Reporter

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Guerrilla Benchers

Stand up for your right to sit

SECRET AGENT LADYBIRD

The Guerrilla Benchers in action in Bloomsbury

First it was guerrilla gardeners spreading their horticultural passion across the capital's weed-choked wastelands, now it's the turn of Guerrilla Benchers, who are coming to the aid of Londoner's footweary pedestrians.

The Guerrilla Benchers, a four-person-strong crack squad, will soon be arriving on a street near you – armed with benches. 'London's benches are disappearing. Once London's streets were lined with them and you could plonk yourself down for a well-earned rest after slogging round the shops. We've found that there's just nowhere to put your feet up any more,' said Agent Bristly Pioneer, a Guerrilla Benchers member. In January, the footsore guerrillas decided to take matters into their own hands. Dressed in workmen's gear of high-vis jackets and low-slung jeans, and armed with power tools, roll-ups, a few copies of the *Sun* – and two benches – the guerrillas swooped on the eastern side of Shaftesbury Avenue.

'We'd started noticing benches had disappeared around this end of Shaftesbury Avenue. We think two or three might have gone, so we decided to put them back,' said Agent Bristly. 'It was fairly simple, we just drilled some holes in the ground, put the benches in and sat down and had a cup of tea. Then we went and had a fry-up.'

Didn't anyone stop them? 'The police pulled up next to us but didn't bat an eyelid. I think people just assumed we were supposed to be there. We didn't hear anything for about three weeks, and then three days after we put something about it on our website the benches mysteriously disappeared,' said Agent Bristly.

And it seems the guerrillas are right:

'We drilled holes in the ground, put the benches in and sat and had a cup of tea'

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Installed *A Guerrilla Benchers seat*

London's benches *are* disappearing under new policies by councils to declutter the streets. 'There are fewer benches now,' confirmed a spokesperson for Camden council. 'Some are removed for a number of reasons: often at the request of local residents, schools or churches, because they are being used for anti-social behaviour, sometimes because of environmental schemes or because they provide an obstacle to a new pavement lay-out. Or just to be repaired,' he said.

Westminster council is also reducing its bench quota. 'We've lost a small number. It's an attempt to curb anti-social behaviour and to discourage rough sleepers who use them as beds. We're usually responding to complaints by neighbours,' said a spokesperson. Westminster scrapped 12 of its seats last year leaving the borough with 240 benches. But Londoners can take a stand against this erosion of their seating rights. 'Anyone can make a request to have a bench put in,' said a council spokesperson.

In the meantime, the Guerrilla Benchers will be targeting other abandoned bench sites across the city. In the words of Agent Bristly: 'We'd like more of a bench culture, where people can sit down, watch the world go by and do nothing for a while.'

Rebecca Taylor

(www.spacehijackers.co.uk/html/projects/guerrillabench/guerrilla.html)