

HIGHBURY COMMUNITY NEWS

No 38 May 2004

Aubert Court - Highbury Gem Under Threat

By Peter Koenig

As a neighbour of Aubert Court on Avenell Road in Highbury for more than 20 years, I've seen a lot happen there, including kids playing, families emerging Sundays to go to church, babies growing into adults, men hitting women, drug dealing and a youth rushing out of the building naked.

Still, I was taken aback when, on the morning of April 19, I looked over at the nine-story, art-deco-influenced housing estate designed by ECP Monson, and saw a man knocking bricks out of the wall to the right of the main entrance.



The man looked more like a council worker than a vandal. So I contacted Andrew Jennings, the deputy chief executive for Islington Council responsible for the borough's housing, to ask what was going on. Mr Jennings referred me to Eamon McGoldrick, chief executive of a body called Homes for Islington. HFI "now manage Islington's housing stock for the Council," Mr Jennings said. Mr McGoldrick "can arrange replies to your questions."

As a result of email exchanges with HFI and various other Council bodies, I believe I have stumbled on a new Islington housing policy with significant consequences for Highbury. Aubert Court has become a guinea pig for a revolution in Islington housing. At its best, this revolution could restore Aubert Court to its glory as a monument to the Atlee government and its success in making Britain a fairer society. At its worst, Islington's housing policy revolution could

guarantee that Highbury becomes an example of what happens to once successful inner city neighbourhoods when authorities cover up bad financial planning with half-baked urban planning ideology.

Built between 1947 and 1953 on the site of St. John's College, Aubert Court has balconies for residents offering sweeping views, grounds as grand as those of a stately home and meeting rooms formerly used for Workers Education Association classes. It also has a basement ballroom where at least one veteran Highbury resident can remember tripping the light fandango.

Since the 1980s Aubert Court has been hit by nationwide local council budget cuts exacerbated in Islington by the burden of heavy debt repayments taken on by former Council leader Margaret Hodge. There are now fences to keep children from playing underneath decaying balconies. The grounds are strewn with trash.

Even so, the building remains remarkably intact. Its façade nicely echoes the art deco design of Arsenal's East Stand. Its fading grandeur offers a silent rebuke to Highbury's Victorian row houses remodelled as cheap and cheerful flats.

Now Aubert Court is to undergo refurbishment. Its windows and balconies are to be replaced. Mechanical extract fans are to be installed. In April, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott approved Homes For Islington as an "arms-length-management organisation" (ALMO) putting forward this planning proposal.

HFI's mission is to achieve Tony Blair's Decent Homes Standard by 2010. Creating HFI, Islington qualifies for fresh injections of central government capital for housing. "The establishment of Homes for Islington will have a major impact on the life of the Borough and make a positive contribution to the creation of a successful 'One Islington'," the Council said in March. "Tenants, leaseholders and other residents will feel the constructive effects of this level of investment as quality of life on Islington estates improves."

No one can argue with such lofty sentiments. What do they mean, though? The evidence of Aubert Court is not reassuring. The hole knocked in the wall there on April 19 was part of a test of HFI's plan to refurbish the estate. When one of the "test" windows did not fit, contractors knocked out bricks to make it fit. When two other new windows were installed and destroyed its art-deco influenced façade, HFI said it would reconsider the matter.

(Continued on page 2)

Road closures create chaos

Closing Bryantwood Road completely to through traffic and Benwell Road to northbound traffic on 24th March 2004, has resulted in adverse knock-on effects felt over a wide area by motorists, cyclists, bus users and pedestrians, reports the newly formed and growing, Keep Islington Connected Campaign (KICC). 6 weeks on, Drayton Park and Benwell Road are regularly at a standstill with no signs that *'it will settle down after 6 weeks as traffic finds other routes'* as Officers told HCA in December last year, when HCA opposed road closure and advised traffic calming, enforcement of the Benwell Road width restriction and a major re-think on safety for cyclists instead.

Rowan Howard, a resident of Sotheby Road, and co-ordinator of KICC, is collecting signatures for a major petition to re-open the roads and install traffic calming urgently, as the solution to the safety problems first raised by residents of Bryantwood Road. She says *"Displacement by some of the traffic to other junctions is causing serious congestion and pollution elsewhere, as well as in the Drayton Park area. Many journeys in Islington are very difficult to make by public transport, particularly East to West journeys. Residents who use buses when they can, choose to use cars, taxis or mini-cabs when they need to. We have had complaints by disabled drivers and a mother of a special-needs child that this major routing re-design is causing them to make longer and more stressful journeys by car or bus. Cyclists find it dangerous and polluting to be cycling in such congestion and residents in Drayton Park say the fumes from stationary traffic are intolerable. KICC is looking into the legality of the making of this temporary traffic order."*

HCA members in Bryantwood Road include those who are happy their road is closed and others who are urging the Council to reverse the decision now because of the congestion and pollution problems and unsustainability of car journeys made longer by the closures. ■

See www.highburycommunity.org for KICC news and contact details. HCA welcomes comments on the website from supporters and opponents of the road closures. Send comments to Council by 11th May 2004 to Owen Davies, owen.davies@islington.gov.uk and copied to Councillors listed for East Area Committee on www.islington.gov.uk

(Continued from page 1)

I've followed developments at Aubert Court in a perhaps too intemperate manner. I may have offended the dignity of Islington Council Deputy Chief Executive Jennings. He says of my emails: *"I am not looking to get into an acrimonious debate and feel it is unfortunate that your emails have adopted the tone they have."*

Tim Lowe, area programme manager for Holland Walk & Isledon Road Area Offices, has agreed that the difference between new and old windows *"may be a clash of Building Regulations and what is acceptable with the Planners."*

Alec Forshaw, the head of Islington's Conservation Department - and the author of *20th Century Buildings in Islington*, a celebration, among other things, of Aubert Court - is known to be unhappy with HFI's plans to modernise the estate.

Still, I am anxious about what will become of Aubert Court, and think others in Highbury should be, too. Islington Council has approved one big change in the neighbourhood. The impact of Arsenal's new stadium and the development of 500-plus flats in the old one remains to be seen. While we await the results, it seems fair to be sceptical about what else Islington Council has in store for Highbury. ■

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NEW MODEL NHS?

By Angela Sinclair

On 29 April the NHS Support Federation hosted an open discussion seminar. Its main focus was on the Foundation Trusts, particularly hospitals, created by the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act 2003.

Speakers included Prof. Harry Keen CBE (President of the Federation), Paul Burstow MP (LibDem Health spokesman), Frank Dobson (former Secretary of State for Health), and Claire Rayner (writer and broadcaster).

This meeting followed up the open letter sent last year by 200 doctors to the Prime Minister, published by *The Times*, expressing serious concern about Foundation Trusts. Criticizing their weaknesses, the letter undermined Government claims that NHS staff supported the concept. A later Federation survey showed that only 5% of NHS consultants thought the Government should proceed with Foundation Trusts; the majority felt less money would go on patient care, and 85% thought care of people with chronic disease would worsen.

Last year the Government pushed through the legislation on Foundation hospitals by a narrow margin, following determined opposition in both Houses. The Federation noted the significant rebellion by numerous MPs, and encouraged local people to join the debate when hospitals seeking foundation status consulted their local communities. Its concern was that *"healthcare provision is blurred by financial incentives, leading us away from the basic point of our health service - to meet health needs of the whole community."* It stressed some crucial strengths of the NHS: sharing information, developing highly skilled staff, and delivering low cost care.

Foundation hospitals imply a two-tier health service, where they compete rather than co-operate with other hospitals. (An ex-Community Health Council official commented later that should one of these hospitals find a cancer cure, for instance, it could keep

this knowledge to itself as a profitable monopoly, rather than sharing it with other NHS hospitals !)

Hospitals granted foundation status (based on awards following inspection by the Commission for Health Improvement) have considerable freedom from Whitehall control. Their autonomy extends to permission to borrow money, sell off NHS assets, select their patients, appoint staff (even from the commercial sector), and spend their funds as they see fit. Their borrowing debts are repayable from the pot of NHS money; and, should they become insolvent, the Government picks up the tab.

Which patients are Foundation Hospitals likely to accept? Since the more patients they treat the more they will be paid, they would obviously prefer those who only require short treatments with high success ratings. So they may deny admission to patients with chronic and complicated conditions requiring extended care. These would have to seek admission to less favoured hospitals

How will they spend their money? They must conform to NHS pay rates, but if short-staffed, they could attract staff either from other hospitals or private firms by offering various bonus schemes, leaving their competitors disadvantaged in recruitment.

Meanwhile the Government has established 572 Patients and Public Forums - one for each Foundation Trust nationwide - and PALS (an advice and complaints service within each hospital). The fora seem intended to provide democratic accountability of foundation hospitals, but appear to have been tacked on as a poorly worked out, under-funded afterthought, an expensively complex system lacking clear directions about membership and responsibilities. Recruitment of fora volunteers from the public seems so far very uneven. Frank Dobson mentioned that 89 people had volunteered for UCLH's forum, but only one for Moorfields.

These setups replace Community Health Councils, whose final abolition this month is expected to cost the NHS £12 million in redundancies. Yet

CHCs, far fewer in number, had an important advantage: rather than being restricted to overseeing single trusts, they could maintain a critical overview of health system operation over a whole area

Claire Rayner was warmly applauded about another issue. Considering the acute shortage of nursing staff, she deplored the modern insistence on their obtaining academic qualifications. Many indigenous retired nurses had excellent hands-on experience and the essential requirements of good nurses - compassionate, caring skills, but were too intimidated by the new structures to return to employment. Meanwhile imported nurses with relevant degrees were unlikely to seek entry to such a poorly paid profession

The Foundation Hospital development relies heavily on the buzz word 'Choice'. But how should potential patients judge relative advantages of one hospital against another - by comparing mortality rates, waiting lists, or their doctors' and surgeons' qualifications? A patient with stomach-ache is unlikely to want to investigate all these variables. Principally he wants assurance that whichever is his nearest hospital can treat him competently, comfortably and without excessive waiting, referring him elsewhere if more specialist care is indicated.

Another objection may be that when competition for market share is involved, competitors turn to advertising their superiority, often in exaggerated terms. Imagine competing hospitals advertising incentives - *"Appendectomy today - FREE taxi home tomorrow!"* Or *"Our surgeons guarantee to leave smaller scars."*

Basically Foundation Hospitals are a step nearer to commercialisation of the NHS. Will you mind becoming a customer rather than a mere patient? ■

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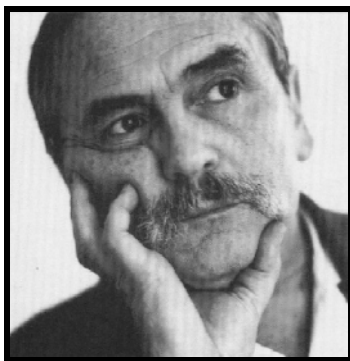
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Highbury Writers: Tom Wakefield

By Mark Mason

Tom Wakefield lived in Avenell Road from 1969 until his death in March 1996 age 60. He was born in 1935 at Cannock, Staffordshire, the son of a coal miner. The autobiographical *Forties Child*, published in 1980, recounts his experiences growing up in the Midlands during the War. A bursary enabled him to attend Rugeley Grammar School, following which he qualified as a teacher at Trent Park teacher training college. Tom Wakefield taught at a number of London schools including Colebrook School in Islington, and Downsview School in Hackney, where he was head teacher. Wakefield's first book *He's Much Better, He Can Smile Now*, published in 1974, gave an account of his time at Downsview School.



The critical success of Tom Wakefield's first three novels, the "Trixi Trash" trilogy: *Trixi Trash Star Ascending*, *Isobel Quirk in Orbit* and *The Love Siege*, published between 1997-79, encouraged him to take early retirement from teaching to concentrate on writing. From 1980 to 1982 he was the North-West Arts Council of Great Britain Fellow in Creative Writing at Lancaster University. Significant critical acclaim came with the Oppenheim Award for Literature in 1983.

Wakefield's subject matter concentrates on characters who are not usually celebrated by

mainstream fiction, and seeks to challenge the stereotypes and conventions of society. The gay novel *Mates* and short story collection, *Drifters* draw on the long relationship he had from 1961 with K, a former Church Army captain who became a social worker. *The Discus Throwers* is about a group of older flat-sharers, Betty (a teacher who has retired early), Kenneth (a cross-dressing ex tax man), Bertrand (who pays the bills with voiceovers) and Victor (the owner of the launderette downstairs). The subject of *The Variety Artists* is an elderly widow who finds romance, new friendship and exotic travel very much to her taste. *Lot's Wife* is about the relationship between Henry Checket and Peggy Thurston, left to spend their final years in an old people's home. And in *War Paint* the women of a Midlands mining village have their lives transformed by a glamorous schoolmistress, who after her death, turns out to have been a man. Using some chapters and extensive notes discovered after Wakefield's untimely death, Patrick Gale (his friend and fellow author) completed *The Scarlet Boy*, the fictional sequel to the memoir *Forties' Child*. This was published in 1998.

Tom Wakefield's entertaining writing is characterised by a strong sense of place (recognisably North London and the Midlands) and obvious affection for his characters. More than one reviewer has remarked on his empathetic style and ability to find the extraordinary in the ordinary. Although only a few titles remain in print, Islington Library has a good selection of his books. Following Wakefield's death, there were plans to convert his

house in Avenell Road into a retreat for artists and writers, to be known as Tom's Place. Although several enjoyable commemorative local events were held over the following two years, this project unfortunately did not come to fruition. ■

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Eclectic Voices Andrew Wood interviews Scott Stroman

A native of Indiana, Scott Stroman came to London in 1982, first as a post graduate student and then to take up a post at the prestigious Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where he is Professor and Head of Jazz. Scott and his family have lived in the Highbury area for 21 years. In addition to being Musical Director for the Highbury-based Eclectic Voices, he is also MD for the renowned Opus 20 String Ensemble, London Jazz Orchestra, Young Sinfonia and a respected composer, conductor, and jazz trombonist/singer. He is also artistic director of the Highbury Festival, to be revived this year over the May Bank Holiday weekend.

Was it your original intention to remain in London for so long?

Not at all. Sue and I came to London (from Miami) on a Rotary Foundation scholarship for one year, after which we planned to move to New York for me to pursue a career as a performer and composer. I was offered jobs at the Guildhall School and American Church in London after the year finished and we decided to stay on.

How long have you lived in the area and what do you like about it?

Having lived in Bloomsbury during my student year, we wanted to stay close to the centre, and found a flat to do up across from Canonbury station in 1983. We liked the area as it was vibrant, culturally mixed and interesting, and very convenient for everywhere. I bike around London and travel out of London a lot; and both are easy from here. Sue is the nurse at Holloway School and we both like the mix of people in the area.

What are your musical influences?

I'm a bit of a sponge, as I seem to soak up that everything I hear. My first real spark came from playing trombone in jazz groups, but even before that I liked to sing in the kids' choir at church. I started out listening to pop and dance music (my dad ran a record store) but soon got smitten by jazz fusion and then mainstream jazz, then classical music, then played in Salsa and African bands....and on it goes. I started writing music and directing groups when I was a school kid and just never stopped.

How did Eclectic Voices come about and why the name Eclectic Voices?

Eclectic Voices was started by a group of singers who had worked with me in choral projects written by the jazz composer/pianist Michael Garrick. They wanted to create a group to do music from outside the normal choral repertoire

and asked me to be the director as I was into a wide range of musical styles. 'Eclectic' - choosing the best out of everything - reflects our approach of choosing works from many musical traditions.

So what makes Eclectic Voices different from other choirs?

It's a really interesting, vibrant and happy group. We do music from lots of traditions, and try to get really "inside" each one, rather than approaching them in a surfacy sort of way. If it's Bach, I try to get everyone to hear the harmony and understand the counterpoint (and listen to recordings); if Gospel, we work by ear, improvise and move in performance (and work with Gospel musicians), if African, we work with

Africans, etc. We do lots of work on rhythm and sound and try to get at the heart of all the music that we do. It's fun and challenging to be in *Eclectic Voices*.

What have been the highlights?

Singing Vivaldi with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, jazz with Kenny Wheeler, Gospel with L.D. Frazier, Haydn's *Creation* at the Highbury Festival and Dartington, the foreign trips...

I guess for me personally the most exciting thing has been writing (and recording) music directly for the group. I created *Songs of the Spirit*, *Canticle of the Nativity*, and the *JazzMass* for EV and our

Highbury Young Singers. I get to perform them many places these days but it's always most special to sing them with the people who inspired them in the first place and the most exciting performances have probably been in Highbury.

What events do Eclectic Voices have planned?

The revival of the Highbury Festival is our big project at the moment; we'll sing Britten's *Ceremony of Carols* (which we recorded), and *Cantata Misericordium* with the OPUS 20 String Ensemble and excellent soloists at Christ Church on Saturday 1 May. After that we return to *Songs of the Spirit* with *Highbury Young Singers* and a superb jazz group on Saturday 19 June, also at Christ Church, Highbury.

How can people join or be kept informed of future events?

They can check our website www.eclecticvoices.org.uk or ring the secretary on (020) 7354-2844. All our groups meet on Thursdays in Highbury and we have places for everyone in EV, or our workshop group, or in *Highbury Young Singers*. ▣



HCA website comes of age!

Last summer, HCA Secretary, Susanne Gustavsson, started to develop a community website. In the self-help traditions of the Association it was decided this should be a fully interactive site, allowing maximum participation by members, who would be able to post stories and articles directly - not just view information controlled by others. It is also easy for anyone to comment on stories or articles, thus ensuring that all points of view can be heard.

Susanne explained, "We have adopted a highly sophisticated system, developed specifically for on-line communities. It is enormously flexible; but adapting it to our needs has proved a big task." Now that the basic structure is in place, the next job is to expand the content. To do this, we are looking for people who would be interested to take charge of a particular aspect - say compiling and managing a "local events" calendar or starting a forum devoted to some aspect of local life that interests them.

People should not be put off because they lack advanced computer skills. Thanks to the way the site has been developed, technical expertise is hardly needed for basic admin, although we are equally keen to find people who are interested in the technical aspects.

The site has recently shown its potential, as people have posted stories and views on the controversial trial traffic scheme in Bryantwood and Benwell Roads.

Check it out and sign up at www.highburycommunity.org 

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Saturday 15th May at 7.15pm

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Highbury Community Association

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Send letters or articles for next issue to: HC News, 83 Highbury Hill N5 1SX or email hcanews@hotmail.com
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