



Harry Tilman has been living in his Southwark home for 33 years

ONE LAST FIGHT FOR ELDERLY RESIDENTS FACING EVICTION

BY SALLY FITZHARRIS

Harry Tilman places a book on Winston Churchill back on his shelf between Montgomery and Nelson. "He's a great man," he says.

Mr Tilman, formerly of the Queens Royal Regiment, white-haired and 80 years old, has fighting heroes. He may need them.

Southwark Council has told Harry to get out of his home of 33 years because the land is needed for development.

"Who has the right to say to me, 'We want your home, you've got to go'?" he asks, looking on with pride around his front room, with its regency-stripe wallpaper and picture of the Battle Of Trafalgar.

In the neat rows of maisonettes central to the Heygate Estate, his neighbours are asking the same question. The estate, a mixture of concrete high-rise and maisonettes that replaced tenement buildings razed in the late-sixties, has been home to the community since the early 1970s.

About half-a-mile south of London Bridge, it is a prime location: at stake is a £1.5 billion regeneration scheme billed as 'the largest in Europe'.

Property consortia Lend Lease, Oakmayne and First Base have joined with Southwark Lib-Dem and Conservative council to give a makeover to 170 acres around the Elephant And Castle, notorious for its ugly landmark shopping complex, but close to the City and Westminster.

Residents were first promised that they could move out to new-build 'affordable' housing close by.

Now the council regeneration executive, under pressure to complete a deal with its commercial partner Lend Lease, has passed a resolution to empty the estate by September 2009, two years earlier than planned.

Not one of the much-advertised 16 housing association sites in the area, designed for Heygate residents, has been built, and tenants have been told they must find their own temporary

accommodation outside the area.

Despite a written commitment by Southwark Council leader Nick Stanton, most believe that they will never be allowed to move back. "The council has lied to us so often," said a long-term resident, fearful of giving her name, "we don't trust them one iota".

"I dread this stuff being moved," says Harry looking at his bookshelves. Some of the places I've been offered to live, they're so 'boxed'. I have one spare room here, but my grandchildren come and stay. It's grandad's home."

'Home' and 'family' are words you hear a lot on the Heygate. The long-term residents who grew up in pre-welfare state Britain look after each other and take nothing for granted.

"We were poor," says Harry. "Not hard up, extremely poor. If you wanted something you had to work for it. But I always promised myself that when I had a family I'd get a decent house."

Another resident, Mrs Margaret Burke, said she had worked hard for her home, and was proud to live there. She said: "All the years I have lived on this corner I have never had an ounce of trouble. I think it's a wonderful place."

Mrs Burke is a leaseholder and

the council has offered £130,000 for her roomy three-bedroom maisonette, which has small terraced gardens at the back and front. "You couldn't buy a toilet for that," she says.

The council claims that they have brought forward the moving date in the interests of safety, since empty flats attract squatters and drug crime: "Dragging it out is painful for everyone," said regeneration executive councillor Richard Thomas. "People have been begging us to speed up the process."

But at a recent meeting of tenants and leaseholders, all bar one voted to oppose the council, according to Kevin Morgan, chairman of the Tenants And Residents Association. "Nobody is in favour of the two moves," said vice chair Mrs Doreen Gee. "We have many elderly and frail. This will traumatise them."

Resident Maureen Stapleton says the houses "are being built for yuppies, not for the likes of us". She is worried as to how her 70-year-old husband who suffers from angina will survive the two moves.

For Mr Tilman the betrayal is personal. "I'm not political but I canvassed all over this estate, stood outside the polling booth with a rosette on. The Lib Dems said 'Give us a chance' so I did."