

London's Most Notorious Landlord

The Story of Peter Rachman (1920 - 1962)

by Gary Powell

Born in Poland, interned by the Germans in 1939 and the Russians in 1940, Peter Rachman had a distinguished Second World War military record fighting as part of the 2nd Polish Corps on behalf of the Allies in the Middle East and Italy; Rachman was transferred to England and demobilised from the army in 1948. He stayed in the United Kingdom, although he was never granted citizenship. By the mid-1950s Rachman had created a property empire with an accompanying reputation for immoral exploitation of his existing tenants and a propensity for violence.

Powis Square W11, situated to the north of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, was the poorer relation to the more affluent areas of South Kensington, Knightsbridge and the Kings Road to the south. The square was first developed by Paddington developer George Frederick John Tippet between 1860 and 1865. Tippet's housing style consisted of long stucco-faced ranges with four or five storeys built upon deep basements, many of which survive today. The 1870 census tells us that the main occupants of these houses were – in the main – professional people: merchants, stockbrokers, lawyers, manufacturers, retired army officers, physicians and bankers. Tippet's developments provided high standard affordable housing on short term leases of between three and twenty-one years at a reasonable £140 per annum.

Towards the end of the 19th century the social structure of the area changed dramatically for three main reasons. Firstly, the growth of nearby Portobello Food Market which attracted many lower skilled workers to the area. Secondly the spread of slum housing especially to nearby Bolton Road and finally the construction and opening of the Hammersmith and City line providing transport links into Central London from nearby Ladbroke Grove and Westbourne Park stations; the professional moved out and the manual worker, especially those who relied on the railway for work, moved in.



Powis Road today.



A rare photo of Peter Rachman.

By 1888 many of the short-term leases given by Tippet expired and many houses were sold and converted into flats. Shortly after the Great War 1914-18 Kensington Borough Council purchased twelve houses in Powis Square and converted these into sixty-eight flats; many of these flats were converted further into tiny bedsits. By 1922 only five of the forty eight houses in Powis Square were single occupancy. Council officials at the time described the square as 'rapidly becoming poorer' and as a 'largely slum area and partly large houses turned into one-room tenements' (London Survey Vol: 37 North Kensington). By this time Powis Square and nearby Colville Square were a world apart from the more affluent Royal borough squares of Ladbroke, Kensington, Edwardes and Pembridge a short distance away.

Peter Rachman found work in London's West End and became involved in Soho's crime and prostitution rackets, funding the start of his property empire on the proceeds of a Bayswater prostitute he ran. By 1956 he owned thirty properties in the Notting Hill area - many of them, run-down or derelict - in Powis Square. Rachman by this time had built up a reputation in London's underworld. He associated with the likes of Christine Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davies (both infamous for their relationship with the Conservative Secretary of State for War – John Profumo, a scandal that broke shortly after Rachman's death).

Rachman's growing property portfolio coincided with a large influx of foreign workers into the United Kingdom from the Caribbean. Many were to be recruited into London's transport network on buses and trains. The majority of tenants in Rachman's bed-sits were white working class people who had statutory protection against exorbitant rent increases. Rachman saw an opportunity, devising a plan that he ruthlessly implemented. If he could force out the existing tenants he could move in Afro-Caribbean immigrants, who at the time were having great difficulty in finding accommodation in the London area, at much higher rents. Rachman, whilst portraying a solicitous

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nature to the media – a man who as an immigrant himself providing rental accommodation to those in need – was using severe tactics to remove existing tenants. These tactics included the moving of prostitutes into adjacent overcrowded flats; hiring local thugs such as Michael de Freitas – aka Michael X - to harass the tenants with violence and threats of violence; the playing of loud music; and even the killing of domestic pets. The war of attrition continued with the cutting off of electricity supplies and making the bed-sits insecure by removing door locks.

Rachman enjoyed the rewards of his property empire, his flamboyancy often displayed with the cars (he at one time owned six) he drove and the women on his arm; but he remained under the media's radar regarding his nefarious affairs until after his death in Edgware General Hospital following two heart attacks at the relatively young age of forty-two years. The Profumo affair broke in 1963 a year after Rachman's death; during the subsequent investigation Peter Rachman's association with some of the main

players came to the fore as did his criminal activities. The word Rachmanism was introduced into the English language by local Member of Parliament for North Paddington, Ben Parkin, who drove through tenancy reforms. It simply means 'the exploitation and intimidation of tenants by unscrupulous landlords' (Oxford English Dictionary). Although it was probably not his intention or motivation, Peter Rachman's reputation amongst many of his Afro-Caribbean tenants was one of a 'knight in shining armour' at a time when this growing community was shunned by the British public in general and accommodation was scarce. From the seeds of Rachman's property empire one of the largest Afro-Caribbean communities in the London area has grown.

Rachman has been portrayed several times on the big screen, mainly in connection with his role in the Profumo affair (Scandal 1989). Rachman – a man, whose name means 'merciful one' in Hebrew – is buried in the Jewish Cemetery at Bushey, Hertfordshire.



About Gary Powell

Gary is a retired anti-terrorist squad officer whose first book - Square London - was published in 2012. It's a comprehensive social history of London's residential squares. In addition, Gary hosts walking tours based on London's historic terror attack spots, bringing to bear his obvious expertise in this particular area. Discount to LH members. [More info here.](#)

