THE ESTATE WE’RE IN

THE STANDARD ENTERS A NOTORIOUS HOUSING ESTATE TO UNCOVER A COMMUNITY STRUGGLING TO OVERCOME VIOLENCE AND DEPRIVATION

Like nothing else, estates epitomise the London that has been left behind – a London of deprivation, alienation and, in some cases, brutal gang violence and radicalisation. Our special investigation, The Estate We’re In, takes you onto Angell Town, an estate in Brixton soaked in poverty and with a history of violence going back generations.

We spent a week living on the estate and met everyone from gang members to single mothers trying to stop their children entering the cycle of violence. Our series of reports comes in the wake of two recent stabbings.

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Tina Brown’s new cause
Why the media mogul is standing up for women
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David Cohen Campaigns Editor
TODAY the Evening Standard launches a hard-hitting investigation into life on one of London’s most notorious housing estates.

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Inside the town within a town where cameras follow your every move

Angell Town in Brixton is one of the most deprived areas in the country. David Cohen stayed on the estate for a week to gain a unique insight into a hidden world of gang violence and alienation. This is the first of his hard-hitting reports.

IT WAS a warm afternoon as the ice cream van pulled up onto Angell Town estate, announcing its arrival with an exuberant burst of music. The driver opened his shutter for business. But there was no patter of small feet. Nobody came. Not a single child. A police car tore through the estate, siren wailing. But as the ice cream van trundled away defeated, and the siren receded, the streets fell preternaturally silent.

We were only an eight-minute walk from Brixton’s vibrant town centre where the streets were pumping, yet Angell Town was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Where were the children? Why were the streets deserted? “Like planet moon,” was how one Lambeth council official described it. “Strange atmosphere. Desolate as a ghost town.” Yet Angell Town – population 4,000 – also has a reputation for being very noisy indeed. The Metropolitan Police score it “red” on the Gangs Matrix, the most serious classification. It has a long history of gang violence, being home to the notorious GAS gang, short for Guns and Shanks, and before them the feared PDC, or Poverty Driven Children. More than half the estate lives in poverty. The Department for Communities and Local Government classified it as “extremely deprived” and “one of the 10 per cent most deprived areas in the country”.

In short, it epitomises the kind of estate outsiders fear to enter. But to understand the mentality of young people in Angell Town, you have to grasp its geography, for it is like a landlocked country virtually surrounded by other estates: Myatts Field to the north, Stockwell Park to the west and Loughborough to the east. Beyond them are more interlocking estates – Somerleyton, Moorlands and Tulse Hill. Many of these estates have gangs as violent as GAS – with names like ABM (All Bout Money), TN1 (Tell No-one), the 67s and Siru – and who, to put it plainly, are “at war” with Angell Town.

I went to live on Angell Town for a week this summer to understand what it’s like to live on a troubled estate. Before I arrived, my host Lorraine Jones told me a story about three young men – called Squirrel, Laughter and Incy – that I couldn’t get out of my mind. It went like this: “Squirrel was sitting in his car in Angell Town when he saw his friend Laughter being chased by Incy with a knife. Squirrel jumped out to protect Laughter, but Incy then turned on Squirrel and stabbed him through the heart, killing him with a single blow.”

It sounded totally surreal, but it was all too real. Squirrel was Lorraine’s 20-year-old son, Dwayne. “I have seven children,” she said softly, “six on earth and one in heaven. In Angell Town, terrible to say, but too often the elderly outlive the young.”

Lorraine, 42, a single mother and church minister, carried herself with enormous dignity, yet she seemed to embody the schism of the estate within her own family. Her son Malachi, 16, had just won a scholarship to Royal Russell, a £17,000-a-year independent school in Croydon, and her chief daughter Sukanah, 18, used to work at Buckingham Palace where she made the Queen’s salad. Yet Dwayne was dead and her oldest son Tyrone, 26, on remand in jail charged with a drugs-related offence.

I was to spread my stay over three families, beginning with single mother-of-six Golda Mochia, then moving to Lorraine and ending with the Rev Rosemarie Mallett in the vicarage of St John the Evangelist Church, Angell Town. I did not expect, in seven days,
We ignore these areas of social exclusion at our peril

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on estates – the killings of Mohammed Dura-Ray, 16, and Marcel Addai, 17. All told 1.6 million Londoners – 20 per cent of the population – live on the approximately 3,500 social housing estates that are scattered across the capital, in every corner of every borough. Some are pleasant places to live, but many are anything but – with the highest crime rate, the worst poverty, the most overcrowding and the biggest proportion of single parents in their borough.

The rise of estate-based gangs coupled with police warnings that estates are potential breeding grounds for religious extremism makes it clear: we ignore these areas of social exclusion at our peril.

Our time living on Angell Town was spent with residents but also with Lambeth council officials, social housing experts and urban designers to dissect what has gone wrong and to re-imagine the future. We spent time, too, with the men who locals call “the Undies” (plain-clothes undercover detectives) to glean their perspective.

It took us into a strangely compelling culture we know little about. We found aspirational single mothers determined to raise up their estate through community action. We found gang members putting out music videos that glamorise violence yet too scared to leave their own estate. And we found deeply divided feelings over the way the estate was policed.

But it was also, to put it bluntly, brutally shocking. For in this world that can feel cut off, like you have travelled to another country, tragedy is never far away. @cohenstandard

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THE ESTATE WE’RE IN

We ignore these areas of social exclusion at our peril

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We were led a campaign to demolish the boilers that heated the estate, and which became a youth club – until the council shut it down in 2012 because of gang violence.

Yet what strikes you as you look around is the unexpected attractiveness of the estate. It is clean and well maintained and instead of forbidding high-rise tower blocks, it boasts human-scale, low-rise blocks that are pleasing to the eye. The estate was radically rebuilt 15 years ago when crusading resident Dora Boatemah (now deceased) led a campaign to demolish the overhead walkways that had become crime hotspots. Angell Town was transformed and the estate won urban design plaudits. As I headed deeper into the estate, every 100 yards or so a CCTV camera swivelled and followed me as I went by. I was being watched by an off-site operator. I would soon begin to feel as if I had entered an open prison.

It was midday when I arrived at Golda’s front door. “Welcome!” she said, beaming and beckoning me into her darkened living room where she stood in ripped jeans and blue slippers with the laundry.

“Have a seat! I am sorry we don’t have a settee,” she apologised, offering me a dining room chair with the plastic still on. “We had a settee with mice living in it, but we threw it out.” Golda, 41, is studying hospitality management part-time at the London School of Business and Finance in Chancery Lane, but there was no college that day and she was catching up with the laundry.

Her father, a Ghanaian diplomat to Israel, had named her after the Israeli prime minister Golda Meir, but her life took a dramatic turn when he died and Golda, aged six, came to live with her mother in London. She was a wild child, got expelled from school and married young. But by 30 she had left her husband and was living with three children in a refuge for battered women.

In 2004, she said, Lambeth council made her an offer to be the first tenant

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in one of the brand new rebuilt maisonettes on Angell Town, but she was adamant. ‘No way!’ I told them. ‘I am not living on Angell Town!’ It was dangerous. I knew people from school who had been stabbed there.”

Was Golda glad she had relented? “Yes and no,” she said. “As a mother you worry about gangs, and if not gangs, the police.” She pointed to her battered front door. “This is from when the police dawn-raided my house this year. They smashed it down, held us captive, searched my home, found nothing, and left citing ‘mistranslated police intelligence’ from my son’s school.”

I was left with six traumatised children. We are not a criminal family. That’s why I am not outside.”

Golda showed me to my room and gave me a quick tour of their maisonette. “I sleep four in a bed with my youngest three,” she said. I took in her double bed on the first floor and struggled to comprehend how they could fit in. “We sleep sideways across the bed,” she explained. “My feet dangle over the edge.” The two teenage boys slept in banks in the room next door and Golda-Lee, 16, the oldest, had the spacious room on the top floor which she had generously given up to ask her and I would spend it later.” (In the end we forgot)

Over dinner Golda suddenly proclaimed: “I am thinking of buying this house, David. Fenton tells me it’s worth half a million. For get that Brixton is a crime area, I am sitting on a gold mine!” But how could she raise the deposit when she worked 16 hours a week as a part-time hairdresser and her income came mostly from working tax credit and child benefit payments?

“Then people like drugs, too,” her face clouded over. “If we get into rent arrears, they move us out chip chop.” She was proud, though, she said, that she had not got into debt.

“Except for the gas bill,” she added. “Nobody charged me gas for years so I didn’t pay and then they caught up with me and said I owed them £5,000. We have a meter now and for every £10 I put in, £8 automatically goes towards arrears and only £2 buys gas.”

Suddenly we heard a plaintive cry from the street: “Golda, can I have a biscuit?” It was Abdul, 16, a friend of Golda-Lee and one of several young people on the estate who turn to Golda for food and support. (The next...
morning, I would find Abdul stretched out in a sleeping bag on her living room floor."

Several biscuits later Abdul, who was at plumbing college, got into a minor scuffle on the street and the next thing two police officers were at the door. As they left, Golda pointed to the CCTV camera 50 yards away. "Soon as we step outside our front door, we are being watched," she said. "That’s why some kids don’t like to go outside. You feel violated." One of these CCTV cameras, set high on a pole above anti-climb paint and protective spikes, had a deflated, punctured football sticking out of it — clearly delivered there as a comical "two fingers up" to the CCTV. Yet many residents told me that they welcomed the CCTV because it had proved to be an effective deterrent to crime. I was about to retire for the night at 11pm when three gang members dropped by for a plate of hot chicken and a swig of non-alcoholic Supermalt. They called Golda "mum" or "aunty" and Golda called them her "surrogate sons", who she helps because "society has given up on them". Ronny, 21, had been to prison for carrying a knife, Quinton, 17, had been kicked out of a pupil referral unit, and Shaquille, 21, had served six months for robbery. Shaquille, it turned out, was a well-known underground rap artist. He goes by the name MDargg or M for short and his rap videos — usually made with other high-profile Angell Town rappers

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Estate population: 4,000
- Black & minority ethnic: 62 per cent
- Poverty: In UK’s 10 per cent most deprived
- Crime: Twice London rate
- Robbery: Three times London rate
- Ambulance call-outs: 63 per cent higher than London average
- Social rented households: 66 per cent
- Children in lone parent families: 63 per cent
- Population density: 2.7 times the London average
- Male life expectancy: 73 (five years lower than London average)

GANGS BY ESTATE
- Angell Town: GAG (Guns and Shanks) / GAG Rockblock SSD
- Somerleyton: GAS Siru
- Stockwell Park: AliaM (All ‘Bout Money)
- Tulse Hill: TN1 (Tell No-One) and The 67s

Kiran Mensah
such as Sneakbo, Stickz and Grizzy — have racked up more than a million views on YouTube and have even been referenced by international stars such as Drake. Some of these videos were shot on Angell Town and feature dozens of local young people massing in black hoodies.

“We were GAS gang but GAS is no longer so we Rockblock 150 now,” said Ronny, making himself a piece of toast. “Rockblock are not as bad as GAS,” said M.

I asked if Rockblock did crime. “What you call crime?” M challenged me. “Robbery,” I said. “We don’t do government robbery, only friend to friend,” he said. So they robbed poor young people like themselves? “As long as dem people from other estates,” he said. But what was the point of robbing other people who were also poor? M seemed genuinely taken aback. “I know it sound silly but we don’t get along,” he said. “It’s just what happens. Life is boring for us. Same ting every day. Nowhere to go, nothing to do. Just hang out and do music. It’s the norm for people our age to go to prison.”

I mentioned the Ritzy Picturehouse and Windrush Square as fun places to hang out, but he just laughed. “Dem places Brixton New York! Dem places not our Brixton.”

Ronny added: “Brixton New York is out of bounds. If gang members from Angell Town set foot there, somebody will make a phone call and we’ll be hit. Our estate is hated by other estates. We can’t cross Brixton Road cos on the other side is Stockwell Park [Estate] and that’s a big ‘no entry’ sign. So these big gangster rappers, who make music videos that glamorise guns and go viral, are too afraid to even leave their own estate? “We don’t leave except to do shows, like one I got in Birmingham that’s sold out,” said M. “We safe to go up north, but not south London. It’s just how things are.”

Golda shook her head ruefully. “My young sons look up to these boys! How will they rise above this and escape gang life? I try tell these boys that this is not the norm. They are not bad boys and they have such talent! We need to do something to give them a stake in our community and turn them towards the positive.”

The next morning I headed out to explore what facilities were available for young people on the estate since the youth centre in the Boiler House was shut down. At the heart of the estate is “the mugger” or MUGA (multi-use games area) — a run-down caged football pitch that I had passed several times before. It was mostly deserted except for a young man, Timon Dixon, 21, who could often be found kicking a ball against the fence.

Why was it not used? “It’s not safe to play on,” Timon said, pointing to its rubberised surface that was coming away in chunks, exposing rough asphalt. He and some friends had launched a campaign to lobby Lambeth council, he said, to put in a proper astroturf pitch so that the young people could play “a normal game of football”.

Yet it wasn’t just the pitch that was desolate. Around it were 33 business units that were mostly shuttered. Some were occupied by evangelical churches that had no link with Angell Town residents and opened a few hours a week. Lambeth council got £150,000 a year from letting these units, but none of it was invested back into the estate. The residents of Angell Town did not have a single shop to buy a pint of milk or a loaf of bread, or a community centre where they could meet.

I walked over to Kamika Nathan, 36, a single mother of five and friend of Golda who had started a voluntary group called My London to tackle the isolation of children on the estate. She wanted to broaden their horizons by arranging excursions to the city’s great free spaces, such as the Science Museum and Hyde Park. Kamika had done a community development course at Birkbeck and just needed a rent-free base to make her scheme viable, so I joined her and her colleague Marie Ennis at the estate Housing Office to ask if they could use their meeting room as a base. “You might be charged for it,” they were told. Kamika was outraged. “But we are providing a free service for children in the community!”

Lorraine had a similar problem. She had started a boxing group in memory of Dwayne and had formed a dynamic youth management committee to take
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Angell Town: A History

1784 Named after landowner John Angell

1850s Laid out as estate of detached and semi-detached villas for middle classes

1889 Appeared on Charles Booth Map of London coloured yellow to depict “wealthy and upper classes”

1950s Influx of West Indian immigrants to area following the 1948 arrival of SS Empire Windrush

1970s Rebuilt as a council estate combining 1960s-style blocks with high-level walkways and ground-floor garages that became crime hotspots

1990s Stigmatised as sink estate with reputation for crime, poverty and neglect

1997 Radical rebuild over nine years championed by resident Dora Boatemah (who died in 2001), in which walkways were removed and garages converted to business units

2012 Community centre on estate shut down due to gang activity

News

Kiran Menzah

it forward, yet her request to Lambeth council to use one of the business units on the estate as a base had fallen on deaf ears.

It seemed a shame all this energy was being blunted. But there were also uncomfortable truths for residents to face up to. I passed by the vicarage and asked the Rev Mallett: where are the fathers? Why are there so many single mothers who rely on the state for financial support? It seemed to be the dominant culture. Golda had six children by three absent fathers, none of whom seemed to contribute. And I met several teenage mothers on the estate who were repeating the cycle again.

“Some of our young women have children because they are looking for someone to love and they think it will liberate them to have a baby when it actually traps them in poverty,” she said. “Calm yourself Golda, I’m going to find out the facts.” Minutes later she returned, her lip trembling. “It seems he was shot on the estate last night. He’s in King’s College Hospital.”

“Why will it stop?” wailed Golda. “How can you be talking to somebody yesterday and today they dead?”

Golda was up early the next day to iron Tristan’s school blazer. He had been chosen to host his school concert and Angel-Christie was to perform with her class at the Southbank Centre. It was a big day for the Mochia family and Golda was planning to attend college, then catch their performances. There was no sign of anything untoward as she dropped me at Lorraine’s, where I was to spend the next few nights. Golda went over to greet some young people standing nearby, but the next thing I knew she had collapsed. Lorraine spoke calmly but urgently.

“Some of our young women have children because they are looking for someone to love and they think it will liberate them to have a baby when it actually traps them in poverty,” she said. “We call it ‘dolly syndrome’, when girls have babies so young that they literally transfer their affection from their dolls to real live babies.”

Aftermath: Lisa Agyekum, left, comforts Zaynah Simpson as Golda Mochia looks on following the news of Ogarra Dixon’s shooting. Inset left, Golda’s son Tristan, who was picked to host a school concert