

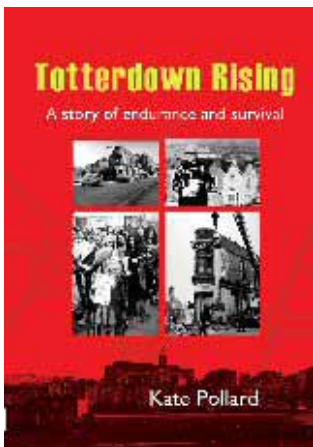
ROUND AND ABOUT IN BRISTOL

TOTTERDOWN

I first discovered Totterdown in 1985 when I moved back to Bristol with Maggie Telfer and our dog Myfanwy. She (Maggie, not the dog) had pitched up in town to launch Bristol Drugs Project in a haunted building in Mark Lane round the back of the Hippodrome. I decided to tag along and packed in my job in Swansea. We rented a room in a house in Richmond Street from a woman called Mary and moved in with her son Dan and a cat called Polly – so named because it liked sitting, parrot fashion, on people’s shoulders. The views across Bristol were fabulous.

I loved Totterdown. I was from Kingswood so South Bristol was new to me. I loved the way the mist crept up the steps from Victoria Park, the way the sound of the fireworks on the Centre echoed and banged around the streets. I thoroughly enjoyed being lectured by the ancient Off Licence owner Frank Smith about why Totterdowners enjoyed better health than other Bristolians due to the microclimate it experienced courtesy of the area being bathed in warm air from the River Avon. And I especially liked the mish-mash society of working class, bohemian, old timers and newcomers, many of whom gathered of an evening in The Shakespeare, – landlord one Mad Ern, undoubtedly one of the greatest characters in the history of Bristol characters.

But you couldn’t help noticing that rather a lot of Totterdown seemed to be missing. There were gaps and bits of road and building sites where houses and shops and pubs should have been. When we came to buy our first house, we were told we wouldn’t get a mortgage in Totterdown. Apparently one of the valuers for a big estate agent was convinced the houses were falling down. We looked at a few places, but moved across the park to Windmill Hill.



We came back to Totterdown about eight years ago. At first it seemed little had changed but in the past few years lots has changed and Totterdowners have every right to be suspicious. Anybody with any interest in the recent social history of Totterdown (and Bristol) should read Kate Pollard’s brilliant book Totterdown Rising. I may be biased because I’m the publisher, but I’ve never read such a

detailed, well researched and well written local history book. It tells the story of how Totterdown got the missing bits mentioned above. It tells the story of the Outer Circuit Road and how



500 homes, shops, pubs, cafes and more were demolished to make way for a lunatic road scheme that never went ahead. On the one hand Totterdown has never recovered from this act of civic incompetence – the Wells and Bath roads are ugly, dangerous and inefficient and there seem to be no coherent local planning guidelines.

Yet Totterdown is home to the first and foremost Bristol Art Trail – Front Room; Arnos Vale Cemetery is eventually being restored to its considerable glory; Paintworks is becoming one of the most ambitious and prestigious developments in Bristol; a Jamie Oliver chef has transformed the Cumberland from a back-street boozer into a gastro pub; Banco Lounge has created a new eating and drinking experience, as has Farrows chippy (voted the best in Bristol by the Evening Post) and the local community group the Totterdown Residents Social and Environmental Association (TRESA) is growing in influence.

But Totterdowners must remain vigilant. The politicians did their best to destroy the area once and there are worrying signs that in the unseemly scramble to save face over the Arena fiasco, Totterdown could again be short changed. There are concerns that because of the Arena funding gap the development could become a deeply unambitious project that only adds to the road problems heaped on Totterdown. But if it doesn’t happen at all, the much-needed road and other improvements that are linked to the Arena, won’t go ahead.

Surely, Totterdown won’t be sacrificed again.

Totterdown Rising is published by Tangent Books and is available at Waterstones and Borders or from Tangent Books at www.tangentbooks.co.uk (01225 463983)

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