

# Churchill Gardens Estate

*A collection of creative writing pieces and interviews*

*Inspired by, and a record of, the architectural and social history of the Churchill  
Gardens Estate, Pimlico*

As part of the Brutalist Playground programme this summer, the RIBA sought to engage with local residents on the estates that are referenced and recreated in the installation. By working with Open Age we discovered a vibrant Creative Writing group who live, or have lived, near or on the Churchill Gardens Estate in Pimlico.

Earlier this summer we took the group on a short architectural history tour of the estate to get their creative juices flowing and you will find their finished pieces in this short booklet. Also included are 3 interview transcripts from residents and ex-residents of the estate, as well as photographs taken by our creative writing tutor, Julie Garton.

In the same way that the Brutalist Playground installation resurrects a part of the estate that is no longer there, the pieces in this booklet breathe life into the architecture we see in the black and white photographs and personalise the community that lived, and continue to live, within the estate.

With thanks to:

Open Age

Jess Grieve

Julie Garton

Suzanne Waters

And everyone who has shared their writing with us

## ***Departed Poets by Chris Sonnex***

HARRY: Straight over Ebury Bridge, past the white ferry, through Lupus Street. Run through Churchill Gardens. Stop. I'm outside Keats House. That's where I used to meet her. Keats House. Me armed with two Fosters that I'd robbed from the local corner shop. Her with two fags that she'd nicked from her mum. And we'd sit. Sit and talk. Sit and shut the fuck up. Sit and do whatever the bastard hell we wanted. Always sitting. Always happy. 15 years old. World ahead of us. Sitting outside Keats House. With no fucking clue who the place was even named after. I looked it up, years later.

*I have been astonished that men could die martyrs for religion. I have shuddered at it. I shudder no more. I could be martyred for my religion. Love is my religion. I could die for that.*

- John Keats. In what would have seemed like centuries before we shared those warm beers together. It seems like centuries since we last sat. Shit, I would have died for her. She was my religion. I never did find out if she felt the same. I should have asked.

*Time and tide waits for no man.*

- Chaucer. Funny. That was the block that my next girlfriend lived in.



## ***Never Judge a Book by its Cover by Carmen Garcia***

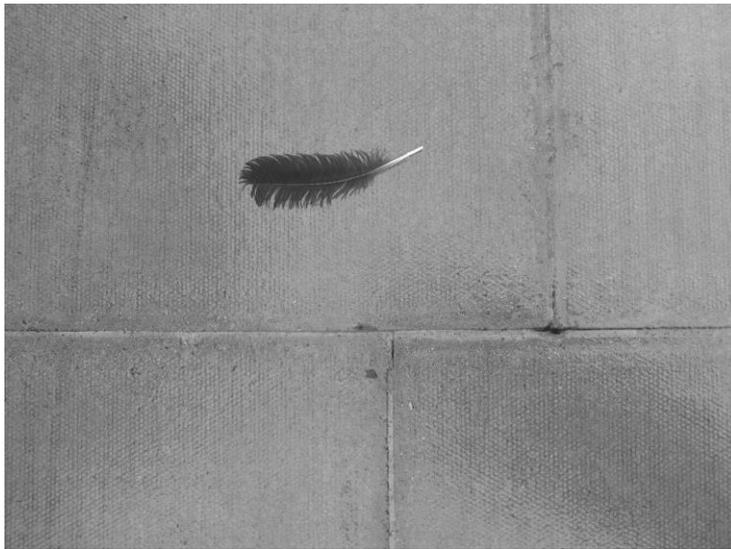
Having been born on an island and brought up in a terrace house, the idea of living in a housing estate, or what life was like was completely alien to me. Living in a big city like London at the tender age of seventeen without my family added to the somewhat to the feeling of something big and unknown - walking through the estate to visit my friend I had for some reason an eerie sensation of not being safe. There was the general idea that in big housing estates like Churchill Gardens lived all sorts of people with intricate alleyways - the perfect trap for attacks and little hope of rescue.

So through the years I looked upon it as a no-go area. Well, all that changed recently when a friend asked me to join her at a Pilates class run by Open Age.

To my surprise it was in the Youth Centre in the middle of Churchill Gardens Housing Estate and I guess since then my perceptions of it have gradually changed as I now not only attend the Pilates class but also a Creative Writing class held at the same centre.

More recently I have learnt a great deal more about the estate, the people that live there. One of them, whom I hold in high regard - attends the Creative Writing. Therefore, to have learnt that as the saying goes "Never judge a book by its cover".

It has also come to my attention that one of the architects that designed the Churchill Gardens Estate was from Spain, so I guess in some way I enjoyed the connection as I am Spanish. So as the stories about Churchill Gardens Estate unfolds it no longer feels unsafe around it and looks upon it as a big community with playgrounds, schools, church, pubs and lots of green space where long ago, people were brought up in a place that was secure enough for their children to play freely without the parents worrying about them and where adults were also kept in check and would be reported to the office if found misbehaving.



### ***Churchill Gardens* by Liza Sandell**

It's eight AM and out they're out  
The kids of Churchill Gardens  
Black, brown and white, short and tall  
The kids of Churchill Gardens  
Fast and slow, with bags and balls  
The kids of Churchill Gardens  
Ginger and blond, curls and plats  
The kids of Churchill Gardens  
All with the purpose of getting to school  
The kids of Churchill Gardens

It's nine AM and out the come  
The mums of Churchill Gardens  
Behind their pushchairs large and small  
The mums of Churchill Gardens  
Fat and slim, tall and short  
The mums of Churchill Gardens  
In eastern robes or skinny jeans  
The mums of Churchill Gardens  
Clustered together, sneaking a fag  
The mums of Churchill Gardens.

***A Haiku inspired by Churchill Gardens by Judy Thomas***

Jostling boys

In after school sun

The ball slips through the net



***An Inauspicious Occasion by Lynne Lawton***

The first day I went to the writing class, I had a bit of a difficult journey as there had been 'an incident' in Lupus Street. It must have been serious as there was a little tent and that usually means that someone had been murdered. People were walking about with white suits on and white bootees on their feet. The scene looked like something from a TV Drama.

I was directed by a policewoman to walk through Churchill Gardens. I'd never walked through the estate before. I had a map with me, which gave 'em a rough idea of the direction to take. It was a miserable day and as I walked along I didn't have a positive impression of the estate. The paving stones were grey, so were the blocks. There were very few people around and I must confess, the deeper I got into the estate, the more spooked I began to feel. The blocks of flats looked forbidding and there appeared to me lots of dark areas that left me feeling distinctly uneasy...

At one stage I got completely lost. I never did have a good sense of direction and ended up going round in a complete circle. It seemed to be taking ages to get to my destination. Thankfully, I bumped into policewoman and she was able to point me in the right direction. She also told me that someone had indeed been murdered. A sixteen year old boy.

Eventually I found my way to the writing group and have been going ever since. But I have never forgotten that first day and my walk through the estate. You will not be surprised to learn that I have never walked through the estate since, but always get to the writing group by way of the peripheries, even though it may take me a little longer...



## ***The Hub* by Judy Thomas**

Home to Pilates each week  
Creative Writing takes its turn  
On Wednesdays it's computers  
- There's always more to learn.

Our hub is a hall  
For girls and boys  
but they let us use it  
we pensioners all.

It's big and it's cosy  
with tables and chairs  
A kitchen for parties  
And cooking eclairs!

We enjoy the delights  
of our artistic young hosts.  
Their designs depict their life styles  
And what affects them the most.

But most of all  
we enjoy each other  
Our friends old and new  
Who gather together in our hub venue.



***Churchill Gardens, A Poetic Resume* by Rosie Cunningham**

Whilst Dolphin Square is left to smoulder  
the building diminishes as it gets older  
The non-profit building has no resources  
due to its old antiquated causes  
where tenants can live on a peppercorn rent  
so their social lives can be well spent.

Churchill Gardens provides many resources  
For young and old to enjoy lots of courses  
The Youth Club is at the hub of the estate  
Where young and old meet and create.  
A place of fun and interests too  
- so long may it reign for the writing class crew!

## ***Gardens Estate* by Julie Garton**

The Churchill Gardens Estate is not just a place for housing. In the spaces which link the different parts of the estate, up on balconies and in small individual front gardens, a wide variety of hedges, flowers and shrubs all flourish. The site is home to a large number of trees, some of which would have been here before the estate was built and could well be amongst the oldest things on the site. Lime, sycamore, birch, maple, cherry, cypress, false acacia and hornbeam as well as a number of London planes, grace the estate's lawns and streets. Plane trees, so ubiquitous in our parks and squares we're almost blind to them, are particularly well suited to the capital's variable climate and its polluted, compacted soil. A row of them stand behind the flats on the southern edge of the site, set back from the busy Grosvenor Road, helping to muffle the constant rumble and whine of the traffic. Trees are all over the estate. Their foliage creates areas of dappled light and shade on the sun bleached lawns; they harbour birds, they reflect the weather and help bring a feeling of permanence to the estate, which over fifty years since the first buildings went up still feels modern against the old squares on the other side of Lupus Street and the solid red brickwork of its neighbour, Dolphin Square.

The numerous open spaces are bordered by low railings and broken up by trees and raised flowerbeds, shrubs and the occasional park bench. Although they're overlooked by the windows and balconies of the surrounding flats, some of the smaller spaces such as the meadow garden, still manage to retain a feeling of intimacy. I discovered this urban meadow at the rear of Nash House by accident one day when I was haring through the estate late for a meeting in the community centre. I wondered how come its overspilling greenery had escaped the attention of the gardening team. Later, I went back for a closer look and found a garden that had been laid out in stark contrast with the disciplined lawns and flowerbeds on the rest of the estate. Plants such as nettles, often shunned by gardeners but an essential food source for the caterpillars of butterflies such as tortoiseshells and red admirals, were welcomed. An array of wildflowers had been assigned a special bed and in the weeks that followed I often returned to the meadow to see its progress. In June a glorious abundance of poppies, mallows, daisies, vetch, cornflowers, yarrow and scabious created a show of colour which made the displays of traditional bedding plants on the estate look tame and suburban. Sadly, the blaze of colour didn't last. Once June was out the wild blooms soon started to wilt; flowerheads shriveled and stems and leaves lost their greenness and turned to paper. By the middle of July, all that remained of it was a tangle of parched leaves and seed heads, ready for germination in the Spring of next year.

The meadow garden was set up with a grant from the London Wildlife Trust and is maintained by volunteers and school children who live on the estate. 'Managed' wild life gardens such as this one are important in our inner city estates. Aside from their ecological importance (wildflowers encourage much needed pollinators such as hover flies and bees, whose populations are currently decreasing at an unsustainable rate) such schemes are also a valuable educational resource and provide inner city children, many of whom do not have access to gardens of their own, with opportunities to get mud under their fingernails, make daisy chains and plant bulbs.

The landscaping of Churchill Gardens was a key feature of Powell and Moya's design a detail they apparently oversaw in person. As well as giving residents access to sunshine and fresh air, the green spaces, children's playgrounds, squares and gardens would 'humanise' the tall slab blocks and provide diversity, visual interest and character to the site. Everywhere you look on the estate there is a lawn, a garden, or a tree to break up the harsh, clean lines of the buildings, soften the texture of urban living and remind us of the season. Our cities should be full of these things.



## Interviews conducted by Julie Garton with a range of past and present residents of Churchill Gardens

### Maureen O'Brien

*Peabody's of course - they were the old London. It was a community. Everyone was in short straights. I mean, they had to sell things from the house, if they had a baby. Someone near us, a neighbour of ours, when she had her baby, she had to pull up her new rug - she had it in front of the fire - and sell it for four shillings to pay the midwife, cos nobody went to hospital then, unless they were really ill. And so you lived from day to day. Wages of course were very poor, if you had a job. My dad, apparently, who was a welder, he was out of work for two years before I was born so they really couldn't afford to have me. He worked on the Battersea Power Station. Then came the war - and the families became even closer together because the men, the younger ones went off to war and the older ones, like my dad, who'd been in the 1914-18 war, he was too old for this, the second one, he went to work in the munitions, being a welder, he went to work in the air craft factories and he used to - cos we were away. My mum took us away for about a year - and so he looked after himself and he used to go to work in the daytime and then have his tea and go fire watching, which a lot of the older men did.*

*We were bombed. Middle of the night. Bomb came and we were left homeless. We were in a surface shelter. My father wouldn't go into it. Ever. He used to stand in the block and watch whatever, But, that night he said to my mother 'I think they're getting a bit near, I'll go and stand in the shelter tonight, so it was his first night in the shelter. Or he'd have been a goner. So we just had what we stood up in. No home. Nothing. We came back about a year before the war ended. We were sent to Ranelagh Road, which is still there actually, and, er, we were in a couple of rooms. Then they started to build Churchill Gardens and of course, that was quite, quite an event. I can remember the streets 'Oh, they've knocked down so and so; 'Glasgow Terrace has gone!'. Everything was changing. We were the first to be offered and my mother was offered one because my brother and I were both over eleven so we both had to have separate rooms and so we had to have 3 bedrooms. So my mum said 'I've been offered - oh, oh, yes, yes! No' It was five pound. 'We can't afford that. We'll have to wait'. So, we never got into Churchill. I don't think many of our lot did, you know, because it was quite expensive.*

*However, it did grow up. One block was open and then they did the next block. Then it won an award in 1953 for being the finest council estate in Europe, there's a plaque down at the end, you've probably seen it. And the two architects, they're quite famous, they got lots of awards. And of course it was. It was 'They've got baths! They've got heating! They've got baths! No more coalman - he was probably dead by then, God love him. 'Hot water!' You could have a bath!' Cos, it was once a week at Peabody's. One day for the women and children and Saturday I think it was, for the men. But the fact that there were going to be baths at Churchill Gardens, everybody was mesmerized! And any that got through, it'd be 'Oh, I'd like to see your flat!' But it was a real joy. There was a waiting list. The waiting lists, apparently - and this is before any immigrants or anything like this, just British people. The waiting lists were about two or three years. You had to be absolutely urgent. And the only reason I got this was because I'd had cancer and I was still getting the treatment and there was no baths down there at Peabody's, so my surgeon wrote and so I got one.*

*It was in the 1970s. I rented it first and then I bought it. It certainly was a good thing, at the*

*time, I mean we thought it was a good thing, but then, when you got to think about it, they weren't built for people to buy, they were built for people who wanted a place to live and pay rent for it. But since then, anybody's bought them and the tenants got a good price from organisations and private people who come.*

*Then of course, in Churchill Gardens, there were porters. Any sort of minor thing... They used to come up. Then there was a curfew, you might say. Everybody, every child had to be in their homes at 9.00 at night. And if it was after 9.00, they had to vacate the whole estate. They could play in the streets if they wanted to, but not here. Also of course, the great thing, under every block, there was a laundry. You didn't have to go out into the street. You had to go down to the bottom of your block on certain days, They had washing machines! God. What a joy! That was lovely. And then people got affluent, they got their own washing machines, so the laundries closed. I don't really know what they're using them for now.*



## Lynne Anderson

*Before we moved in, I remember being taken to the flat and my mum said 'What do you think? Do you like it?' and I was just so-I was ecstatic! Just running. The sheer size of it, 3 bedrooms, living room, kitchen, bathroom, separate toilet. We'd come from a 2 room place. We didn't have carpet down for year cos we just left the floor whatever it was and it was just amazing. There was a kitchen with loads of cupboards, I remember opening all these cupboards, all these drawers and it had a balcony at the back and obviously the entrance at the front. When we moved in we had very few pieces of furniture, nobody had a lot of pennies - you didn't need it because the bedrooms had fitted wardrobes. I'd never seen anything like that. It was almost like America for me being so ahead of everything I'd ever seen before. When we moved in we found out we had downstairs. We were given a lock up in the basement, you were given keys to it and you could keep your bikes, or anything that's bulky or the pram. We had the silver cross pram, so that's what my sister was in, so the pram would have had to go downstairs. There was also the laundry downstairs, so we took all the washing down once a week. You'd chat and do your washing in the machines and drying as well down there.*

*Each block had a porter and he knew you and your family and if you did anything wrong, which I did once - I painted on the walls, going down to the basement, I painted a lady's face on the wall - and I was reported. He came up to the house and knocked on the door. My mum marched me out the front. My mum was really timid as well, but even she was, you know, This is wrong! People were very well behaved.*

*When I was getting to about 10 or 11, some families were moving out and I think they were aspiring to not be on an estate, they started to rethink about where they wanted to be, so they were moving out of London or they were looking for different things. But my mum lived here till she died. She never changed flats. We bought the flat. That came quite a lot later, that came when you had the right to buy. I do remember at one point looking out of the window from our block and seeing lots of empty flats and not understanding why and that was all the Shirley Porter time of, whatever the shenanigans were going on which I wouldn't have understood because I wasn't politically inclined but they were being purposely left empty but even me in my naivety thought why are they empty?*

*I moved away but my mum always lived here so it's always been a constant in my life and that's why I really like it. I know it's got its flaws but London's got its flaws hasn't it? It's the sheer volume of people. I went to the school as well. My sister and I both went to Churchill Gardens as children, so that was great. From a parent's point of view, you can see it can't you. So you're out the front door, cross the road, you're at school, you don't have to worry about them. But then in those days, very few people had cars. We played out at all hours, yeah. All the time. Always played out. Loads of kids. I wouldn't have known all the kids, cos once you got - you know - typical London. We had our own areas. I lived in Coleridge. A lot of my friends lived in Chaucer. You sort of stayed within your own area. I played in the playground. But not so much with the flying saucer one, I played in the other one because somehow that seemed nearer, I think... I gravitated to... It's funny that isn't it. But playing out was just normal. Coming home when it got dark, or pretending - my mum would shout over the balcony, 'Lynne, Lynne!' And I used to walk away, pretend you can't hear her. Everything was just - safe. Well, it wasn't that safe actually because there were a couple of not very nice things that happened, flashers and the usual things that happened. But you had a lot of freedom really.*

*The people that lived in our block, and so it would be the same in all blocks really, would be the same people. So families had been there for years, so my mum would know all*

*these people, so, you'd get in the lift together, or you know what's happening to their children, then things started to change. People are different and often different nationalities. It's just a fact of life isn't it? Some of them don't speak English. So someone like my mum, who was in her early 90s when she died, it would be difficult for her, you know, because her sight was poor, she more or less lost her sight, so she would get in the lift and say 'Good morning' - somebody would maybe not answer her and this would seem really strange to her. So I think, yeah, it's people that changed, the community. The community that I knew was very solid. Working class people, all living together, who would have all gone through similar things. You had to have a job, you had to have references, as I said, it wasn't easy to live here. Yeah. And we were all very proud. Everybody took a turn in cleaning their section. I'm remembering it now.. My mum and the next door neighbour would take turns, once a week, one or the other would wash our section of the stairs. We never had cleaners. It was up to us to keep it clean and they were pristine.*



## Angela Leacock

*I started off in Page Street with a bath in the kitchen, like you do, so from that I upgraded from that to Churchill. I was really, really surprised. I moved in 1985. I remember it being an old, old block. I remember the old windows, metal windows that could hardly shut, the wind would blow through them. A lot quieter than now. Not so many cars, as now. I remember Battersea Power Station still being in use, they used to heat the water from Battersea, over to our estate, then they closed it down.*

*I've played a big part as a community person in Churchill. I've worked with the youth centres, anything that they had going within the Churchill Gardens, I always got myself involved, cos I like a community atmosphere and we've had a great community in the early eighties, it was all families and most families were like mums, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, that grew up in Churchill, so it was very family orientated but as the years have gone by things have changed a lot, and a lot of these families have now moved out and new families have moved in, so what I've found now is that the Churchill Gardens hasn't got that family orientated feeling anymore because everyone's changed, moved out, passed away. At one time you could pass your flat down to your daughter or your son but the family part of it, to me, has disappeared. A lot of the estate has been bought up by outsiders, privately. My son could never live on Churchill because he's off the list now but before, they had a family quota, so that's what I'm saying, they kept families together, so my son was able to be put on the list and he would have got maybe a one bedroomed or a studio, but in Westminster to keep the families together, that's all gone. Our kids have moved out. My son's moved to California and he says there's nothing here for him, he lives there now. It's gone from a family orientated estate to a money orientated estate cos they're selling off the flats to everyone and anyone and council tenants are not getting hold of them.*

*There's a youth club and they've got a community centre, which, when I first moved in, we used to go down there because it was family orientated, again, and I think the tenants, or the committee they all got together and they were local committee that formed on the Churchill Gardens and myself I got interested because I love community and I put myself down one day to be on the committee because I thought it needed a bit more injection of ethnic minority within there and because I noticed a lot of ethnic minorities had begun to live on Churchill, so anyway, I got put on, but, when I went to the committee. I ran it through here with them for a year, we made lots of changes, we got a lot of ethnic groups in there, a lot of ethnic involvement in the community and it really worked and my son, he was a local youth worker that ran the local youth centre at that time and the combination of mother and son was really good!*

*When I first moved in, I had a few ups and downs and I had to stand my ground where a bit of racism came in. This was about 30 years ago. Unfortunately, I have to say it cos it's true. It was like, oh, I'm making too much noise, I'm having parties at the weekend, I've got lots of friends coming up and I'm thinking ... and I got complaints off the council. And one day my next door neighbour, she was looking at me, we met in the pub and I was working, and I said why are you looking at me like that and she said I've got something to tell you. So, I said oh, and she said They came round to sign a petition against you. Yes! Oh yes. That was 30 years ago, as I say, it's changed a lot now. So I said well, why have they done that? And she said well basically they're saying why have you got a flat, my daughter was here and so on. And I said Do you know what it is? Basically it's because I'm a person of colour. That's what it was. So I said What did you do Anne, did you sign? She said I told*

*them where to go because you could not meet a better neighbour with her and her son, there's nothing wrong with her but she thought she would let me know. So with that, I went straight down to the council office. I said, I've been told by someone, this is what's happening and they said Yes, we have had some complaints about you. I said Right, my son goes to school every day. I go to work every day. Weekends, has anyone come and said to you outright I'm having parties? No. I said well it's all wrong. I need to address this. Oh you have to do it with me. I said I need to see someone above. I got all the excuses, he's busy, she's busy. I said I'll wait. So after that I spoke to the head of housing in Churchill. She said Angela, I'm so sorry. You have to do something about it, so what she did, I think, she wrote - however they did it - but it completely stopped. And that's it. because I'm a bit of a fighter like that.*

*Things have changed for the better. It was Irish, Scottish, English people, there was a - they ruled it. Westminster didn't rule it. They did. So, if you came in as an outsider, you was made to feel like an outsider. So you had to prove yourself to be part of Churchill. which I have done after 30 years and I made sure that my son was part of it too. He was a local youth leader. So we had to prove ourselves a little bit and we've left a mark.*