



CGCA's first Executive Committee on the steps of  
St Martin-in-the-Fields (1971) –

(l-r): Austen Williams, Donald Moyer, Sam Driscoll, Jim Monahan, Nadia Perkins, Jane Williams, Jean Gardener, Brian Anson, John Toomey, Sebastian Loew

redevelopment plans. For example, at the top of Drury Lane the Kitchener & Khartoum Dwellings were being demolished to make way for the Moat House Hotel & BT office block, under which a section of the proposed sunken ring road that was to encircle the neighbourhood was constructed and can still be seen today. Developers were busy purchasing ends of leases ready to exploit the development plan. The only thing standing in the way was a motley vociferous collection of locals who had no evident power or influence and were for the first few years largely ignored.

To the establishment, personified by Lady Dartmouth at the time the leader of the GLC Covent Garden Redevelopment Committee, Austen Williams'

involvement with the CGCA could not be fathomed. What was a Chaplin to the Queen - Austen was appointed in 1961- doing giving credibility to a disparate bunch of protesters who thought nothing of taking over GLC press conferences, squatting buildings, organising demonstrations, circulating "scurrilous leaflets full of untruths" and organising demonstrations to Lady D's Mayfair home.

This sentiment was repeatedly expressed over the years more so when the CGCA's actions became sophisticated and irritating. For example, when the CGCA took Westminster and the GLC to the High Court and various Secretaries of State of the Environment became involved.

While Austen clearly welcomed the success of the struggles, he hid his own tireless efforts to keep the personalities in the campaign working together and to allow individuals preoccupations to become manifest. And how they did become manifest! A community centre was set up, a sports hall established, derelict land taken over and made into community gardens, sponsored walks organised, even a private members bill was sponsored to get legislation to create local Community Councils in London (a campaign still to be won).

One of the first tasks that Austen undertook as Chairman of the CGCA was to give evidence to ministry officials at the public enquiry into the redevelopment proposals. Austen talked about the community, local social ties, historical connections, the lack of meaningful public participation in the preparation of the plans and the remote and undemocratic behaviour of planning professionals and politicians. He was belittled and patronised by the GLC's leading Counsel and his evidence was dismissed as irrelevant. Austen was both surprised and hurt that what purported to be an independent enquiry was evidently a charade and the result preordained. True to form, the enquiry approved the GLC's proposals. The experience made Austen even more determined to battle for the area's survival, and to some of us he subsequently appeared to become more radical. He was proud to lead demonstrations. The largest took place in 1973 when the CGCA co-ordinated London community groups in a huge demonstration that filled Trafalgar Square to protest at the destruction of their communities by way of official plans and crude speculation by private developers.