

HIGHBURY COMMUNITY NEWS

Issue No 26 February 2002

Elizabeth House Reborn By Rodney Clark

With this Newsletter, you will find a leaflet with details of all the activities currently available at Elizabeth House, which reopened as a Community Centre and Learning Centre last September. This simple leaflet cannot convey any idea of the hard work, energy and good luck needed for this building to continue its important role in our community. This is the story of how it managed to stay alive during the last 10 years.

I was going to write that the early history of Elizabeth House is not clear, but that is probably not true at all. What I should really be saying is that, with all the work required to make it habitable again, nobody has found the time to do the necessary research. I have a map of Highbury from the turn of the century, showing a Mission Hall on the site. We know that this is of later construction than the building in front of it, which was originally 3 houses dating from about 1800.

During the middle of the last century, the building was a flourishing Community Centre, apparently under the auspices of a women's organisation called the Soroptimists, whose name appeared alongside that of the Save the Children

Fund (SCF) on the wall facing Blackstock Road before the refurbishment works started. The name dates from this time, the 'Elizabeth' being one Elizabeth Hawes, a member of this organisation, who had a great concern for children and young people. During the latter half of the century, the building belonged to SCF, during which time a range of activities continued to be run.

In the 1980s the building and its work entered a period of decline, and the decision was made to close it and sell it off. This was a matter of great concern for the local community, and a number of those most exercised at the loss of this facility established a Trust in order to save it. Jeremy Corbyn, the Revd. Stephen Coles of St. Thomas's Church, Sue Higgs and her staff at the Blackstock Advice Centre, now sadly closed down, and others formed The Highbury Vale Blackstock Trust. After some difficult negotiations, involving meetings at the House of Commons, the building was purchased. The Church Urban Fund and the Tudor Trust provided money, but most of it came from an anonymous, local benefactor, who was friendly with one of the founding Trustees.

Over the next few years, these volunteers worked hard during their spare time to make the building serviceable. The Youth Clubs and After School Club for children were established and a wide range of local groups and organisations used Elizabeth House for their meetings.

After 2 or 3 years of its independent existence, it became clear that if the project was to continue, a great deal of money would be needed to refurbish the building. The fabric was crumbling and the services (heating, plumbing, electrics etc) were starting to fail.

The stout band of volunteers was beginning to lose heart, and it looked as though there might be no future. One of the band was Lorna Davies who, even though she had moved to Cambridge, continued to make a huge contribution by remaining as Company Secretary. Lorna spent a great deal of time and effort in fundraising in support of the activities, and she set about getting a grant from the National Lottery. In 1998, we learned that we had been given a grant of £269,000, an enormous sum but still a long way short of the target needed to bring the building back into good heart.

The small group of Trustees then had to work really hard to get the rest of the money together. Fortunately, the Finsbury Park SRB bid had been successful. Less fortunately, Elizabeth House was first included in the area it covered and then excluded. After a lot of campaigning by Robert Scott, another of our Trustees, we were again included and now Elizabeth House is at the heart of the Finsbury Park Partnership's (FPP) education role, as you can see from the leaflet. The FPP awarded us a significant capital grant, and we were also successful in obtaining other grants from a number

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COME TO THE FIRST HCA QUIZ NIGHT!

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To: HCA Treasurer, 75B Highbury Hill, London, N5

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David and Goliath

Will the interests of big business always come before people and their environment?

Marie McGrath, a local mum with two young children, describes why she got involved in the campaign against Arsenal's plans for Lough Road.

Greetings from the other side of Holloway Road, the poor relations to Upper Street, Highbury and Barnsbury! A former vicar at a local church the Prime Minister used to attend described us as the a*** end of Islington!

I am a representative from the Freegrove and Cardozo Area Residents Association. We are encased in a triangle of major, one-way roads (Hillmarton, Caledonian and Camden). Our ward, Hillmarton, is among the poorest five per cent of English wards. We also live beside the largest parcel of undeveloped land left in Islington - Lough Road.

The first people around here knew about Arsenal's plans was at the end of November 2000 when a council leaflet and a glossy brochure from Arsenal arrived. These said that Arsenal wanted to build a new stadium in the borough. But to do this it would have to build a new road, a waste transfer station, a council depot and buildings up to 12 storeys high

at Lough Road.

We felt even more aggrieved when we saw that the deadline for comments was 26 Jan 2001 - and a council public meeting "to hear more, ask questions and have your say" was organised for Jan 11th. With Christmas in the middle, this effectively gave the people most affected by the adverse effects of Arsenal's desire for a new stadium just two weeks to organise a response.

Arsenal was obviously in a hurry. It wanted planning permission by Spring 2001 so it could relocate the waste transfer station, and council depot by mid-2002.

Our neighbourhood association (FACARA) formalised our opposition to the plans. Volunteers distributed newsletters and petitions alerting tenants and residents to the plans and asking them to write to their councillors, the mayor and the Secretary of State.

At times we have felt pretty powerless against Arsenal's huge PR machine. But we have kept plugging away. We have dressed up in bin bags and leafleted outside the tube, knocked on doors with letters and petitions, written to local papers, met our local MP, invited our councillors to meet us and hear our concerns.

Meanwhile, Arsenal, the council and London's mayor have been tinkering at

the edges of plans which are fundamentally flawed. The stadium is in the wrong place, the waste transfer station is in the wrong place. And the developments overall will do nothing to solve Holloway's chronic pollution, traffic and health problems.

So what has being involved in this campaign taught me?

- That it's possible to become even more cynical than you thought you were
- that local councillors don't listen to their constituents
- that the media can't or won't dig any deeper than the gloss on a press release
- that many people thought there was no point taking on Arsenal Football Club
- that having a computer at home makes campaigning life easier.

I'm as gutted as a Jamie Oliver fillet that Mayor Ken has not only backed Arsenal's plans, but is actively lobbying against them going to a public inquiry.

So our future is now in the hands of Stephen Byers. Will he be prepared to probe the smoke and mirrors of Arsenal's PR by calling-in the plans?

For all the children and elderly people choking in Holloway, I hope so. ■

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of Trusts and Foundations which are listed on the leaflet, thanks to the persuasive talents of Peter Kent, another Trustee.

Work finally began in September 2000 and we hit the ground running exactly a year later when the building reopened with courses run by City and Islington College. We are now looking forward to our Formal Reopening at the end of February when HRH The Princess Royal will be the Guest of Honour.

As we look back over the past 10 years since those first volunteers got together, there were many moments when all support might have totally drifted away; and yet something about the place and the continuing need for it ensured that it kept

going. We can now confidently look forward to an active future in the new building, of which we are all unashamedly proud. Please come and see us, and indeed participate in the many activities listed in the leaflet. ■

(Rodney, who retired recently as Chief Executive of SENSE, the Finsbury Park based Charity, has been Company Secretary since 1998.)

ISCA launches legal challenge

Papers were lodged in the High Court on February 1st, to quash Islington Council's decision on 10th December to approve Arsenal's plans.

The community alliance has taken this step because the Council has stated that it

would challenge any delay.

ISCA says the council's decision was not legal because of defects in Arsenal's environmental studies. ISCA also says the council is acting unreasonably in forcing legal action before it is known whether there will be a Public Inquiry - as this would make legal action unnecessary.

The plans have grown from being 'just a stadium' to a development of housing, waste station, restaurants, offices, a casino, new road junctions, 14 storey high tower blocks and poorly designed housing covering 60 acres of land, much of it to fund the expensive 60,000 seat multi-use stadium. 83 businesses and 1100 workers face eviction.

Visit www.RedCard.org.uk ■

What nice neighbours!

What do you do if you have an anti-social neighbour who fills up the front garden with rubbish? Ring up the Cleansing Department? “Not our problem if it is on private property”. Ring up Environmental Health? “.....would have to know there was a health hazard”. Email the Planning Department? “There are powers... but these have been rarely used in the past.....” Despair of living in Islington? Probably.

Maybe it's different if your neighbour is Joe Bloggs, but the site we were complaining about (shown right) happens to belong to those “model” developers that Mayor Ken is so keen on - you guessed it - Arsenal PLC. And the rubbish is twice as high now as when this picture was taken a month ago.

What do you do, if you wake up one morning and find a host of Estate Agent's boards illegally erected all over the place? Up and down Drayton Park and Ashburton Grove, for instance, claiming “Acquired for Arsenal FC Development” - even though the sites were acquired months or, in the case of the Arsenal warehouse, many years ago?

Complain to the Planning Department, of course! Instead of being told to take them down, Arsenal have been asked to submit a Planning Application to retain these offensive, unnecessary eyesores, apparently designed to depress the neighbours and the property prices.

No wonder the people of Lough Road are upset at being told they have to live next to a waste station designed by Arsenal. ■



ONE OF ARSENAL'S RECENT SIGNINGS, THE CST FACTORY IN ASHBURTON GROVE

Why Highbury?..... Why? When? What now? What next?

HCA interviews Rachel Stott, musician and composer, who lives in Gillespie Road, Highbury, close to the Blackstock Road shops.

HCA – Why do you like living here?

Rachel – London is a wonderful city to be in if you are a musician; possibly it's the most 'fertile' of the well-known 'musical cities'. It's bigger than Paris, more diverse than Berlin or Munich, certainly more so than Vienna. New York, of course, is hugely exciting too. I know hundreds of musicians here. There are so many cultures, so many different musical styles and so much happening that life is very rich for me here. In particular I love being in Highbury. There's a park in every direction, 8 minutes walk North, South, East and West from my flat! I've walked the Parkland Walk many times – through Finsbury Park and on to Highgate. Because I don't have a car or bike I walk everywhere or use the tube or buses, so being right beside the Piccadilly line and the trains at Finsbury Park is perfect. And as for Blackstock Road – it is functional and down to earth with all the shops I need. Since I do all my composing in my flat, it's nice to feel safe in the area, which I do.

HCA – When did you start composing?

Rachel – I was eight when I started writing tunes to play on my recorder. So –parents shouldn't complain too much about 'mindless tootling' as you never know where it might lead! I went to Cambridge University and then studied at Guildhall. Now I travel a lot and pieces I've composed have been played in Japan,

Slovenia, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, which is very rewarding.

HCA – What do you do that is particularly related to Highbury or Islington?

Rachel – I teach local children violin or viola here in my flat. And I often perform with other local Highbury musicians – there are quite a few of us and we help each other out! A group I play in started the Art to Zen Dinner Concert Series. The Café Gallery is in Upper Street and for a time we arranged a really interesting selection of evenings – Japanese poetry and music, an Indian evening, Vietnamese, a Mediaeval Christmas one and we even had one with Indian Puppets, which was very successful. Because I've always worked as a freelance I have to take my work where I can get it, though, which does mean I tour all over, Hong Kong, Israel, most European countries.

HCA – What's next?

Rachel – I'm composing a String Quartet for a Festival in Yorkshire. The piece takes ideas from Wuthering Heights. It will be performed for the first time in June in Swaledale during half-term week. I'm enjoying the work on it. I think sometimes people think composers are miserable reclusive hermits! Driven by soul-searching angst and all that! Well, I'm lucky as I'm pretty cheerful!



RACHEL AT HOME

A CD with songs composed by Rachel costs £10. Ring 020 7704 0147 or email rachel@symphony82.freemove.co.uk ■



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Oops! HC News blundered in the last issue when we advertised for computers for the Green Party. We gave the wrong contact number for Chris Ashby. This should have been **7609 5093**.

Sorry Chris! - but thanks to all those who succeeded in making contact anyway.

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ArtSpace is a new venue in Highbury which operates like a salon. The next three open evenings are on 21, 22, 23 March 2002, 6 pm to 9 pm.

There will be a one hour programme of new music, poetry and performance in response to a drawing installation - as well as time to meet others and to talk. Donations: £4, £2 concessions. Booking essential: 020 7609 2764
email: artspacelondon@mac.com

Highbury Community Association

The HCA represents 730 residents and businesses, on all aspects of living and working in Highbury, Lower Holloway and Finsbury Park. Run by volunteers it relies on donations. Send cheques to HCA Treasurer, 75 Highbury Hill, N5 1SX made out to Highbury Community Association.

Send letters or articles for next issue to HC News, 10 Stavordale Road N5 1NE or email: pg_lg@hotmail.com

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