

13 MAY, 2004

# Save our town

**R**esidents of Crouch End and Hornsey – including many local celebrities who turned out to lend their support – were given a taste of what it would be like to have their town hall and its square back last Saturday.

Despite the dismal weather, hundreds turned out to look around the town hall, which was open to the public for the day, and to enjoy the Party in the Piazza. Music, stiltwalkers, food stalls and a bouncy castle were just some of the amusements organised by local group Crouch End for the People (CEfP) in the square outside.

The group has been campaigning to prevent the Council, which is vacating the premises, selling off the Grade II-listed town hall to a developer for a possible £3 million. It wants to reclaim the town hall and set it up as an arts venue, meeting place and facility for local people. In February it persuaded the Council to give it six months to come up with an alternative, financially sustainable plan. The tour of the town hall took place as part of the Council's agreement to a consultation.

Chairman of CEfP Nir Wegrzyn, a Crouch End resident for 18 years, said: "We have large community support – at the public meeting about 700 people came, which is a lot of people in anybody's book."

Judging by the number of people who queued up to add their names to the CEfP petition on Saturday, it's clear that Hornsey wants its town hall back.

James Larkin, a local actor/director who has two children voiced his support: "Turning it into flats would be a complete waste," he said.

Agnes Atkinson, a full-time mum with two children, said: "It's definitely a good idea. We haven't got a community here in Crouch End and this would help."



Pauline Stephenson of Rathcoole Gardens, who has lived in Crouch End since 1970, said: "I think any property that belongs to the Council, belongs to the rate-payer and it's not right to sell off what belongs to us."

The tour drew a lot of interest – at around 2pm, an unofficial estimate put the number of people who had been through the doors at 1,000, and the queue was still snaking around the square long after 3pm, when the town hall was scheduled to close its doors.

It meant that people witnessed for themselves the years of neglect the building has suffered. Many residents *Avenues* spoke to remembered better days – of attending concerts, plays and dances in the town hall back in the 1970s.

The dilapidated state of the theatre, now being used as a junkyard for discarded furniture, left many horrified.

A resident from Berkeley Road said: "I was really upset when I saw the theatre. They've let it go to rack and ruin."

Even two council employees – who didn't wish to be identified – voiced their disgust at its poor state: "They've let it rot – they're just using it for storage."

The theatre, which seated 1,200, was in use until 1991 when it was refused a fire certificate. The Council decided not to spend the money on repairs to bring it up to standard because of the cost.

## Celebrity support

Directly involved in the campaign are local celebrities Jack Ellis, who plays Jim Fenner in ITV's *Bad Girls*, and Annie Miles, formerly of *Family Affairs* and *Brookside*. Ellis acted as compère of CEfP's Party in the Piazza, introducing speeches and asking local people their opinion on the future of the town hall.

Ellis, a former resident of Mount Pleasant Villas, believes that a community facility is just what the area needs: "There's a great sense of community here but what it doesn't have is something for the community to finish it off."

Annie Miles, who has lived in Crouch End for 16 years, has also been involved since the campaign began: "I think it's an easy option to just sell it off, it would make for a cash injection without putting in a lot of effort."

She said turning the town hall into art centre would be good for the area: "It would bring a lot of people into Crouch End and it would help local businesses."

Other local celebrities including Tony

**Ex-Brookside star Annie Miles would like to see the town hall turned into an arts centre**



# hall, say locals



Jack Ellis, well known for his role as Fenner in *Bad Girls*, compèred the event, which included entertainment organised by Crouch End for the People

O'Callaghan, who plays Sergeant Boyden in *The Bill*, and comedy actress and author Arabella Weir, also added their support.

The campaign is also being backed by local businesses: estate agents Winkworth and supermarket Budgens sponsored the entertainment, local bakery Dunn's set up a stall in the square and Hornsey YMCA provided the bouncy castle.

An advisory panel set up in February this year represents the Council's views and is chaired by Labour Councillor for Hornsey, Judy Bax.

"I want to see the town hall restored for the community to use for a community arts venue – I don't think there's much disagreement about that."

But she admitted that where Haringey and the CEFp clash is over the financial side of things. "The Council can't afford to put in the money that it needs."

She said: "We shall have to find a developer in the end. Some of the building could be put to commercial or residential use – we have to remember that we have 4,000 families on the housing waiting list in Haringey."

Barbara Roche MP, who chaired the public meeting held by CEFp at the end of April, has supported the campaign from the beginning. She said: "I am cautiously optimistic that we can make this happen."

The final decision on the fate of the town hall will be made in September.

