

## REFLECTIONS

# Exterminator On The Farm

The riots in the autumn of 1985 brought Broadwater Farm into the news. Eddie George reports from the estate

I'm sitting here in my Broadwater Farm flat, writing an article on the recently reconvened Gifford inquiry. I am also waiting for the exterminator.

Last night I fell asleep while reading the inquiry panel's report. I dreamt a cockroach was crawling across my chest. I opened my eyes and found myself still sitting here, and a lone roach squatting on my chest, staring blindly into my face. And so now we're sitting one beneath the other, very still, writing and waiting together.

The report covers Haringey council's history of police and black community relations, with particular reference to the riots on Broadwater Farm in October 1985. It makes some recommendations, aimed at the police, central government and Haringey council.

I thought that if I was going to say anything useful about the second phase of the inquiry, I'd better find out why it had been reconvened. I rang Haringey council. They were surprised to hear from me. They said I was the first person from the farm to ring lip about the inquiry. I found out all I needed to know: the inquiry had been reconvened to investigate the state of community-police relations following the riots, and to find out the length to which the council and police had implemented the inquiry panel's recommendations.

I moved onto the farm on June 13, 1984. I arrived in the rain. The biggest mistake I made was the decor: grey walls, dark grey carpets. Outside, the pavements are grey and so are the walkways. The flats themselves and the skies above them are whitish-grey.

That day it rained so hard the lack of sun or moon

threatened to wash the grey skies and the grey flats one into the other. On a morning like that, the whole estate could have faded into the sky and disappeared forever.

No-one would have noticed. Then, Broadwater Farm was just another housing statistic. The most that could have been said about the estate was that it rises from the ground as you approach it and sinks back quietly as you leave it.

Since 1984, it has been mythologised almost beyond recognition. After the riots, the press called it 'a living hell', a twilight world of human butchery, loony Libyan-trained lefty terrorists and gun-toting teenagers.

If the estate disappeared this morning, the media might remember it as a hole in the middle of nowhere into which law and order disappeared without a trace. Neither I nor the roaches have disappeared. Since June 28, 1984 I have been plagued by cockroaches. And every Tuesday morning since, an exterminator has arrived with gels for ants and sprays for roaches. In the initial stages, the roaches ignored the sprays, ate the gels and then ate the ants. That went on for years.

Then came a new exterminator. My hero. A handsome devil. He left them on their backs, legs bent in the air. Death at first sight for them, love at first sight for me.

Sometimes I'd forget to call him and having been evacuated from every other flat on the block, the refugee roaches would rush into mine. They eat their dead. It's quite a spectacle.

I think he lives on the estate. I've seen him around, just hanging out. The council employs maybe 30 estate residents in contract and mainte-

nance work, he could well be number 27. This scheme was part of the council's response to the Gifford inquiry's recommendations. However, the Tory party's local government bill might invalidate it. Under this bill, borough councils will have to put their public services out to private contractors. They'll be unable to stipulate employment quotas and it will be harder to enforce equal opportunity policies. The result? My number 27 may well lose his job.

He didn't believe I was a film-maker. He said the flat was too messy. I tried to impress him. Told him I was a member of a film group, Black Audio Film Collective. He'd never heard of it. Still, he said it was always good to see black people doing something constructive.

The first time I saw him it was winter. I was on my way back from up north, showing our film *Handsworth Songs* in a small community centre. He smiled from across the street, waved, and then sank into the dusk. It was January 7, 1987. Seven people showed up.

After the film there were questions, mainly about the farm: how was life on the frontline now? What was it like living on the borderline between race and civil disorder?

Fronts and borders. It made the farm sound like a key territory in a political war of position. Maybe it is. A series of fronts and borders composed of co-ops, nurseries, women's groups and youth associations, where both young and old are cared for. These are the lines under threat, more so from central government, these days, than from heavy policing.

I sat in the snow and waited for my train. What would happen to all the people on the farm if these lines were dissolved? The train pulled out of the north and into the dark. Fronts and borders collapsed as I sat back, closed my eyes, and thought of his smile.

The sky is hardening over. The clouds fill the room with a flat grey half-light. I consider my last words: 'These are



Grey skies, grey flats

the lines under threat.' Since the 1986 local government act council powers have been steadily diminished, divesting both council and community of the means of organising their lives as they choose. And since the 1986 police act, police powers have been increased. The inquiry's recommendations for anti-racism training, accountability and policing via mutual co-operation have not been answered let alone implemented. It's hard to imagine life on Broadwater Farm improving under such



conditions.

As for the roaches crawling across the walls. From nowhere, they run between the punctured holes in my notebook. This is not a plague, it is a state of abjection.

He is still not here. Outside the rain starts to fall. It's going to be one of those days when it just rains and rains. Eventually the grey skies and the flats beneath them will wash one into the other. The whole estate will disappear and I'll be left sitting in the middle of nowhere, waiting for him.