

HIGHBURY COMMUNITY NEWS

Issue No 14 September 1999

The Highbury Hounds.....Or sweet singing in the choir?

Nicky Spice explains the evolution of the Highbury Chamber Choir

In the 16th century, English huntsmen chose their dogs as much for their bark as for their bite. A good hunting pack was not just one that ran fast and attacked with fury, but one that sounded melodious at bay. Such a pack was deemed to be 'well-tuned'. To tune a pack meant mixing dogs of all shapes and sizes – big dogs with deep barks, small dogs with piercing yaps, middling dogs with contralto yowls, and so on. I have often thought of this delightful old tradition, when I have tried to characterise the *Highbury Chamber Choir*, which we started in May 1987, and which has been meeting regularly ever since.

The Renaissance huntsmen got the kind of sound they wanted out of their dogs, precisely by not picking and choosing them, and it is this principle – or lack of principle – that has been applied with rigorous carelessness to the formation of the *Highbury Chamber Choir*. No-one has ever been auditioned for this choir and no-one who has turned up to sing has ever been turned away again. In this way, organically and without any very definite control, the choir has grown to include around 25 singers, all of whom have very different kinds of voice – indeed, just the voices they happen to come with. You might think this would lead to cacophony when the choir sang together. In fact, when the choir is singing happily and confidently, the variety of types of voice within it produces a natural open sound, full of energy and ordinary life.

The energy and life also comes with the commitment of the singers. Because the group has grown without planning and intervention, the people in it get on together in an easy-going sort of way, united by their common interest in and love of singing. Several members of the choir have been with it since it started in 1987, and many have sung with the group for five years or more.

I think it's the quality of the music we sing that keeps people coming back to singing in the Choir. In a group that learns notes quite slowly, the music has to be good enough to stand up to repeated rehearsal; in fact, it should get more interesting the more you get to know it. If you run a group by trying not to run it too tightly, things happen quite slowly. When the *Highbury Chamber Choir* started, in May 1987, we had only three people, and it took two years of patient rehearsing to grow in size and confidence to the point of being able to give a concert. We mainly sing unaccompanied music, which we rehearse without a piano, taking the note from a tuning fork. This slows down note-learning, but gives singers confidence and teaches them to listen better and to sing in tune. The

Choir has always been good at holding its pitch over the course of long unaccompanied pieces.

The great thing about amateur choirs, as opposed to amateur orchestras, is that they can tackle really sophisticated music and perform it to a high standard. A group of local singers, like the *Highbury Chamber Choir*, with no more than an ability to read music and sing in tune, can give fine performances of the greatest works of the Western choral repertoire, works which are often thought to be the preserve of professional or semi-professional groups. In recent years, we have performed works by William Byrd, Thomas Tallis, Palestrina, Victoria, Purcell, Brahms and Bruckner, as well as part-songs by Brahms, Ravel and Britten. To perform this kind of music with a local choir, in a local setting, before a local audience, has always been a happy experience. In a small way, it has proved the point that great pieces of music can be more than just products to enrich a centralised and professionalised entertainment industry. They can be brought back right into the centre of people's lives. ■

The Highbury Chamber Choir meets every Tuesday evening during term time, and rehearses from 8.15pm until 10pm at St John's Church, on the corner of Gloucester Drive and Queen's Drive, N4. If you can read music and have some experience of singing in choirs, and would like to know more about the group, please call Nicky Spice on 0171 209 1141 (daytime) or 0171 354 1129 (evenings and weekends).

HCA COMMITTEE 1999-2000

George Arabanos	Highbury Hill
Chris Ashby	Bryantwood Road
Anna Banks	Gillespie Road
Sheila Benson	Highbury New Park
Alison Carmichael	Highbury Hill
Elizabeth Dudley	Highbury Hill
Mark Duffill	Highbury Hill
Pauline Gerlis	Stavordale Road
Sue Read	Balfour Road
Robert Scott	Highbury Hill
Tony Wood	Highbury Hill
Roger Wright	Highbury Hill
Margot Young	Highbury Hill

HCA general information: 0171 359 5731

SEVEN DOWN, FIVE REMAIN - GILLESPIE TRADERS STRUGGLE ON

Crime and Football are driving Gillespie Road traders out of business.

A year ago we reported a summer crime wave in Gillespie Road. Now, things are even worse. In the last year a further four of the twelve businesses closest to the tube station and the stadium have given up the struggle and shut up shop for good, making seven in total. So, instead of a parade of useful community shops, a depressing row of graffiti-covered hoardings and steel shutters lines one side of Gillespie Road.

Last month, the staff in William Hill were held up at gunpoint, despite the prominent CCTV camera in the shop.

The Estate Agent shut up after all the computers were stolen last year, around the time the Laundrette's plate glass

frontage was shattered by hooligans. This was the final straw for the Laundrette, which served people on the Quill Street Estate and students living near-by. It was already struggling to break even due to the loss of trade on week-day evening Arsenal Matches and week-end matches.

The owner of the Satellite Dish shop has also closed and says he could not open on Match Days at all as traders don't get Match Day Parking Permits, stopping him from parking his van near-by.

The Arsenal Cafe has closed this year and other traders worry about their increasing isolation amongst the boarded up shops. The shops that remain have to watch carefully for pilfering (worst in Newsagents shops) and

usually employ additional staff on Match Days to guard against petty crime.

This was, for years, a thriving community where many of the shop owners lived above their shops and residents had a variety of shops to choose from. However, amongst the shop-keepers that remain in Gillespie Road, there is a generous spirit of co-operation.

This struggle to survive might have a better chance of success if yet more residents and shop-keepers joined the Neighbourhood Watch Scheme, which has now been running for eight years here. ■

To join Neighbourhood Watch or to learn more, ring: PC 353, Chris Bartley, at the Sector Office 0171 421 0663

THE HCA PARTY, THE NEW COMMITTEE, NEW INTERESTS

In May the Highbury Community Association held its AGM and Party at the Ecology Centre in Drayton Park. Over 60 people heard Bob Gilbert, Islington's Ecology Officer (now elevated to Islington's Green Space Manager) regale the audience with stories of the myths, magic and folklore of the plants we all walk past every day on the streets of Highbury. There was plenty of wine and food, and a general feeling that it was a good party, in an excellent location, and unusual to get so many people turning out for a 'community' event.

At the AGM we reported on what the Association has been doing and what it stands for. Robert Scott, one of the founder members of the HCA, said that we see one of our strengths in not being affiliated to any political party. He explained, "The HCA is very much a members' organisation. The committee is not there to do things for the members, (although we try), but we **are** there to help people do things for themselves."

With over 600 'signed up' members, we are also the largest community association in Islington, something which will become more important when the Neighbourhood Fora cease to exist early next year.

We support our local shops and small traders (and they support us by advertising in this Newsletter) and we are the only organised resource for the Highbury based traders.

Members heard that Elizabeth House Youth Club, in Hurlock Street, which is aiming to start its major re-building work this year, is one potentially very valuable community resource with which HCA members are involved. In liaison with Highbury Fields Association, the HCA acts on relevant planning matters, traffic issues, environmental concerns and so on.

And we are always looking for other suggestions for activity and involvement. Ring: **0171 359 5731** ■

Greek Wonder in Highbury By Pauline Gerlis

When Islingtonians suggest having a Greek meal, the chances are they will be thinking of Greek Cypriot village cooking. From Upper Street to Green Lanes, that is what we have in abundance; and very good it is too.

Now Highbury can offer something a bit different. The owners of the recently opened **Olive Tree** (on the corner of Blackstock and Mountgrove Roads) hail from Athens; and they offer metropolitan, not rustic style.

Why spend ages trying to park around Upper Street when you can walk to this delightful restaurant right here on your doorstep? This family-run bistro and

patisserie has a warm and bustling atmosphere and the food, which is all home-made and fresh, is cooked with natural ingredients only.

Even the flour used in the baking of some of the most delicious Greek breads you'll ever taste is organic.

The Olive Tree is open from 8 a.m.

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Planning - The Inside View

By Ian Crawley

Gavin Weightman's article in the February 1999 edition of HC News made a number of statements about the planning system and the way it is operated in Islington which bear little relation to what actually happens.

Islington is unique in the UK in having residents comprising Neighbourhood Forum Planning Committees which determine planning applications - most notably in Finsbury since 1989.

Islington is unusual in providing funding to groups of residents to employ planning consultants to prepare a planning brief for a site, have the officers recommend it, the Committee approve it and planning applications measured against it. This process took place at Islington Green and Isledon Village.

Customer satisfaction questionnaires show we are succeeding in engaging more effectively with residents. Between July 1998 and February 1999 the percentage of objectors satisfied went up from 73% to 83%, whilst the percentage of applicants or agents satisfied went up from 81% to 90%. The key conclusion, however, must be that we can do better. There are lessons from the Kelross Road process and we must ensure we learn them.

The Government has set a target for all local planning authorities of determining 80% of planning application within 8 weeks. Islington's councillors consider 65% is a more appropriate target - in the year to 31st December 1998 we achieved 69%.

Islington grants 87% of all planning applications. It has been suggested that Islington is exceptional in achieving this because of the officers' desire to satisfy applicants. The truth is rather different - nine other London boroughs approve between 90% and 99%. All local planning authorities will try to negotiate an acceptable scheme wherever possible

In issue 12, Gavin Weightmen described the frustrations of lodging a planning objection, following his experience of a controversial proposal for housing behind Kelross Road. He concluded **"...planners should warn objectors like myself that no amount of expense or effort is going to alter anything; the rubber stamp is at the ready, regardless"**

Now, Ian Crawley, Islington's Head of Planning, defends the Council's procedures, but agrees **"For too long the planning system has been the preserve of applicants, officers and councillors."**

because of the benefits that can flow from investment in a property or locality.

For too long the planning system has been the preserve of applicants, officers and councillors. One of the successes of the Neighbourhood Forums within Islington, supplemented by the Council's approach to public involvement, is the number of people who are now engaging in influencing the future of their environment. This can only be positive for the quality of the planning decision and of the environment.

This does not mean, however, that people necessarily get the planning decision they want. A significant proportion of proposals are amended through negotiation by officers in response to objectors concerns. This can lead to the accusation that officers are working

with developers against residents. This may occur when an objector highlights concerns about the principle of a proposal as well as details, whilst sorting out the details can make the overall scheme acceptable.

With the high residential density in Islington - at 120 persons per hectare (against 77 persons per hectare for Inner London), many planning applications elicit objections. Most proposals are, however, acceptable after some revision, when checked against the Council's statutory Unitary Development Plan policies and standards.

There is a high degree of judgement required in balancing the different policies within the UDP with each other, in balancing what could happen to a site if its current use was maximised with what a planning application proposes; and in balancing these with residents' views.

That is why there is no right decision on any planning application. We aim for the best decision, taking account of all the relevant issues. The key lesson from Kelross Road is to ensure all the information on which officers base their recommendation is widely available at the earliest opportunity. This is to assist people to make their own judgements and represent their own interests most effectively. ■

Ian Crawley is Head of Regulatory and Planning Services for Islington Council

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every day, serving breakfast, and closes late every evening. The range of breads, cakes and deli specialities is varied and tempting - perfect for last minute shopping.

If you're going to have a meal at The Olive Tree, arrive with a large appetite.

Particularly good are the bourekias and the kleftico. The pitta and olive breads are to die for.

The meal won't break the bank balance, either, with most main courses averaging £7.

A word.....If you say you have come

through the Highbury Community News you will receive an especially warm welcome. ■

The Olive Tree
177A & B Blackstock Road
London N5 2LL
Tel: 0171 503 5466

THE BARN STORE
15 Highbury Park
London N5 1QJ
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Letters from.....

Bernadette Banks - 0171 704 1558

As a very recent new mother, I find myself - as one who is used to being at work - looking for things to do with my baby daughter.

If anyone knows of any activities in the area, I would be grateful to hear from them or maybe a reply to the newsletter could benefit other people in a similar situation.

** If you want to reply to Bernadette through the newsletter, or if you have anything at all to say, write to HC News, 10 Stavordale Road, Highbury, N5 1NE.*

& from.....

Ellen Trost - 226 9517

I would like to promote the Council's programme of tree sponsorship. Do members know that the Council will plant and maintain trees if they pay for buying them?

I have done a bit in Elfort Road. We now have 3 new trees sponsored by residents. Is anyone else doing the same?

** Contact the Tree Officer, Vincent James, on 477 4946 for details and advice or ring Ellen.*



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Editor's note: Send news or views you want published in the HC News to the Editor at 83 Highbury Hill, N5 1SX or email: alicar@bigfoot.com. Deadline for next issue 07.11.99

Highbury Community Association

The HCA represents residents and businesses, on all aspects of living and working in Highbury, Stoke Newington and Finsbury Park.