

HIGHBURY COMMUNITY NEWS

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John Betjeman's Highbury By Mark Mason

Poet Laureate, Sir John Betjeman, (1906-84) knew Islington well and his family owned a furniture factory in Pentonville Road. His parents were from Highbury families, and although they moved to Highgate before he was born, many of Betjeman's relatives lived in the area.

The journey to Highbury is recalled in his poem *The Sandemanian Meeting-House in Highbury Quadrant*, published in 1932:

*On roaring iron down the Holloway Road
The red trams and the brown trams pour,
And little each yellow-faced jolted load
Knows of the fast-shut grained oak door.*

*From Canonbury, Dalston and Mildmay Park
The old North London shoots in a train
To the long black platform, gaslit and dark,
Oh Highbury Station once and again.*

In his autobiographical poem *Summoned by Bells* (published in 1960) Betjeman remembered childhood visits:

*...Slow walks we took
On sunny afternoons to great-great-aunts
In tall Italianate Houses: Aberdeen Park,
Hillmarton Road and upper Pooter-land,
Short gravel drives to steepish flights of steps
And stained-glass windows in a purple hall,
A drawing-room with stands of potted plants,
Lace curtains screening other plants beyond.*

Betjeman had a great affection for St. Saviour's, Aberdeen Park, the church where his grandparents were married in 1870, and his father Ernest married Mabel Dawson in 1902. In his poem *St. Saviour's, Aberdeen Park, Highbury, London, N*, published in 1948, Betjeman wrote:

*These were the streets my parents knew when they loved and won -
The brougham that crunched the gravel, the laurel-girt paths
that wind,*

*Geranium-beds for the lawn, Venetian blinds for the sun,
A separate tradesman's entrance, straw in the mews behind,
Just in the four-mile radius where hackney carriages run,
Solid Italianate houses for the solid commercial mind.*

*These were the streets they knew; and I, by descent, belong
To these tall neglected houses divided into flats.
Only the church remains, where carriages used to throng
And my mother stepped out in flounces and my father stepped
out in spats*

*To shadowy stained-glass matins or gas-lit evensong
And back in a country quiet with doffing of chimney hats.*

*Great red church of my parents, cruciform crossing they knew –
Over these same encaustics they and their parents trod
Bound through a red-brick transept for a once familiar pew
Where the organ set them singing and the sermon let them nod
And up this coloured brickwork the same long shadows grew
As these in the stencilled chancel where I kneel in the presence of God.*

St Saviour's Church closed in 1980 and in 1988 the Florence Trust converted the Grade 1 listed building into artists' studios. It can be visited during the annual Summer Show in July and the London Open House weekend in September.

Betjeman's affection for the area is reflected in his reference to 'sylvan Highbury' in *Summoned by Bells*, in which he also reminisces:

*Hushed
Be thy green hilltop, handsome Highbury!
Still be the traffic roar of Upper Street!
Flash shop-fronts, masts and neon signs, drop off
The now-encumbered houses! O return,
Straw-smelling mornings, to Old Islington!*



ST SAVIOUR'S CHURCH, ABERDEEN PARK AS IT IS TODAY

Local Plumber Walks the Yang-Tse

By Francis Radice

Glen Tweedie of Premier Plumbing, Drayton Park, raised nearly £2000 for cancer research by walking with a group of friends 112 kilometres through mountain gorges along the Yang-Tse River in China.

So what prompted him to make such an epic venture? Glen is a bit vague on this, but it's clear that he and his friends liked the idea of combining their preference for adventurous holidays with raising money for charity. Like many of us he had some personal experience of cancer in his family and the opportunity came from Cancer Research UK's 'ultimate challenge programme'.

Groups of up to 40 volunteers, of all walks of life and including, on Glen's river walk, some cancer sufferers, are enabled to undertake long treks in exotic parts of the world. But the hard part of it, Glen says, is the fund raising. Every participant aims to raise £2,500. Of this over £1,000 pays for the cost of the trip and the rest goes to cancer research. 'You have to start at least a year in advance,' he told me, 'raising money any way you can.'

The Yang-Tse walk itself was a wonder and an inspiration. They went along the Three Gorges seeing large areas of valley just before they were flooded for the hydro-electric dam at Chongqing, about 1000 miles up this immense river. At this point, the river winds through sheer tree-dotted mountains exactly as one sees them in Chinese paintings. They passed along disused tow paths formerly tramped by gangs of 100 men pulling barges on the river and saw the caves where the hauliers sheltered at night. The paths, since overgrown, had been obligingly cleared by their Chinese hosts. On the water barges frequently passed up and down stream and every now and then a noisy Russian built hydrofoil roared past.

What of the future? Glen is keen to do another walk in Cuba and is already wondering how he's going to raise the funds. Meanwhile You can be sure of an extremely helpful and friendly service at the plumbers' merchant's shop in Drayton Park (tel: 0207 224 3370) which is a useful contact point for plumbers, hardware and professional advice for DIY enthusiasts. ■

Cancer Research UK web-site: www.cancerresearchuk.org/events E-mails: ultimatechallenge@cancer.org.uk



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DAWDLING ON THE PATH TO FINANCIAL RECTITUDE

An HCA member tries to trace a route through Islington's annual accounts.

The verdict: "Improving, but still a long way to go....."

Islington has been on a slimming regime for years, closing down voluntary organisations, selling community property and cutting staff by the thousand.

For a time, local politicians talked about the need to reduce the Council Tax as an explanation for the austerity. After raising Council Tax by around 21% last year, the same politicians now speak of obtaining value for money by making the most of the Council's assets. Could it be that our leaders are suffering an incurable case of fiscal anorexia?

To find out more about what is going on, I obtained a copy of Islington's draft 2002-03 accounts to see whether a lay person could make some sense of it.

The 73-page Statement of Accounts has a Housing Revenue Account, which covers property operations, a Collection Fund, which contains taxes and other receipts that move into and out of central government bank accounts, and a Pension Fund Statement, which shows what is invested on behalf of staff. All of the borough's activities are summarised in a Consolidated Revenue Account, a Consolidated Balance Sheet and a Cash Flow Statement. There are plenty of sub-accounts and footnotes; and a tiny asterisk next to one large number, explaining that the number is actually zero.

Overall, the accounts resemble an old Victorian house, which has been modernised without planning permission into a cut-rate hotel with cash-dispensing machines in the bedrooms and toilets. The Council's landlord activities are its most important and its most troublesome. The Council owns 2,813 houses and 26,824 flats.

The Housing Revenue Account is supposed to show that what the Council collects from tenants and the subsidies it gets from central government are about in line with what it spends on public housing.

However, a subversive change in accounting practice has been introduced that requires interest and principal repayments on the Council's dwellings to be shown in the Housing Account instead of being isolated in separate accounts. As a result, the Housing Account shows a £28.3 million deficit for the net cost of housing services in 2002/03. The previous year has been restated to show a deficit of £43.9 million instead of £533,000.

The change could be politically explosive in that it points a finger at the need to raise council-flat rents. Rents after rebates now barely cover the cost of supervision and management, much less repairs and upkeep; and even less the cost of capital. Furthermore, rent arrears have been hovering around £20 million for the past five years; so what the Council actually collects is lower than the figures stated in the accounts.

In April 2004, the Council is due to hand over responsibility for management of the borough's house estates to an Arms Length Management Association (ALMO) composed of Council tenants, employees of the Council and independent directors. It is hard to believe that the new body will win any popularity contests.

Another concern is whether the Council will have to raise taxes to bail out the pension fund. The pension fund is subject to new reporting standards, which, among other things, require the actuarial position of the fund to be updated annually instead of every three years. Under the new reporting system, the assets at 31 March 2003 were £357.9 million and the liabilities £567.4 million, making a rather large shortfall in funding of £209.5 million.

The deficit was calculated after payments into the fund of employee

and employer contributions of £17.6 million, a special payment by the Council of £6.3 million to cover underfunding in previous years and £53.7 million from property sales, which represents the maximum that the Secretary of State will allow.

The Council has plans to make up the shortfall in the pension fund assets by paying £7.5 million per year into the fund, subject to upward adjustments, for the next 14 years, in addition to its normal payments into the fund. Even so, if the stock market doesn't perform well, it will be Council Tax payers who have to meet the shortfall.

Despite the misery, Islington seems to be gradually getting a grip on its finances in comparison with earlier years. For instance, its 1997/98 accounts had a footnote saying "*in compiling the asset register it has not been possible to fully match it with other property databases within the Council. There remains a possibility therefore that the asset register may be incomplete in some respects.*" Translation: The Council didn't know what it owned.

In its 2000/01 accounts, the auditor noted that "*inadequate records were maintained to support £37.1 million of the debtors balance of £95.8 million on the consolidated balance sheet and £69.4 million of the creditors balance of £118.8 million...*" Translation: The Council was having trouble working out what invoices are outstanding and what it owed.

The top layers of the Council's accounting staff have been replaced and procedures now seem to be tighter. Even so, the 2002/03 accounts were still treating Mrs Thatcher's Poll Tax as an uncollected item that might be paid some day. However, a little asterisk next to the Poll Tax figure of £10.9 million indicated that the Council might write it off before long.

Islington may be trying to embrace the reality of its dire financial position; but clearly it is not in an over-whelming hurry to do so. ■

Traffic Engineers under fire

On the basis of research carried out in early December, a group of local people believe the new road layout at the top of Highbury Hill has made the junction more hazardous than it was before.

Following scores of complaints from local residents and schools, they spent a day surveying the 'new' route between Christ Church and Highbury Barn. Members of Living Streets (the campaign group for pedestrians), Highbury Fields Association and Highbury Community Association were all involved.



From 8.30am to 5.15pm they counted nearly 2,500 people using the pedestrian route, and received 544 completed survey forms showing what people thought about its safety. Over three-quarters of respondents thought the new layout with the 'build-out' was no better than the old; and 9 out of 10 thought crossing the single two-way road unsafe. Significantly, just over half of those polled reported experiencing or witnessing unsafe incidents. These included someone whose foot was run over and a driver who crashed trying to cross from Kelvin Road to Highbury Hill. Nine witnesses from Highbury Fields School reported a fellow pupil had been knocked down.

Christine Mabey, of Living Streets, set out the survey findings for the East Area Committee on 19th January, demanding that the Council should act urgently to improve pedestrian safety at the junction. Council Officers said it was changed because there was a "history of accidents" and initially claimed the fact that there had been no recorded accident since the £70,000 redesign of the junction last February showed it was safe and not in need of further modification. Since meeting community representatives in February, Officers have promised to look into it. One point made by community groups was that the Council's own map of pedestrian accidents between June 2000 and July 2003 shows there was none at this junction in the three years prior to the change, although there were accidents at different points along Highbury Grove/Highbury Park.

Alison Carmichael, for HCA, pointed out "Six years ago the HCA, HFA, Forum members and Councillors advised against this re-design, partly because there was no evidence of accidents; but this time the Council only consulted the nearby residents who naturally wanted a paved area next to their homes. A wider consultation might have saved money and led to a better design." ■

Bryantwood Road closed

The controversial recommendation of traffic engineers to close Bryantwood Road was upheld by the East Area Committee last month. The plan is for the road to be closed at the junction with Benwell Road; and there will also be a No-Entry sign at the width restriction in Benwell Road to prevent traffic from Drayton Park using Benwell Road to reach Hornsey Road.

HCA was lobbied hard by supporters and opponents of this re-design of traffic flow, and proposed the alternative of traffic-calming in one or both roads as a way of better meeting the needs of local residents and the wider community. ■

Arsenal on the Move - again

Arsenal continues to revise its development plans to increase profitability. The latest change involves the very dense "key-worker" housing blocks to the north of the new stadium. Density rises again.

Previously three times the approved maximum density for North Islington and laid out as bed-sitting rooms with shared kitchens, the blocks have been redesigned as conventional flats. The net floor area has been increased by no less than 60% and the proposed community sports facility with two roof-top football pitches has been scrapped.

ISCA commented, "Flats are better than the poorly designed bedsits, but the density is getting ridiculous. Doubtless there will be ritual outrage from politicians at the dropping of the sports centre; but we could see the design was impractical and that it would not be carried out. It was only there for PR reasons. The Council may not be happy, but since they put Arsenal in charge, they will have to get used to doing as the Club says." ■

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FULL CIRCLE - FOCUS ON ANGELA SINCLAIR By Alison Carmichael



"I got myself out of many sticky situations by passing myself off as Yugoslav in post-war Yugoslavia and the other night my Serbo-Croat came in handy again!" Angela Sinclair, returning from yet another late-night meeting, had lost her bus pass. In trying unsuccessfully to track it down, at 1am she found herself waiting for a Night Bus at a deserted bus terminus in Edmonton.

Two young men sitting nearby quickly became friendly when she struck up conversation in their language, discovering they came from Niš.

Seemingly indefatigable, Angela says her age, at 82, stops her joining as many demos as she used to. The last Stop the War march from Holborn to Trafalgar Square via Waterloo, tired her more than she liked. However, her schedule of meetings and commitments to such bodies as Liberty, Islington Pensioners Forum, the Commission for Health Improvement, Greater London Forum for the Elderly, Housing Corporation and more, would defeat most people decades younger. Campaigns are part of her life too, ranging from national ones like Campaign against the Arms Trade to Save Gillespie Park.

Angela's lifelong involvement in working for peace and social justice, and her close links with the medical world, started when, as an 18 year old student at Oxford reading Philosophy, she left her studies at the outbreak of war in 1939 to help people in the East End shelters. She went on to take courses in First Aid and Home Nursing, working in several hospitals. Meeting up with the pacifist Quakers struck a chord with her and she spent the next war years working for the Friends' Ambulance Unit, which eventually found her driving and servicing trucks delivering medical supplies in post-war Yugoslavia in 1945. *"I wasn't a Quaker – I was a bit 'wild', had a red jacket and smoked. I thought them too moderate but liked their views on the war. They sent me on a Midwifery course and I worked in the Archway Hospital (the Whittington) for 3 months. I remember being mocked by a Ward Maid for my shyness and for being a pacifist. Her attitude changed when she saw my photo on the front page of the Daily Mirror with my friend Susie Carter! We had volunteered to test a secret new anti-malarial drug. For 3 months we went twice a week to a research centre in Reading to hold malaria-bearing mosquitoes against our legs."*

From Islington and the Whittington Hospital, Angela went via Egypt where she had worked with Yugoslav refugees, to Yugoslavia. *"I loved the Yugoslavs and wanted to see their country. I took a mechanics course and joined them many people and organisations, of which UNRRA was the largest, helping the great mass of uprooted people in post-war Yugoslavia. Our Friends Ambulance Unit had many trucks and was essential to keeping medical supplies flowing. I think I was the only woman driving trucks there and it was pretty rough. We were based in a bombed-out house and I was responsible for my truck,*

changing wheels and keeping it going with the minimum of equipment." Angela remembers her last journey (and the worst) she had to make from Split on the coast, through Sarajevo and on to Belgrade. It took 36 hours without a break, alone, without food and not in her usual 3-ton Chev but in a Ford. *"If I went too slowly, especially uphill, the petrol flow stopped and I had to suck on the petrol lead over and over again, which made me feel sick. You had to be strong – going round a right angle bend where the road seemed to have disintegrated, I skidded into the gutter and had to heave logs under the wheels to get out of the skid. A bridge further on would not take my truck. On the way back I came across a Russian Captain with his truck stuck where mine had been, so I towed him back to Sarajevo. I then set off on an alternative route to Belgrade, which took me over a terrifying, narrow Bailey Bridge. I had an inch to spare each side – I'll never forget it. The radiator sprang a huge leak next, which couldn't be plugged by my usual chewing gum trick. I collected armfuls of corn on the cob from across the fields to stuff into the holes which worked, but I was black all over and so cold, tired and hungry by the time I reached Belgrade."* Angela delivered the truck with its medical supplies and went to the French Embassy to ask for a plane out. *"I wasn't that welcome being so dirty and was told there were no planes for 6 weeks!"*



Angela met her future husband, by then a doctor working in Belgrade with UNRRA. He worked in Public Health for WHO and they lived in many countries including Canada, Thailand, Burma, Hong Kong, France and Morocco. *"He was classed as an Ambassador so we had a car with a flag on it. I carried on doing voluntary work, learned more languages and brought up my three children."* At the age of 57 Angela found herself homeless in London and felt herself lucky to be able to buy her house in Highbury Hill, which was £1000 cheaper than any others nearby, since it was behind Arsenal Football Stadium. *"I had never heard of Islington as a place to live but it seemed easy to get to the airport and now I like the people in Highbury Hill too much to leave. Looking at that photo of me in 1943 outside the Whittington, it is strange to think that here I am now, on the Patients' Panel at the Whittington. I was even on the Research Ethics Committee for a while – I wonder if we'd have approved of the malaria trial?"* ■

John Phillips (Elizabeth House Centre Director) writes to say:

"Thank you" to all of the readers of Highbury Community News who took the trouble to fill in and return the Elizabeth House Community Survey, which was sent to a random selection of readers with the last issue. The survey aimed to discover projects that local people would like us to develop.

Thanks to your efforts, we ended up with a large enough sample of opinion to make the whole exercise well worth the considerable effort.

We are now working to provide some of the most popular items identified, including Keep Fit Sessions and First Aid/Food Hygiene Classes, which, conveniently enough for us, are also the easiest to sort out. You will have been contacted again by us if you expressed an interest in these items. They should be up and running by the time you read this.

Other popular ideas were a Welfare/Housing Advice Service, and a Tool Library. These will obviously take time to set up as a fair amount of planning and cash will be involved.

There was also considerable interest in setting up a Community Radio Station for the area, supported by training. I have already been able to start I.T. Audio Training with a group of local teenagers every Monday evening, due to a couple of small grants we have received; and we are trying to raise money to progress with the rest of the idea.

Those of you who had attended something at the Centre and expressed an opinion were mostly happy with the service you received, which is nice for us to know. This is good information to be able to show funders and monitoring bodies like Ofsted etc.

I hope this little write-up shows that we are acting on the information you provided as far as we are able and that it was worth the time you spent filling the thing in.

Anybody who is interested in receiving a full write-up of the survey results with exciting coloured-in pie charts & everyfink, just give me a call.

Special thanks to the staff team at Highbury Community News for all the envelope stuffing & distribution.

John Phillips, Elizabeth House Tel: 7690 1300

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