One week with JOHN GULLIVER

johngulliver@camdennewjournal.com

Clive's great undertaking

Clive Leverton at the Good Funeral Awards ceremony

HE wasn't what I expected. Before I picked up the phone I imagined a sombre man, perhaps a little one-dimensional, given to much quiet reflection.

And then, within minutes of talking to 73-year-old Clive Leverton, it was difficult not to be swept along by his humour and a genuine feeling of wanting to help people.

If you trace back his life to his younger days, it all makes sense – and would explain why it culminated the other week in his reaching the pinnacle of his profession – the Lifetime Award for the Good Funeral Awards of 2017.

Born in Hampstead Garden Suburb during the Second World War, Clive left his secondary school in Cricklewood at 15 – "I wasn't the scholastic type" – and joined his family's undertaking business founded in 1789.

He was part of the eighth generation of Levertons. Quite an act to follow.

It may all seem a long time ago but he remembers quite clearly how religious he felt in his mid-teens, along the Baptist tradition, and wanted to leave the firm and serve as a missionary abroad.

Somehow the feeling abated slightly during his apprenticeship in undertaking but his need to help people especially in their bereavement when they are at their lowest point remains with him. The words flow naturally from him. "I feel the need to help them remove some of the burden from their shoulders," he said.

Typically, he is involved with several charities and has chaired the St Pancras Welfare Trust for 20 years, which provides grants to local residents in Camden.

As the key figure at Levertons for many years, before his retirement three years ago, he saw the firm appointed by the Royal household, carrying out funerals for the Queen Mother and Princess Margaret and playing a part in the funeral of Princess Diana.

Though I caught him at home yesterday (Wednesday) he still spends time at the office, and helped to pioneer Britain's first all-electric hearse four years ago – an innovation that won Levertons the Most-Eco-friendly Funeral Director Award this year.

New flats in a shaky market

Homes come on stream in Maiden Lane

ANOTHER block of new flats was unveiled this week under the council's pioneering Community Investment Programme – this time in the Maiden Lane area, off York Way.

And, judging from comments of potential tenants, the flats are swish, spaciously designed, with a quality you would normally find in a private block.

Despite this, rents appear to be pretty average for a council property – in a five-storey block, a one-bed flat, for instance, is £138.62 with rents rising to £163.07 for a four-bed one.

This all pivots on the sale of nearly half of the 273 units with a one-bed flat starting at £545,000.

An innovation is the introduction of higher rented flats, known as "intermediate", with rents for one-bed flats starting at £195, rising to £452.20 for a three bed flat. As I understand it, these are meant for the higher earners, who cannot get onto the property ladder.

The success of the programme will turn on the saleability of the private flats – and how quickly this will occur in an uncertain market remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, more news on the empty flats in the other CIP block in Vicars Road, Gospel Oak, that the council had been unable to sell.

Now, apparently, sales are beginning to move forward, and six offers have been accepted, though none has exchanged.

Authors of the programme will feel less anxious but, as I said, the London property market is far from steady.

Their profit, our loss

THE splendid towering edifice of the University College Hospital in Euston Road – built only a few years ago – draws appreciative glances from passers-by.

But it has been sucking blood from the hospital – roughly in the region of £30million per year.

This is because it was built by a conglomerate, Health Management (UCLH) Plc (HMU) contracted by the hospital under the system much favoured by the New Labour government – the Private Finance Initiative.

The contract committed the NHS Trust to pay an annual charge of £27.9million increasing through the retail price index each year until June 2040.

The total fee paid by the Trust for 2015/16 was £38.8million – money withdrawn from the hospital's threatened budget already teetering on an abyss. So far, Health Management has made more than £180million in pre-tax profits from the deal entered into 12 years ago.

Health Management is made up of Credit Suisse (43.3 per cent), Semperian (40 per cent), Interserve (8.3 per cent) and Dalore Capital (8.3 per cent).

The scandalous financial web stitched together by the PFI deal has been exposed by research carried out by the Centre of Health and Public Interest think tank into PFI schemes across the country.

Colin Leys, author of the report, headed *Profiting From Our Infirmaries*, said that the profit margin from the contract governing University College London Hospital, is "more than enough" to build an additional hospital and is the result of a system of "highly favourable" contracts.

The report also warns that the UCLH contract was "especially concerning" as there was 'exceptionally high rates of profits.'

According to the hospital's board papers the entire scheme is described as a "particularly expensive form of borrowing".

As for Colin Leys, a respected health policy campaigner, his research

University College Hospital

reveals a staggering scale of profits extracted from the coffers of the UCLH Trust by the PFI contract – between 2005 and 2015 it paid a total of £724.8million out of which the company, HMU, has made pre-tax profits of £190.4million and post-tax profits of £150.1million.

While profit margins have been falling for many companies in Britain, HMU enjoyed a reversal of this trend. They rose from 4.6 per cent in 2005 to 29.4 per cent in 2015.

Digging further, Mr Leys reveals that during the coming years UCLH will pay the PFI company an extraordinary total of £1.95billion.

His report recommends using public sector loans to buy-out PFI contracts – saving the NHS funding in the long run – and capping the amount of profit a company can make from the schemes. I wonder which government would be brave enough to take this step – a step, I sense, that would draw much public support.

To stir the pot further, Mr Leys adds: "There is a legitimate debate about how much, if any, profit should be generated through contracts to deliver publicly funded healthcare."

John Gulliver