

THE CHATHAM HILTON



AKA PEAK HOUSE

The godsend that turned sour

BY ALAN MCGUINNES

DRUG DEALERS and prostitutes on the streets, heaps of rubbish piling up outside, holes in the ceiling and dodgy boilers - the students that stayed in Peak House are unlikely to forget their year there in a hurry. I should know: last year I was one of 31 first year students at the University of Kent who stayed there, a Grade II listed building which had been converted into student accommodation, just off Chatham high street.

For many of us who turned up on that weekend just before Freshers' Week, our first impressions were actually quite positive. Piers Singer, 23, who studies Music Technology, said it

DRUG DEALERS AND PROSTITUTES

"seemed like a nice old place," low budget, but bearable. Joel Neale, who studies Audio Design and Production and is 19, describes his first impressions of his flat: "big, spacious but a nice size for two people to live in."

Dan Boardman, a 20 year-old Music Technology student said his room was bigger than he thought it would be.

But as we settled in, things soon began to go wrong. We quickly discovered that we were in what would best be described as Chatham's red light district. Also, a common sight was seeing random tramps in the garage below, as Piers explains: "Being propositioned by prostitutes is not all that pleasant and the tramps in the garage shooting up and leaving their needles and faeces lying about even less so."

One student, who didn't want to be named, said they found it "scary". Nana, a 23-year-old business technology student, branded it "unacceptable".

Piers and Nana shared a flat at Peak House. They discovered that there was a hole in the ceiling of their bathroom. Someone came round to try and fix it before Christmas but then nothing was done for six months.

Piers said: "After many phone calls and emails, some contractors turned up to fix it. They discovered another leak forming and started pulling the ceiling apart." "After a couple of hours they realised that they couldn't fix it and so we were

CHATHAM'S RED LIGHT DISTRICT

left with a great big hole in the bathroom ceiling, which still continued to leak. We placed a bucket under the leak which collected almost 2 gallons of water for the duration we were there," he added. According to Nana, the leak was still there when they left in June. He has tried to get compensation from the university, but has so far had no luck.

During his stay at Peak House, Piers had four bikes in the downstairs garage, and all of them were vandalised. "I had four motorcycles vandalised of which one cost me almost £200 to repair and the other three were so badly broken that I had to have them scrapped."

These sorts of problems persisted throughout the year. My boiler broke twice and for long periods me and my room mate were left without hot water. My bedroom light stopped working in October and I wasn't able to replace it. Then it magically started working again in May. The internet was also shockingly bad, akin to having dial up. Loading Facebook or Gmail was a bridge too far for Peak House's congested connection.

Bruce Boyd, a local landlord who runs Pads4Grads, a company that offers houses to students at Kent, has heard about some of the issues surrounding Peak House.

Bruce says the university viewed Peak House as a "godsend" when the Universities at Medway project first began in 2004.

"I don't think anybody realised where Peak House was," he chuckled. "I think they were quite surprised about the ladies of the night."

Bruce also said that the university had taken a lot of action to remedy the problems with drugs and prostitutes. He was surprised when I told him that despite this, many of us continued to experience problems throughout the year: "I'm quite surprised the problems were still going on to the extent that you're saying...I thought they'd gone a long way to solving that problem."

But he thinks the university shouldn't be judged too harshly on what is still a project in what he calls its "embryonic" stage.

Nearly all of the students I spoke to said they were glad to get out of the place. Nana was "delighted" to leave. When asked if he was glad to leave, Piers replied "Oh god yes." Piers, Nana and Joel also agreed that their stay at Peak House wasn't value for money. "I paid £4332 from September till June including deposit which was £300. This is a rip-off, it

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is like being charged £10 at a chicken & chip shop for a portion of chips," fumed Nana.

However while some residents undoubtedly had a tough time at Peak House, some will miss it. "I'm excited about my new house but I'm gonna miss the people and the banter," said Dan. He said he was never once bothered by prostitutes or drug dealers and thinks his stay at Peak House was value for money.

Despite the problems, Joel will also take away some good memories: playing 4 player Mario Party, Ring of Fire in James and Stefan's flat, Centurion with Jon, riding an ironing board down the stairs, being locked out of his flat about 100 times and sleeping walking to find himself half naked on the stairs

locked out of his flat at 3am.

Jackie Warden, the Off-Campus Housing Officer at the University of Kent, said she was not allowed to comment, but the university's Accommodation Office released a statement in response to the experiences of Peak House residents.

"We are concerned if some students feel let down over the Peak House accommodation, as clearly the welfare of our

"UNACCEPTABLE"

students is of the greatest importance to us," the statement said.

"However, we strongly believe that the Peak House flats offered modern, good quality accommodation, located in the centre of Chatham and within very easy access of the Medway campus.

The statement added: "The accommodation represented good value for money - for example, including all heating and lighting, and free internet access - when compared with other student accommodation in the area." Many students clearly disagree with that assertion. Bruce's houses in Bridge Road - minutes from the university - were almost £1,000 cheaper, and a darn sight nicer than the rather soulless confines of Peak House.

This year's intake of students won't have the chance to experience the unique pleasure of staying there however. Peak House has gone back to its lease holders, its future uncertain. Students will instead be housed in the brand new university accommodation at Liberty Quays in Gillingham. Bruce thinks this is a part of the university's continuing improvement at all levels. "It's just a shame the accommodation has been a bit behind the times," he said.

"You might look upon it in years to come as a slightly amusing situation," says Bruce about Peak House. When its former residents look back on their time there they may find themselves doing just that.