

FAREWELL HOME



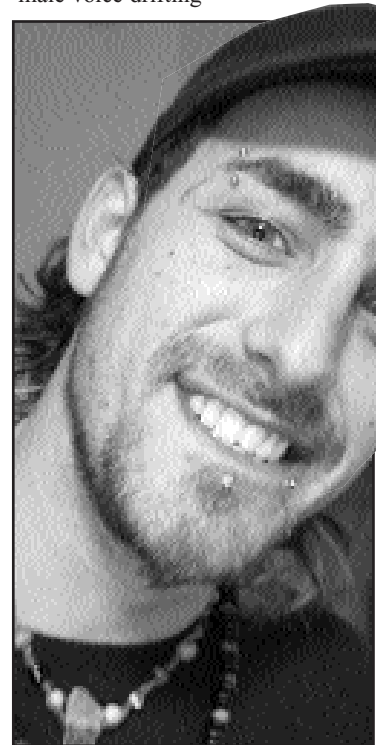
MOVING ON: Rossella Toma outside her former home and, below, former housemate Argentine squatter Leandro Lesterius

A FLASHLIGHT glinted in the distance. This was my sign to try not to look conspicuous, and climb over the gates to join the now evicted group of squatters which had taken over the Commonwealth Institute in Kensington after Christmas.

The welcoming French accent of Flo, 19, drew me to the gigantic conference hall of the disused exhibition centre.

"When I first moved in I thought it would be better suited to concerts than squatters," she says. Fumbling through the darkness, the light from the torch revealed ramps used by a group of skaters before the squatters moved in.

"We don't live in this area of the building, it's too cold," says a firm male voice drifting



informer review

A GROUP OF YOUNG SQUATTERS WHO HAVE BEEN LIVING IN THE COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE'S EMPTY HALLS SINCE CHRISTMAS HAVE BEEN EJECTED BY THE POLICE. CHRISTIAN McLAUGHLIN VISITED THE GROUP BEFORE ITS MEMBERS WERE EVICTED

towards us. Out of the shadows of a candle emerges Dominic. He is second in command after Leonardo Marques, 23, who 'opened' the squat to his friends after hiding out on his own for a week in late December.

We follow Dominic up the winding, Michelangelo-style staircase on to the circular mezzanine that is the centrepiece of the odd, multi-layered structure. He points the torch to areas of the building that have been vandalised. Broken glass covered metres of floor space, anti-climb paint is streaked across white walls, and ceiling panels have been smashed out of place.

"You should have seen the place before," says Dominic, standing next to a pile of black bin bags. "Leonardo confronted the group of teenage skaters that used to mess the place up, and we've been cleaning up ever since."

He opens the door to one of the bedrooms. There is a pile of bedding on the floor, a swivel chair, and a small desk.

About 20 of Leonardo's friends, acquaintances and friends of friends bunk in similar rooms.

One office has been turned into a living room and 10 people relax in chairs around the television, to-ing and fro-ing between the kitchen and the stereo.

I had brought a bag of breads,

snacks and a bottle of Montepulciano wine with which to treat my hosts, but to my surprise most of the good-looking, confident, multilingual group had already eaten and were offering me a choice of wine or vodka cranberry.

The group claim their presence is beneficial to the building in terms of safety and maintenance, and fail to see what harm they are doing by occupying a dead space.

Attitudes to squatting have shifted with the times. After the Second World War, soldiers returning to the capital occupied, and were later conceded, whole streets in London when housing they had been promised was not delivered.

The movement dipped out of the public eye until its re-politicisation in the late 1960s – tying in with anti-Vietnam protests and the hippy movement. In 1969 the Notting Hill Group became one of the forefathers of the modern squatting movement, taking over disused buildings – often for less than 24 hours – only to do them up again and then leave.

By improving property without laying claim to it, the group showed the power potential squatting has for change.

The Commonwealth Institute group's fate was sealed by a judge at West London County Court on

'WE JUST HAVE TO FIND WAYS OF GETTING IN WITHOUT BREAKING ANYTHING'

March 13 when he ordered their eviction and costs of £250. Two days later, and they were out on the street.

Dome Gofvtomyi, 26, who arrived in London from Budapest in November and was the third person to arrive at the squat, said: "No letter from the court arrived as we were expected to leave. It was 7.30am on Friday and five of us were standing outside the building with 17 people's bags.

"A lot had gone to work in the morning and had no idea the stuff was out in the street. But it's OK. Leandro, Rossella, Paola and the rest of us will reunite soon. We are all sleeping at friends' places, so we have to be quick. We just have to find ways of getting in without breaking anything."

Property law is permissive in this country, and squatters endlessly ingenious in finding ways to live within the law.

The 1977 Criminal Law Act protects an estimated 10,000 squatters circulating in London. The law says it is not permissible to use violence to get into a building whose occupant does not wish you to enter.

Sam Baker of the Advisory Service for Squatters said: "The young, left-leaning, European squatters are the most visible and most contactable group.

"But the majority of squatters are facing eviction from council property or housing associations."

"Many have officially become 'trespassers' for not paying their rent, for example. They are not squatting out of principle, but out of necessity."

Watching squatters such as Dominic trade languages, stories, friendship and support made me appreciate how little I knew about these urban nomads.

● The Advisory Service for Squatters is on 020 3216 0099.

'THE LAYERS OF REBUS STAY HIDDEN IN GRAND SCOTS TRADITION'

TWENTY years on; a multi-layered, dark, smoky, ruggedly manly whisky reflects perfectly the traits of one of Scotland's favourite fictional sons, says its creator.

On March 19, 1987, best-selling author Ian Rankin dragged his tough but vulnerable detective John Rebus from the underbelly of Edinburgh and on to the pages of his novel *Knots and Crosses*.

To celebrate 20 years of the dour, hard-drinking detective, Rankin has joined a leading Scottish distillery to issue a single-cask limited edition malt called Rebus20, which was unveiled at the Whisky Live convention at the Royal Horticultural Hall, Vincent Square, Victoria.

"There are layers to his personality, and many of those layers stay hidden, in the grand Scots tradition," admitted Rankin with a twinkle.

With complexity like that it was surely inevitable that someone would make a whisky out of him. "There's a Jekyll and Hyde thing about whisky which ideally fits Rebus's personality," he added.

Established in 1798 on Orkney, Highland Park is one of the most remote Scotch whisky distilleries in the world. At the heart of this single malt is its extreme

island location and exposure to the elements.

The best-selling crime author chose the whisky from five casks when he visited the distillery in Orkney last November, as the ultimate drink for his whisky-loving detective.

"I thought it rather too dark, but I'm now convinced that we've got it right," said Rankin.

"Rebus suits a dark caramel colour, a rugged manly, smoky whisky. The one we've got is certainly the one I think Rebus would prefer, but with perhaps a bit more bite than I would go for myself."

Scarred by experience, Rebus is obstinate and distrustful, but can also be kind and emotional. In England, he would be described as a 'salt of the earth' figure.

He is a no-nonsense tough guy steeped in Presbyterian pessimism who dresses badly and has a passion for books and music. He likes the company of women but is unprepared to compromise his work ethic.

In *Knots and Crosses*, he is only a detective sergeant but is promoted to detective inspector some time before the start of *Hide and Seek*, four years later.

He has not been promoted since, although he has turned down a promotion on at least one occasion.

In *The Naming of the Dead*, published in 2006, Rebus drinks a dram of Highland Park, so no doubt he would approve of the association with his name.

Just over 150 bottles are being produced from the 20-year-old Highland Park single cask, with the exclusive whisky not on sale at any shop, but available to fans of the malt and the book character via competitions on the Highland Park website:

www.highlandpark.co.uk

"It will be brilliant to toast the anniversary with an extra-special dram of Rebus' favourite drink," added Rankin.

By Kevin Dowling



PUNCH DRUNK: Author Ian Rankin

DISC OF THE WEEK: HOW TO CURE DYSLEXIA

STEP one. Hire art gallery in King's Cross. Step two. Open doors to public. Step three. Record your debut album.

Or so thinks David Miller, pictured, lead singer and founder of London-based band How To Cure Dyslexia. Along with four band members, he spent one week recording 10 tracks from *The Tempo of Bicycles and Boats* (Dyslexic Music) under the watchful eye – and occasional participation – of the general public. And the distinctly English-sounding pop album is the experiment's stunning outcome.

Hackney-born Miller, 35, who specialises in a special brand of woozy psychedelia and sardonic lyrics, claims he can't write without a bit of 'melancholy and sourness', adding: "I like Morrissey as he uses his own voice like I do, and wasn't afraid to employ sarcasm either."

Anyone that popped by the Spaceflight Gallery in Cromer Street would have seen a room littered with instruments and equipment, while a very intense Miller crooned into a microphone. He said: "If art can be an unmade bed, inviting the public to see how songs are recorded should not be a problem. The process itself should be seen as a work of art."

But what about the results? They stand up to criticism as well. The opener *Close Your Eyes* is a hypnotic mix of acoustic guitars, melodica and keyboards while *Humour* is laced with vibraphones and Miller's biting lyrics: "We'll go our separate ways, and I'll see you – never."

It all finishes in a reflective mood, with a ukulele and a soft warble, that typify an album that lives in the grey area between folk, sun-kissed pop and Brian Eno's sonic dabblings.

Were you there? Geoff Cowart

