

How Little Moor was saved – for the second time

by **AUDREY MARLOW**

LITTLE MOOR is a pleasant one-third of an acre in north-west Leeds, a small piece of park-land with a variety of beautiful, mature trees, and regarded with great affection by those living in the two contrasting neighbourhoods between which it lies.

Woodhouse is a largely working-class suburb, built up during the Industrial Revolution with rows of back-to-back houses.

And Hyde Park (north) is an area colonised by the prosperous business community and its professional auxiliaries who made their fortunes on the backs of the working class during the same era, and which is still largely middle class in character.

It might seem unlikely that the people of two such dissimilar localities would ever find themselves uniting together in a campaign for a common cause, but, in April of this year, it happened, because of a threat to the borderland of Little Moor.

Few were aware that Little Moor had been the subject of an almost identical struggle nearly 100 years ago.

Originally common land, it had been enclosed for private use then returned by the owner to the people in perpetuity. In 1875, Leeds Corporation tried to enclose it again, and after protests, including riots, the scheme was dropped.

Campaign

Now, a century later, Little Moor was to be built on. There were no riots this time, but an extremely vigorous campaign was launched, eventually victorious – but only just.

Maureen Baker, a Young Liberal, well known for her work in CND and race relations was the first to notice that workmen were busy painting large white crosses on the trees on Little moor.

She discovered that they were being marked for felling, and that the corporation had acquired the land for the building of a hostel for handicapped people.

A phone call to the civic hall revealed that planning proposals had been advertised in the local paper as required under the town planning Acts., the dedication of the land to the local people by the offer of an “equivalent parcel of land in the vicinity,” and no

one had sent in any objections (in which case a public enquiry would have been necessary).

Maureen quickly gathered together a number of people to form the “Save Little Moor Action Group.”

Committee

The group contacted the Woodhouse Community Association and the residents’ association at Hyde Park, both with Communists among their leading members, and the three organisations formed a joint committee chaired by the Vicar of Woodhouse.

Letters of protest were sent, and phone calls made to the Ministry of Environment, local MPs and councillors, the town clerk and the chairman of the social services committee which was responsible for siting the hostel.

A vociferous campaign was launched against us led by the chairman of the social services committee. Because a home for the handicapped was involved,, those who were unaware of our reasoned arguments might have thought us a lot of callous so-and-sos who “put trees before handicapped people.”

These attacks only strengthened the resolve of the people of Woodhouse and Hyde Park, and it was amazing to see Hyde Park’s normally staid, Tory churchgoers reacting so militantly.

The joint committee devised the slogan: ‘Not hostel OR trees, but hostel AND trees,’ and a petition circulated in three days collected 450 signatures including that of Lord Boyle, Vice-Chancellor of Leeds University and a former Tory Minister.

Woodhouse Community Association voted to withhold rates if Little Moor was built on, and at a primary school on the edge of Little Moor children wrote in protest to the lord mayor.

We had requested talks with the local services committee but a week went by without reply.

In sombre mood the joint committee decided to instruct solicitors, and the necessary funds were forthcoming from our supporters. The day after our solicitors had contacted the civic hall, we were informed that we could send four representatives to hold talks with members of the corporation.

Our representatives arrived at the meeting to be confronted by 11 people, including four lawyers. The expected arguments were trotted out. – correct legal procedures for acquiring Little Moor had been complied with; we had not taken opportunities provided for objecting either to this or to the “parcel of land” equivalent; our local councillors had voted in favour of the proposal.

Saved

Things looked black. We had to wait until June before an official announcement was made, but long before that the news leaked out – we had won. Little Moor was saved.

The new chairman of the social services committee (the council having meanwhile changed control from Tory to Labour) stated that the hostel was to be moved to another site because it had been discovered that there was a private right of way across Little Moor.

This successful campaign has done more than save a delightful piece of open space.

The two residents' associations have been immensely strengthened, and are all ready to fight imminent bigger battles – against plans for the wholesale demolition and re-development in Woodhouse, and a proposed express way to run alongside Hyde Park.

It is noticeable that the council is taking more trouble to inform the public about its plans, and has arranged ward meetings to discuss them.

Lessons

Important lessons can be learned from the Little Moor campaign. One is that where the environment is concerned, wide sections of the public can be drawn into the struggle.

But the most vital lesson is that we must pay more attention to local planning matters, find out how they are made public and follow them up immediately.

True, the town planning Acts are woefully deficient in the protection they afford against local bureaucracy. But until such time as we can exert sufficient pressure through residents' federations, civic trusts, etc., to get the law amended, we must make maximum use of such democratic facilities that exist.

The white crosses still remain on the trees of Little Moor, and perhaps they should stay there as a lasting reminder that we must exercise unceasing vigilance over our local affairs.