Ann Widdecombe, then minister for Sheffield, operated the machine which smashed through the bridge connecting the two blocks. Balloons were released into the air to “celebrate,” and some people started crying. My only thought was “How the f*** are people gonna get across that now?”

It hadn't really dawned on me that this was really *it*: Kelvin was a goner. No more streets in the sky. No more cosy flat on Edith Walk. No more chatting to neighbours on the landings. No more local pubs or community rooms as they were going too.

You couldn't even revisit your old streets. They were just a piece of sky.

An old lady had brought a bugle, and she played “the last post” just before demolition began. Some people were in tears. I had told myself not to turn up and watch as I knew it would only be upsetting, but curiosity got the better of me and I went. I took a few photos, went home and cried.

A few weeks later, and about a quarter of the massive main block was gone. Then something strange happened: they stopped. They had got as far as my old flat.

Amazingly, they left the living room wall exposed to the elements for several weeks.
(All those years of looking after that flat for nothing!)

It was bizarre to see it for so long, half a flat, 100ft up. I could even see it from the window of my new flat on Park Hill, and it prompted me to write this poem about it:

I used to stare at that wall for hours

On Sundays the Top 40 played and bounced off it

I screwed bolts into those walls to hold up the shelves

I painted my name on the concrete pillar

To mark my flat from the others

Now it stands empty

No body

No floor

Just a wall, mid-air, with the same wallpaper patterns

Growing 100ft in the air

My flying ducks have been set free

They scarpereed like the pigeons

When they heard the crash of the concrete boulder

Concrete crushes concrete

Nothing crushes memories

Looking back on Kelvin is a bit like remembering your first love: maybe she was a bit overweight and not very pretty. But she looked after you, made you a nice slap-up meal of greasy eggs and bacon. You didn't get on. She was a bitch.

But you still loved her.

