

MEMORIES OF BEDE HOUSE, BERMONDSEY

I went to Bede House in March 1961 and stayed till February 1965. I had been in secretarial college and needed a job. The Warden, Dorothy Furness, was advertising for a secretary to help her at Bede House, a residential settlement in the docklands of south-east London. I applied and got the post. It was the beginning of the Sixties, an exciting time when people were trying out new ways.

Bede House offered accommodation to students and young people in their first jobs in London. We were a diverse group coming from different parts of the world as well as all parts of the country. I quickly became more aware of the needs and points of view of people from other nations and other walks of life. I remember a young medical student from Ghana telling me that there would be no peace in Africa until the different tribes learned how to live together peacefully and forget their tribal loyalties of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

Bede House's primary commitment was to the community. It ran clubs for young people between the ages of five and eighteen and also clubs for the old and handicapped. The residents, who were all young, had to commit at least one evening a week to working in one of these clubs.

I ran the Hawks Club for girls and boys between eight and ten. I remember they gossiped, they argued, they fought, but beneath this facade, thankfully they had an interest in the different activities on offer. It was all great fun. I also helped with the Leisure Club for older people. Annual outings and parties were a great feature.

Every summer we welcomed Winant volunteers from America who helped with these clubs and students from Clare College Cambridge. Another regular visitor was Major Richard Carr-Gomm. After fighting for king and country he retired from the Coldstream Guards and came to live in Bermondsey where his family owned much of the run-down property. He told me that when he worked as a home help he was appalled by the loneliness of so many old people. His vision was a house in every street where older people could live together, their meals provided by a house keeper, and enjoy regular sing songs around the piano with 'push' written on the door so that the occupants would never lose touch with the community. He opened the first home when I was living at Bede House. The scheme grew hugely and became known as the

Abbeyfield Society. When I retired to Lincoln in 1995 I stumbled upon an Abbeyfield House. I was amazed that it still retained Richard's vision - contact with the community.

Every day there were regular prayers said in the Chapel.

Another memory, of eating my meals with the residents, and discussing the latest government events, comes to mind. John Profumo, Secretary State for War in Harold Macmillan's government, had an affair with Christine Keeler, a nineteen year old model that eventually led to his resignation. I remember we talked endlessly about all this. Like everyone else we were fascinated by the scandal.

After supper we often danced the night away – rock and roll, the Beatles were in fashion at the time. When the Warden queried all this hilarity our excuse was always it was just another birthday party.

I remember we would frequent the local pub. On one occasion one of us overheard a local man answering someone's query about 'the place next door'. "It's just a hostel for students and the like".

Bede House was a delightful place to live in. But that was not all. In conclusion I quote the words of one resident, John Wilkins taken from the Bede House Annual Report 1964, "Bede House exists to bring a heart into times and places".

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