

# Threat to Soho's old alleys

**T**HOSE intrusive fellows, the property developers, are sniffing round Soho. The one place in the centre of London with something of the colour and vitality and squalor of a foreign port is threatened by their inquisitive gaze.

For hundreds of years London was made up of furtive alleyways, odd courtyards and twisted streets. Then came the Georgian housing boom and the Victorian department store boom and our own office boom, and the honeycomb melted away. Yet Soho remains almost untouched.

In the Dickensian discomfort of The Buildings an old Huguenot lady is paying 30 bob a week for a bed-sitter and sharing one tap with seven other flats; Golden Square is full of jolly wool merchants from Bradford and Huddersfield who have a pub lunch at the King of Corsica; and the children of Italian waiters play tig round the odd-looking hut in Soho Square—supposed to be a hunting-lodge of Charles II but actually a potting shed of Westminster City Council's with a ventilator for the Tube underneath.

## Six girls abreast

Soho is, in fact, one of those rarities, a village in a city. People still live there—4,000 of them in the odd terrace houses, many of them Georgian, and the Victorian tenements.

Berwick Street is their village high street, and Soho Square the village green. Go there on a warm Sunday afternoon and you will probably find a chef sprawled in a deck-chair under the huge plane trees. There's the publican of the Bricklayers' Arms from across the road. And the cobbler from St. Anne's Court—where they use a mirror to catch the daylight.

Except for CHRISTINA FOYLE, who lives above her shop, no one who lives in Soho is rich or famous. Most people live there because they work there—in the food trade or the rag trade, for example. The bosses usually live in the suburbs.

Soho is a series of extraordinary well defined quarters. There are the rag-trade people up in the north-west corner; dressmaking establishments where you can see girls working six abreast, and tailors' shops where they do the lapels for Savile Row suits. Soho Square and Golden Square are all offices, dealing in everything from song-sheets to billiards balls. Filmland runs along Wardour Street in a narrow strip from north to south. Food shops and restaurantland are in the south-east. Entertainmentland in the south-west.

## In for a quickie

In each quarter people stick to their own pubs and (for afternoon drinks) clubs. You'd be surprised to see a film man drink at the Pillars of Hercules in Soho Square, for instance, while everyone at the Dog and Duck seems to be talking film shop. At the White Lion, off Archer Street, actresses slip in for a quickie before they're due back on stage—grease-paint and all.

Changes in Soho usually come gently. The girls were swept off the streets and on to the telephone two years ago, but even so faces beckon from the upper windows. (The bell-push adds encouragement: "Elsie, Come up.") You won't find the bookies round the telephone boxes waiting for the results of the 3 o'clock. But they've only moved round the corner to the new betting shops.

But two years ago something rather sudden did happen: an enormous skyscraper shot up by Berwick Street market. Ironically, it was not the developers at work, but the Westminster City Council.

In a desperate struggle to re-house people from slums (or, as the council primly call it, "unfit housing accommodation") without making them leave Soho, they had been forced to build 20 storeys high. "It just doesn't fit in," says GASTON BERLEMONT, who runs the York Minster, and was born there.

The council are planning to build more towers in the next few years. Despite tower-building (or as they would say, by means of it) Westminster and the L.C.C. hope to "preserve the existing character of Soho."

Many architects feel that the L.C.C. should pluck up courage to do a three-dimensional plan for Soho and not rely on judging each new scheme on its merits. But the L.C.C. do not want to call attention to Soho.

## L.C.C.'s nightmare

For there is a worse nightmare than tower blocks in the wrong places—the advent of the property developers. They are at present kept out of Soho by the L.C.C.'s policy of allowing new offices to be built only in the few places where offices were already. But if the rules were relaxed so much as an inch, or if land values rose so that there was money in large-scale commercial building as well as office building, the developers would pounce.

If Soho is saved, on the other hand, its future could be golden. SIR WILLIAM HOLFORD'S plan for Piccadilly is bound to have repercussions. It may be possible one day to walk uncontaminated by traffic along raised pavements and through colourful precincts all the way from a restaurant in Greek Street to Piccadilly and beyond.