

The corruption goes deeper

Jane Ashworth reviews

"Our Friends in the North", BBC2, 9pm, Mondays

THE SERIAL is less than half way through, and although it's got faults, I'm gripped. I used to live in Newcastle's West End, not far from Mary and Toska, two of the central characters. Thirty years on from the start of the serial, their tower block is still there.

It is one of ten, rising up off the slopes of the Tyne bank, monuments as good as any to the corrupt civic life of Newcastle in the 1960s, which is the main theme of the programme. Those flats were built as the first phase of slum clearance in a dirty deal between Austin Donaghue (the T Dan Smith figure) and Edwards System Building (the fictionalised Poulson company). The building faults which made Mary's and Toska's life a misery have been corrected, and these days the flats are probably better places than many in the West End, with 24 hour security and CCTV to deter the casual or apprentice house-breakers who torment the area.

Down the hill from the blocks, just a short walk away, is the river. Toska used to work there for a shipping company until Mary's former best mate Nikki (who is the serial's active young socialist) shopped the firm for sanction-busting by sending goods to Rhodesia. Toska is now self-employed, and it looks like he is going to be dragged into a gang, probably one involved in the pornography racket, via the market stall a gang leader has bought him. Toska's future is bleak.

The Tyne's heavy engineering base declined very rapidly in the late 1960s and early '70s, and there wasn't much alternative work for men like Toska. It wasn't until the 1990s that the Newcastle Business Park was built on the riverside to replace the dead industries. The Park is a state-subsidised office development intended to entice firms to relocate to the West End. A lot of these new offices are half-empty, and most of the staff do not live in flats like Mary's and Toska's. These days, anyone in the West End with a job moves north, maybe to the new towns like Cramlington and Killingworth, on the fringes of Newcastle, leaving the area to those who cannot afford to

leave.

I hope Mary and Toska have a chance to follow the trend and go north. It would be awful for them if they are relocated from their unhealthy flat to a house in another part of the West End. They don't know it yet — it is only 1968 — but the whole West End went down together, both the corruptly built flats and the honestly built post-war stock.

If Mary and Toska do stay in the West End, it is probably better that they stay as council tenants. The estates are grim, but life is certainly no worse than for the West End home-owners who are trapped by up to £20,000 negative equity or for the private-sector tenants, prey to landlords who police their run-down properties with gangs of heavies.

It is not only the quality of the housing, and the crime rate, which makes the West End as bad today as it was thirty years ago. Mary's and Toska's kids will have a dangerous playground, uncannily similar to backstreet Middlesbrough, where a little boy recently froze to death, trapped by the yard wall, too high to climb, of a derelict house. Some West End kids expect so little from adults that if trapped they might not even cry out.

Austin Donaghue justifies his corruption to Nikki, now a young, decent mainstream socialist who is about to rebound in disgust and join an English Red Brigade, by saying that he was frustrated by the lack of will and vision in both Newcastle's labour movement and its ruling class. To "get things done", to "rebuild the city", he brought together the council and the builders. His personal gain is the small change of this historic project, and even if he gets caught he will be looked back on as a force for positive change.

Thirty years on, the Newcastle Labour group is not corrupt, but once again the builders are the ones most likely to benefit from a new round of slum clearance — urban regeneration, as it's now called. "Partnerships" between the council and the private sector are now positively demanded by the central government.

As industry, and then the working class, leaves the West End, the council, City Challenge, and the Urban Development Corporation create parcels of land to sell off for "development." For example, Chas Chancellor, who made his name playing with *The Animals*, has been subsidised to build a multi-million

pound sports and music arena on the riverside. I doubt the makers of *Our Friends* saw the joke when *The Animals*' tracks were laid down as the setting for much of the programme.

West End land is derelict, and it's cheap, but the north bank of the Tyne faces the sun. It could become very desirable, and maybe one day posh flats with sunny riverside views will be built there for the senior staff from the Business Park.

The last time I saw the tower blocks on TV, they formed the background for the opening credits of *The Likely Lads*. Upwardly mobile Bob was on his way to Cramlington, or some place similar, and even likeable, dissolute, under-achiever Terry could get a job when he really tried. It's ironic that while the comforting (if a little kitsch) "Away the Toon" Geordies Terry and Bob were the public face of Newcastle in the 1960s, Mary was desperately re-papering walls to deny the running damp in her two year old system-built flat.

It has taken thirty years for that scandal to be made safe enough to dramatise. Justice had been seen to be done when T Dan Smith died a few years, his last home being a flat in one of the tower blocks, just next to Mary's and Toska's.

I will be very surprised if the plot veers off the likely track and examines the social policy of the City Council as well as the housing and planning issues. That would really cut to the quick, in both 1968 and 1996. The TV prefers to show Newcastle as a tale of civic corruption, which in truth is not the most significant factor in the making of today's North East.

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