



Got a property that's been taken over by drug dealers? The usual security guards too expensive? Try Ambika, whose rugby players soon send the petty criminals packing. Lucy Barnard reports

Crack dens cracked

Paul Cooke, managing director of Ambika Security, stands shiftily outside a dark doorway in Holborn and taps his foot on the glass-panelled cellar hatch three times. In the gloom below there is a slight echo.

"This was one of the crack dens," he mutters. "Punters would tap a code here before they were allowed in. For everyone else, this was pretty much a no-go area."

He leads the way into a courtyard surrounded by blocks of Victorian flats. "On a bad night, there was a queue of a dozen people here. Cars were parked in the lane behind the estate, with people waiting to jump out. According to the police, who raided the worst crack den – in units 128A and B – a deal was going on there every three minutes."

But times have changed for Gray's Inn Buildings, a small estate of 132 Victorian flats in a run-down part of Holborn, operated by Community Housing Association.

Cooke leads the way up a graffiti-covered stairwell, which smells of damp and weed, to one of the flats. "You just couldn't get into these," he adds. "The smell was sickening. There was effluent everywhere. Just before we started working here, a man was thrown down the stairs and killed."

It is quite eerie looking around at the words and pictures daubed on the walls. There are years of names, song lyrics, drug-fuelled paintings and obscenities. So, inside, the difference could not be more startling.

Six-foot-tall Trent, a 26-year-old electrician from New Zealand is listening to a CD in his flat. He has just hung out his washing and is making a cup of coffee. His flat is clean, tidy and freshly painted although his half-full rucksack sits in a corner. The flat smacks of a cross between student digs and a backpackers hostel in Thailand.

If you have ever wondered how all the bars in central London happen to be staffed by Antipodean visitors who could not afford central London rents, this is the answer.

Rather than providing a costly 24-hour



The courtyard of Gray's Inn Buildings – where queues of junkies used to form at night

security system, involving one or two guards patrolling a building and monitoring it on CCTV, Ambika uses the flats like a select youth hostel, allowing athletic young men to live rent-free in return for providing security. Caretakers occupy 24-30 of the 80 flats for which the firm has responsibility, with the remainder secured. The rest of the flats have tenants, but the whole estate is patrolled.

Ambika Security's celeb connections

The firm has attracted some unusual names to its properties. Jason Elliott, author of the bestseller, *An Unexpected Light*, has been staying in an Ambika house on and off for seven years.

Some occupants of the company's clients' properties include Jason Palmer, the chief physiotherapist for Fulham FC, Abi Akoku and Vaughan Cherrington, who play for the London Broncos rugby league team, and finally, Te Rangitu Netana, the tattoo artist who designed the motif on pop star Robbie Williams' back.

Cooke set up the company in 1998 when he was working as a part-time artist and living in a Crown Estate property. His original plan was to provide professional caretakers for Crown Estate houses.

Today, the firm has around 70 clients, with 160 caretakers spread across 50-60 sites in London and the Home Counties. Last year, it had a turnover of £400,000, a 17% increase on the previous year. Its objective is to achieve double-digit growth each year, an objective it has so far managed to achieve.

Taken on by Camden council

Ambika is now trying to get more work from the social sector. It has recently been taken on by Camden council to look after Levita House, Chalton Street, a similar property to Gray's Inn although not as problematic.

Cooke adds: "I just think it's something that has to be done. Crime, drugs and prostitution are problems across the country and this is an effective and inexpensive way of dealing with them. I don't care if it's us or somebody else, but it really ought to be done."

As a condition of their accommodation, the caretakers have to patrol the estate twice a day and stay on site for at least 12 hours a day. They must attend a meeting every Monday to discuss security issues, compose a weekly incident report, and liaise between tenants and the landlord; for example, collecting the key when someone moves out of a flat. Each guard must also undergo a one-day training course before starting.

The men make an odd sight, walking past the former brothels in their black Ambika T-shirts and jackets as if they were on their way to play inter-collegiate rugby.

As Ambika guards, they can vacate the building at a moment's notice should the landlord want them to do so. And, because they are not being paid, the firm can charge as little as £40 a week per guard-occupied flat. At the top end of the scale, Ambika charges £650 a week for 24-hour cover.

The writing is on the wall for petty criminals on this estate: Ambika guard Jo, who is now the full-time caretaker, pictured in Gray's Inn Buildings



possession of lost flats and the cost of worker time, Ambika offers a competitive service, and we're very happy with it."

Over the past six months, Ambika has managed to clear most of the estate of drug dealers and their associated crime, although patrols often turn up collections of used needles, condoms and other insalubrious items. However, Ambika claims that these are usually the refuse from potential squatters visiting the estate, looking for vacant property, who take a look and realise there is no chance for them.

Facing down hostility

Cooke says that this success was not achieved overnight. "It was tough for the first three months. The boys faced a tremendous amount of hostility and had to cope with a lot of intimidation. We started them off patrolling the roofs in groups of six to 10 just to clear the loiterers away. By simply physically taking over the property and showing people we were there to stay, things got a lot better. At the worst point, we had about 40 boys staying on the estate," he says.

The scheme is a massive change for Ambika, which is also in charge of security on some of the most upmarket homes in the country. In the past, Ambika guards have lived in the home of the Earl and Countess of Wessex, Bagshot Park, Royal Lodge in Windsor and a number of properties on the Regents Park and Kensington Estates.

The opportunities for the security guards are obvious. Jo, 25, a Samoan who works as Gray's Inn Buildings' full-time paid caretaker, adds: "Initially, I was a caretaker like the other boys but with some training I'm now gaining some management experience."

Davey, a 26-year-old New Zealander, says it is the mix of business and pleasure that makes his participation worthwhile. "This gives me the chance to live in central London rent free and I'm among friends. We even have an Ambika rugby team."

The landlord, Community Housing Association, has had consent to redevelop the flats for years but was unable to enter the estate or to evict the squatters. Now, thanks to Ambika, the project is on. "Renovation work is now due to start this financial year," says development manager Jason Williams.

"CHA has been using Ambika at Gray's Inn Buildings since 2001, after we became concerned that conventional methods of securing properties were not working. The safety concerns of the remaining tenants waiting to move were not being met.

"With redevelopment about to happen here, tenants are moving out and leaving flats vacant. It means there is a real danger that the estate will attract unlawful activity.

"The style of security Ambika is providing means there are extra 'eyes and ears' on the estate. The result speaks for itself - we have experienced few break-ins and there's been a dramatic reduction in unlawful activities.

"We now use Ambika on other schemes and properties. Security of this nature is not a cheap option but compared with the cost of vandalism, the legal costs of regaining