New dawn for Hell's waiting room

The Aylesbury estate, a byword for urban squalor for 40 years, is to be torn down. Can planners get it right this time? Martin Fletcher reports

Red Lion Row, a tiny South London backstreet overshadowed by one of the bleak grey apartment blocks of the infamous Aylesbury estate, has had a bloody recent history. It was here, last Boxing Day, that a 20-year-old Nigerian-born asylum-seeker named Dipo Sowhe was shot dead after being chased through the estate. His body lay undiscovered for 26 hours in a communal garden.

Here, too, in late 2005 an 18-year-old pastor’s daughter, Ruth Okechukwu, was pulled from a car and stabbed repeatedly by a teenage Angolan immigrant for failing to show him respect. A bunch of long-dead flowers marks the spot where she died.

Now work is about to begin in Red Lion Row on one of Britain’s most ambitious inner-city regeneration projects: the phased demolition and replacement of the entire Aylesbury estate, over 15 years, at a cost of £2.4 billion.

Some 2,700 flats in more than 40 monolithic concrete blocks on one of the largest estates in Europe — it covers 70 acres — will be reduced to rubble, one by one, and replaced by 5,100 new homes built on a mercifully more human scale. Some 7,500 residents will have to be moved out and housed elsewhere while their homes are successively demolished and rebuilt.

The project will end one of the country’s most disastrous experiments in postwar municipal housing — an experiment that has made the Aylesbury a byword for crime and deprivation, the first port of call for politicians seeking to highlight the desolation of Britain’s inner cities, and the backdrop of choice for film crews seeking the archetypal “sink” estate. Episodes of The Bill are filmed here, as were bits of Spooks and the snippet of urban blight that Channel 4 uses to promote itself between programmes.

It is a measure of how badly the planners got it wrong that, while the Aylesbury faces the wreckers’ ball, the few Victorian cottages on the estate’s fringes that escaped demolition in the 1960s have become desirable homes in a conservation area.

Today’s planners are determined not to repeat the mistakes of their predecessors. This time the housing will be “tenure blind” so no one can tell which homes are privately owned and which not. It will be denser than the Aylesbury but no denser than most of London. And it will be eco-friendly, with a small utility company providing sustainable heat and electricity.

Every unit will have a garden, patio or balcony and be within 400 metres of a park. There will even be special bricks in which birds can nest. The aerial walkways will be replaced by green boulevards and proper streets with traffic-calming measures. There will be better access to better parks, play areas, community hubs, improved transport links, cycle lanes and huge new leisure and shopping centres at a revamped Elephant and Castle, which will look more like Covent Garden — or so the planners claim.

“There will be a huge improvement in people’s quality of life,” promises Martin Smith, the Aylesbury regeneration director.

To be fair, the Aylesbury’s appalling reputation is somewhat outdated. The authorities, and many residents, have made strenuous efforts to improve it in recent years. But not even its staunchest defenders want to preserve the forbidding, dilapidated Soviet-style blocks of what has been described as “the estate from Hell” and “Hell’s waiting room.”

“Without doubt they should go,” says 57-year-old Jean Bartlett, who runs the Aylesbury Tenants Association and a lively nursery for infants from every conceivable ethnic background. “Please — knock them down,” says Kelvin Rose, 22, one of many residents who told me that they do not dare go outside alone at night.

The Aylesbury was not always so unloved. The Walworth estate was built between 1967 and 1977 to replace overcrowded Victorian slums that lacked bathrooms and inside toilets. In accordance with the “streets in the sky” ideas of the Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier, the ground floors of each block were given over to garages and service areas. The residents lived above and could walk the length of the estate on elevated walkways. Just not down.

Critics were unimpressed. The eminent architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner wrote: “Exploration can be recommended only for those who enjoy being stunned by the impersonal, megalomaniac creations of the mid-20th century.”

But the new residents were delighted. The big, bright flats had bathrooms, separate toilets and hot water. They were a huge improvement. “These places were sheer heaven,” says Bartlett, who was among the first to move in.

The euphoria did not last. The shoddily built blocks developed leaks and draughts. The lifts and heating system broke down regularly. The rubbish chutes got blocked. The stairwells and dark passages attracted junkies, prostitutes and the homeless. Empty flats were taken over by squatters or used as crack dens. Worst of all, the aerial walkways proved a paradise for muggers and burglars, offering easy access to flats and handy escape routes.

Many of the original residents moved out, to be replaced by a much more transient and fractured population of immigrants from across the world, and the downward spiral accelerated.

In 1983 The Times reported that “petty crime, and some not so petty, is normal: muggings in the vandalised and darkened entrance and lift areas, burglaries in the flats, even armed robberies.” By the early 1990s the Aylesbury had become a virtual no-go area for the police, especially at night. Desperate residents demanded — successfully — that Southwark council should employ private security guards to protect them.
Howard, then Tory party leader, visited to claim that nothing had changed. Last year Jacqui Smith, the new Home Secretary, visited to insist that it had.

Such was the Aylesbury’s notoriety that Prince William and some fellow Etonians visited as part of a geography field trip in 1999 — to the belated astonishment of 79-year-old Phyllis Cobham, who showed the boys her one-bedroom flat without realising that one of them was in line to be King.

At first sight Michael Howard had a point. The Aylesbury looks as bleak and desolate as ever. Its schools, nurseries and recreation areas are ringed by high protective fences. Few children play on the grass between the blocks because their parents will not let them out alone. A surprising number of residents own alsatians and other ferocious-looking dogs. Many flats have iron grilles over their doors, windows and balconies. The Hour Glass, the only surviving pub, drips with CCTV cameras. Anything moveable is bolted to the ground.

Chris Baxter, the estate’s emergency services manager, says that its 26 antiquated lifts are vandalised regularly — about a fifth are out of action at any one time. He shows me where a fire started deliberately, has melted a lift car and destroyed the motor at the top of the eight-storey shaft, causing an estimated £300,000 of damage. Linda Elliott, the estate manager, says her staff often find pools of urine, and even excrement, in the stairwells.

Residents say that they know hardly any neighbours. “It’s like living in a railway station. Everyone you move,” one woman laments. Most say that they feel safe during the day but never venture out after dark and would certainly not open the door to strangers — Hannah Lee, 78, describes her maisonette as her “prison” because it is the only place in which she feels secure. One or two say that they block their letterboxes at this time of year to prevent firecrackers from being shoved through.

The atmosphere changes after dark. One night recently I spent an hour wandering around the estate. It was an eerie experience. The roads and public spaces were deserted except for the occasional fox or human figure hurrying past, head down and avoiding eye contact.

At an Asian-run convenience store, the manager told me “In the olden days all my customers would come in the evening, but they get their stuff in the morning now. They are scared to go out.”

But Jacqui Smith has a point, too. Behind the grim façade much has changed. Indeed, some places, such as Michael Faraday Primary School, are inspirational.

Few schools have such a challenging catchment area. It is so racially diverse that only 86.5 per cent of the school’s 330 pupils are “white British” and 44 per cent do not have English as their first language. Despite that, the school has been ranked “outstanding” in its past two Ofsted reports and obtains excellent SATs scores. It is three times oversubscribed and — astonishingly — has middle-class parents from outside the estate clamouring to send their children there. Its pupils periodically win bursaries to leading private schools, although some families struggle to raise the £50 test fees. Pupils have performed at the Globe Theatre and Royal Festival Hall, played with members of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, made regular visits to the Rothschild bank headquarters a few miles (but a world) away, and helped the award-winning architect Will Alsop to design the new £13 million school building on which work is due to start.
next March. "I want confident, articulate children who are ready to take on the world. I want them to believe that they can be and do anything," says Karen Fowler, the no-nonsense Geordie who is the school's head teacher. Karina, a bubbly ten-year-old of Chamaean descent, is certainly that. "We love it here. We love it so much," she says as she shows me round.

Two years after Blair's visit, the Aylesbury was awarded £56 million over ten years under the Government's New Deal for Communities programme — money that has been spent on a plethora of new community and sports facilities, training programmes, educational initiatives and security measures.

There are now breakfast clubs, homework clubs, holiday clubs and pre-exam booster sessions for the estate's schoolchildren. There are healthy walking and eating programmes for older residents — a calendar with a wholesome ethnic recipe for each month has been distributed to every household.

A derelict pub has been turned into a juice bar and youth training centre. A group of teenagers has started Picture Box Youth Cinema, a community cinema with the slogan "all adults must be accompanied by a young person". The area's failing secondary school has been turned into an academy and is being almost totally rebuilt. Eight community wardens now support a team of six — soon to be 14 — police and police assistants. Lighting has been improved. Residents such as Joan Bartlett have won national awards for their volunteer work.

Statistics suggest that the infusion of money is making a difference. Last year 49 per cent of the estate's 16-year-olds achieved five GCSEs at grades A to C, up from 17 per cent in 1999. Crime has inched down 4 per cent since 2001/2, and one morning recently I found the estate's police contingent engaged in nothing more serious than a "flag the poo" campaign to stop people allowing their dogs to foul the grass. That said, fear of crime remains pervasive and certain categories of crime, including burglaries, robberies, drugs offences and rape, have risen sharply.

Southwark council has cracked down on squatters — mostly Eastern Europeans. More than 30 groups were evicted on one day in March. Linda Elliott says that only ten flats are occupied by squatters, compared with 50 a year ago.

Jonathan Toy, Southwark's head of community safety, says that there is only the occasional crack house left, whereas a few years ago there might have been ten or 20 at any one time. Five were eliminated last year. Storage and rubbish cupboards have been fitted with strong locks to deter vandals.

Ken Roach says that his men are no longer threatened, clean all graffiti within 24 hours, and are so efficient that the frustrated "artists" have to keep devising new ways to protect their "tags". "They make one up with ink and shoe dye," he says. "You can get the colour off but the solvents burn into the concrete."

These improvements create problems for the film companies — 15 to 20 of them a year — who can use the estate as a backdrop provided they don't identify it, and pay up to £2,000 a day (the tenants' associations receive about a quarter of the fee). Andrew Pavor, Southwark's film officer, says that they now have to make the Aylesbury look worse than it is by importing rubbish bags, litter, abandoned cars and lines of washing. They even put up their own graffiti, although the council insists that it must be non-offensive and easily removable.

These days it is not unusual to find residents talking of the estate with affection. Karen Fowler, the head teacher, is one. "It's not pretty, she says, "but it is vibrant. There are lots of really good things going on around here."

Ultimately, though, no amount of social regeneration can save the Aylesbury because physically it is beyond redemption. The blocks are long past the prime they never really had. In 2005 Southwark council decided that refurbishing them would cost more than they were worth, and opted for demolition.

One afternoon recently Martin Smith, the regeneration director, described with infectious enthusiasm his vision for the future. The masterplan, drawn up by a cutting-edge design practice called Urban Initiatives, envisages 2,800 private homes blended with 2,200 "social" homes financed largely by the sale of the private ones and managed by a housing association. There will be a strong emphasis on creating family accommodation, vibrant streets and an attractive environment.

Southwark council has promised to buy out the 500 or so Aylesbury residents who own their flats, to rehouse every tenant on the estate who wants to remain there, and to offer alternative council homes to those who are wary of housing associations.

Listening to him, it was not hard to imagine the original architects of the Aylesbury describing their plans with just as much confidence and enthusiasm 40 years ago.

This time, though, the residents have been extensively consulted and, although they voted against switching to a housing association at first, they have given their consent. Is Smith confident that this 21st-century blueprint for urban housing will work better than that of the 1960s? "I hope so," he replies.