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Curb these rogue landlords

By Chris Mathewson

So Newham Council will license all its private sector landlords, not just those who own houses of multiple occupation. But will Barnet follow suit?

I am a state pensioner, long resident in private sector rented accommodation in Barnet, legally 'regulated' with a 'fair' rent and security of tenure. For many years, I got along very well with my landlord until he had to sell the property, which was snapped up by a supposedly 'respectable' organisation on the local high street.

They wanted to convert it into flats. Accordingly, they wanted me 'out' and harassed me by, amongst other things, taking up my floorboard and filling my wardrobe and bed with building dust. My co-tenant suffered similar indignities.

The landlord didn't approve of my anger, but they did offer me alternative accommodation until the refurbishment was complete. This, they advised, would take four months.

It actually took four YEARS! Doubtless I was expected to quit and thus lose my regulated tenancy but it wasn't to be. I spent these years in a house with the landlord's Polish workers. Two rats lived with us, the shower exploded while I was using it and threw sparks all over me, the boiler failed twice, and then the hall ceiling fell in, crashing onto the floor below and only by chance failing to injure anybody. Fawty Towers had nothing on this place.

Back in my original accommodation, the new boiler packed up and the shower needed repair. Meantime, tenants downstairs suffered their own problems. Their bathroom ceiling fell in and then their rent was increased by £30 a week. They were threatened with eviction when they refused to pay, but then the wife's pregnancy (of which the landlord had been fully aware) forced them to accept the increase. Where was Barnet's Tenancy Relations Officer?

These details represent only the tip of the iceberg. Approaches to the council proved largely fruitless, though I have nothing but praise for the local rent officer who awarded me a substantial reduction in my rent.

Decent landlords have nothing to fear from licensing. Even as I write, Ed Miliband is calling for greater powers to deal with rogue landlords, 'respectable' or otherwise. Bring them on!

KALASHNIKOV KULTUR

By Ricky Savage, the voice of social irresponsibility

Death wish list

Once upon a time when men were men, women were women and a dog was a man's best friend there were no lists of 1,000 things to see and do before you died. For one thing, the ancient world only had seven must-see attractions and once you'd seen one hanging garden you'd seen them all.

Once the Romans had gone and the ages got dark the list got shorter so by the time you got to the 14th century your to-do list was probably down to: be born, work, go to church, get married, have children and die. Obviously plenty of people missed most of the middle bits, especially when the Black Death was doing its bit for population control.

The Victorians had more ambition. Apart from birth, marriage, children and death there were lots of opportunities to travel to unknown lands, meet unusual people and catch unusual animals and exotic diseases. And that's before you get to members of the British aristocracy ensuring that you don't need to go to Athens to see the glory that was Greece because they'd brought half of it home to decorate their country estates.

But now it's different, now our mind-blowing lack of imagination means we need to be told what to do. We need books telling us what to watch, read and do before we die. It's all there, from bungee-jumping off the Eiffel Tower to making a porn film on your smartphone, to back-packing across suburbia or white water rafting off the Viagra Falls. And on the subject of smartphones, there's even an app to make sure you don't miss out any must-dos by mistake.

The only problem is what to do when you've done them all by the time you're 30. Does this mean the end? No, it means it's time to find a whole new list to work through. There's already one on wines you should drink, beers you should get drunk on and cocktails you should shake. But what about coffee? Yes, what the world needs is the 1,001 coffees you should drink before you burn down Starbucks. And at number 1 would be the mind-destroying super-strength heart attack in a cup that's Death Wish, said to be the strongest coffee in the world. There is a coffee to die for!

Thorn in your side

By Janet Maitland

Have you ever thought of using plants to deter burglars? Barnet Boroughwatch has produced a list of attractive shrubs and trees which will make intruders think twice about trying to enter your property, if you plant them along a boundary or under a ground-floor window.

Plants with prickly leaves make good barriers, such as holly (*Ilex agulfolium*). Thorny shrubs are also off-putting, such as purple *Berberis* (*Berberis thunbergii* 'Atropurpurea'). Intruders will also find it painfully difficult to get through plants with spines, such as Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), or spiky needles, such as Blue Spruce (*Picea pungens* 'Globosa').

Other plants work as a barrier because the stems are so dense they are impossible to push through, such as golden bamboo (*Phyllostachys aurea*). Ordinary privet hedging also works in this way, especially if it is kept well pruned.

Although it's tempting to hide your property behind tall hedges, Barnet Boroughwatch advise you not to plant anything higher than three foot tall in your front garden or you will simply be providing a helpful screen for burglars. For a copy of the plant list, contact Barnetboroughwatch@gmail.com

Burglars use twig trick

By Janet Maitland

Criminals are using a low-tech but effective way of identifying unoccupied properties. Police report that would-be burglars are inserting small twigs or bits of paper around the door frames of houses, returning some time later to check if they're still in place. If they are, the burglars break in, confident that no one is at home.

This trick was tried on 14 different properties in Edgware over a period of just two days in January. Barnet Boroughwatch advises you to keep a close eye on your door, and to call the police on 101 if there are any signs of these markings. Dial 999 in an emergency.

Plant swap day

Bring your spare seeds and plants along to a swap day at Martin School in Plane Tree Walk from 2-4pm on Sunday 21 April. Seedlings and plants will all be part of the free exchange.

A reminder of how things used to be

By Diana Cormack

If the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations last year made you feel nostalgic, there's a little museum in Lonsdale Road, Notting Hill, where you can take a quick trip down memory lane. The Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising has a stock of memorabilia capable of stimulating thoughts and pleasures of the past dating back from the 1980s for almost 100 years.

The objects on display cover many aspects of daily life, which would have been found in most homes. There are food containers of all sorts; toys and games; comics and magazines; fashion and design features; travel pieces and technology items.

Described as "an unexpected reunion with your past", the museum is suitable for a wide age range and is good for family outings and groups as well as offering a school visit service. It is open almost daily

(closed Mondays, except Bank Holidays) and until the end of August there is a special exhibition showcasing souvenirs and commemorative products from present and past royal jubilees. In contrast "Waste Not, Want Not" concentrates on how the past can teach us to make better use of resources today.

So, if a look back in time is the order of the day, call 020 7908 0880 for more details or visit www.museumofbrands.com



An old-time night out

In February, 17 elderly and housebound people were taken to the superlative Old Tyme Music show at Lauderdale House in Highgate by the Rotary Club of Golders Green. They had an exciting evening adding their own voices to their favourite old songs. The picture, courtesy of Neville Robinson, shows Jean Henry, from East Finchley, aged 103, with Derek Marcus, pianist and organiser of the evening, and Barbara Kneally, one of the singers from the Lissenden Players.

Editor's note:

Those snails again...

Are you smacking your lips at the thought of harvesting edible snails from Coldfall Wood (see page 3)? Probably not. In any case, we have to own up and say the story was our April fool. Yes, we're late, but what can we do when we're only a monthly paper? You can put your knives and forks down now.

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