

# “CO-OP THE CO-OP”

## CONTENTS

Introduction. Steve Mepsted Pg. 1

Useful links and Information Pg. 6

‘The Political Background to the Co-op Solution’ and  
‘The Origins of West Eleven Housing Co-operative’:  
a rough memoir and potted history.

Essays by Jason Copeland Pg. 8

### **HISTORIES:**

Tony Allen Pg. 22

Tony Bennett Pg. 34

Alex Bowling Pg. 42

Geof Branch Pg. 54

Ben Buchanan Pg. 68

Tamar Davies Pg. 74

Rod and Nilla Freeman Pg. 86

Corann Malcolm Pg. 98

Linda Saunders Pg. 110

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** Pg. 120

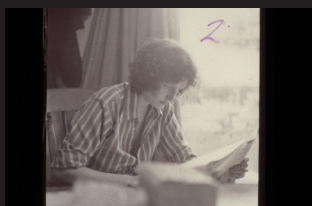


THE PEOPLE & HISTORIES  
OF THE WEST-ELEVEN  
HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE

Photographed & Edited  
by Steve Mepsted

**THE**  
**TOP**''

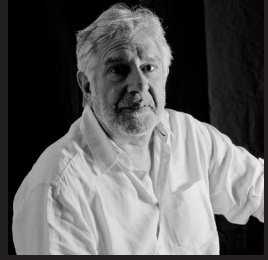
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# STEVE MEPSTED INTRODUCTION

Some 179,000 people live in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. There exists an extraordinary ethnic and cultural diversity; nearly half of the residents were born outside the UK and come from 90 countries, speaking over 100 different languages. It is the smallest borough in London but has the highest residential density. Although known as one of the wealthiest areas in the country a few wards are still considered to be within the ten per cent most deprived in England.

The members of West Eleven Housing Co-operative, based as it is around the bustle of Portobello Road and its market, mirror this rich mix. Black and white, English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, European, North American, South American, African and West Indian. The oldest members are in their 70's. The youngest in their early twenties. Some have children, some work with their hands, some work in offices, some are artists, musicians, teachers, writers or actors, some are full time parents, others are unemployed or retired. The W11 area is similarly varied in its make up. It's a working class area, yet it's a locale in which fairly affluent people have chosen to make their homes. Its a multi-cultural area, a notorious area, a 'troubled area' a 'desirable' area and always a bohemian area. Housing has persistently been a problem in W11. Notting Hill Housing Trust was created in the 1960's as a response to Rachmanism: to provide affordable housing of a high quality. West Eleven Housing Co-op was formed in 1976 from a similar impulse. During the 1970's, the Trust had become a vast organisation. West Eleven's motive was not only to be able to provide high-quality affordable housing, but also to provide a sense of community and control over living space.

West Eleven Co-op manages 34 units in the heart of North Kensington. It collects rents, administers arrears control and keeps the flats maintained to a very high standard. The Co-op has built up a body of experience and expertise providing day-to-day maintenance of the properties, carrying out emergency repairs and improvements and conducting a 5-yearly cyclical maintenance. The Co-op has a number of skilled trades-people within the membership, as well as people who have acquired a wide range of administrative skills. Some of the members have utilised their acquired expertise to find employment in other housing associations.

West Eleven Housing Co-op has its roots in W11's community. The Co-op believed then and still believes, that a collective and co-operative organisation is a viable, essential alternative to the national housing and property casino. It engenders a strong sense of 'principled living' and community cohesion. The "Big Society" has been alive and well for 35 years here!

(Rewritten and adapted from a video script of 1994)

This book charts, through conversations with its members, the formation, ongoing management, trials and tribulations of the West Eleven Housing Co-operative. It is in part a celebration of the Co-op's 35 years of existence and along the way it attempts to illuminate some of the factors that necessitated the need for such an operation, while revealing the daily work needed to keep the Co-op going. It is essentially a critique, it is celebratory without being triumphalist and its voices do not shy from criticism of the very organisation of which they are a part. The people with whom I spoke are a cross-section of Co-op members, some have been around from the very first days of the Co-op, one has been only recently housed, another is currently un-housed, two of the interviewees are 'Children of the Co-op'; the daughters of founder members. The impetus for making this book arose from my own involvement with the Co-op as a member since 1993 and a housed member since late 1999. As the Co-op reached its 35th anniversary this year I felt that it would be a useful enterprise to document the history of the organisation through photographs and interviews. My relationship with the Co-operative has been a peripatetically active one and so this book, the process of documentation, is one that provided me with an interesting dual role: I was able to operate as a knowledgeable insider but also with the necessary questioning demanded of a 'reporter' or at the very least a participant observer. At the time of writing, my Masters in Photojournalism and Documentary Photography is drawing to a close and this book therefore forms one of my major outcomes, along with an exhibition and other material for dissemination. When I began this exercise my ideas were purely photographic in nature: portraits and environmental images would be linked together with archival material, underpinned with captions and put together as a portfolio. While interesting in itself, it quickly dawned on me that this would not be enough to allow for the 'heft' of 35 years history to be communicated. It became clear to me that the recording of a set of textual histories would be necessary also, and that a book could be made. I am pleased to have followed this avenue as the photographs now feel firmly embedded in the story and do not act as mere indexes to faces or spaces which lack the voices of the people who 'occupy' them. The exercise has drawn me closer once more to the ideals and ethos of the original thinking, and thinkers, behind the Co-op's inception.

So, as a member of the Co-operative since 1993 I feel bound to include my-

self in this set of histories. I need to begin back in 1974, as the first rumblings of the West Eleven Housing Co-operative were to lead to a gestation period resulting in its formation, I was 11 years old. I lived with my brother and mother in the East End of London in a house that smelled of scented candle wax. My mother, from Sunday to Friday would melt large bags of beaded wax in saucepans and baking trays, adding coloured dyes to the mix. These pans would cover each kitchen surface like opened paint tins left by a decorator with a taste for the psychedelic. Other worktops and ledges in the kitchen, and into the next room, would be filled with the essential equipment and paraphernalia of candle making. Racks of stiff plastic moulds, a box of rubber ones, rolls of wicking, scales, measuring jugs, bottles of exotic scented rubber gloves, and thermometers. This industry at first sight looked as chaotic as a jumble sale but was in fact a highly efficient production line. The candles that emerged from this factory were little things of beauty. Cubes of multicoloured wax constructed from shards and slices; smaller cubed and diced pieces formed the internal bulk of the candle. The shapes were gathered by criss crossing the soft wax with a bone-handled knife as it lay shallow in the baking trays and pans. The finished candles shone like stained glass after dipping in a clear, covering coat of transparent gloss wax. Once dry they would be wrapped in soft cloths and kitchen towels and placed in boxes by the front door. On Saturday mornings my brother and I would rise at around 5am and catch the early underground train to Liverpool Street, then onto Ladbroke Grove on the Hammersmith and City Line. Arriving at around 6.30am we joined our Mum at her market stall which in the early days of 1974-75 was situated on a piece of rough, muddy and uncovered ground at the North End of Portobello Road at the junction of what was to become Portobello Green Arcade and adjacent to the newly built Westway Flyover. This space was an irregular collection of stalls, brightly covered in tarpaulins against the rain. The stalls predominantly sold second-hand clothing, bric a brac, books and still lives of findings from a weeks 'tottering' - scavenging in skips and on the doorsteps of Portobello for discarded items that could be fixed up and sold on. The classic two-legged stools and armless dolls were much in evidence. Most important, to an imaginative and impressionable eleven year old like myself, was the contact with the stall holders and regular customers of this tarpaulined village, my brother and I would do a 'Tea Run' for them, down to the 'Mountain Grill Cafe' in the hope of a tip. Their eccentricity and alternative thinking, combined with the ramshackle surroundings of muddy ground and concrete fly-over, struck me vividly and I remember feeling proud and happy that I was part of this mad scene. It was at the time also that the nature of the buildings underneath the recently built flyover was being decided upon: what is now a health club and community offices opposite a landscaped green space, were then cavernous, vibrating empty spaces opposite a

muddy 'bombsite'. The undersides of the Westway were filled with adventure playgrounds and free stages for ad hoc and planned performances. I took full advantage of these spaces, playing for hours on nailed together 'equipment' that would present a modern day health and safety officer with an instant cardiac arrest. In that underworld space I witnessed theatre workshops, music events, song circles, demonstrations, drumming, fights and probably a lot of other goings-on that my eleven year old eyes didn't fully understand. I waited all week for the chance to come back again. It felt like home.

Nine years later, in 1983, aged 20, I was living in the area, having decided that it might as well be home. Indeed I worked on Portobello Market throughout that time as a seller of coats and T-shirts, running my own and other peoples stalls and helping my mother on her candle and jewellery stall. It was entirely logical that I should move to the area in which I had spent so much time during my formative years. I first lived in a bedsit in a house on Chippenham Road, just outside of North Kensington, off the Harrow Road. Ironically it was Angie Tieger, one of the founder members of the Co-op who introduced me to my first landlord: 'Shakey Vic', a blues harmonica maestro who played the area regularly with his 'Shakey Vic's Blues Band', and he's still going strong. At this time I was earning a living busking at Marble Arch underground station in the bewildering subway network beneath the roundabout. I would spend my free time 'upstairs' in Speakers Corner where I met Tony Allen, who would dress as 'Tofu the Clown' and 'bottle' (collect money) for me sometimes, as I sang and played guitar. Tony was a member of West Eleven Housing Co-op and would be the person who introduced me to the Co-operative a few years later.

I met my then partner Becky in 1985 through the local CND meetings held at Colville Nursery where she worked. Becky was a tenant of Notting Hill Housing Trust as a Key Worker in the area. Becky and I were active at CND demonstrations at the Molesworth Base and at various anti-nuke events, with Becky present also at Greenham Common Women's Protests. When our first child Lauren was born in 1987 we were housed by Notting Hill Housing Trust in a two bedroom flat on Colville Terrace. In 1991 our second child Bryony was born. We separated in 1992, one year after the Trust abandoned its policy of helping to house estranged fathers (it was mostly Fathers) and I found myself back in 'bedsit land' on Ladbroke Grove, living above the 'Friendly', the late night Off Licence that didn't mind flogging you a late beer on the hush-hush after 11pm. During the period 1989-92 I was also doing my BA in Fine Art Painting at Chelsea College of Art and Design and earning a living playing guitar and singing in pubs, sometimes five or six nights a week, having 'graduated' from the underground of Marble Arch to the burgeoning live music pub scene in London at the time. I also graduated from my degree and promptly

became elected the Student Union President for Chelsea College/London Institute. This gave me a wage for a year as I sorted out some options, helped me learn the language of Politics and developed my initiative for problem solving and liaison. It also allowed me to organise some damn fine parties on a very large scale, including one occupation of the Manresa Road site and several musical events within the College.

After a succession of bedsits and a hapless period in shared rented accommodation; not able to fully accommodate my two young daughters for any reasonable amount of time, Tony Allen encouraged me to join the Housing Co-operative. This I duly did in late 1993. I never looked back. The next few years were a period of purpose where I began to feel that I would be OK, I began to volunteer myself for work within the Co-op and held the posts of Minutes Secretary, Secretary, voluntary designer of campaign material and reports, and a brief stint as a video director putting together a potted history of the Co-op, then 17 years old, for the Trust, who were considering letting the Co-op more property. The video was for a subsequent presentation at the Town Hall. Most importantly I was a founder member of the 'Sesame Shortlife Housing Association' which gave me a place to stay down Barlby Road while I put in the time with the Co-op. I concentrated on my burgeoning career in teaching and gained my Teachers qualifications while working part-time at Kensington and Chelsea College, as an evening class drawing tutor.

In 1997 I met Tracy, who was also a 'Shortlifer' with Westminster Shortlife Housing Association and we moved between 6 or 7 places together, as near as Lonsdale Road and as far as Battersea. It was in 1999 or early 2000 that a one-bedroom flat became available and it was allocated to me, based on the points I had accrued as an active working Co-op member. I spent approximately one year there before a further reshuffling; prompted by the availability of a new empty unit, meant that I was moved to my current home - a two-bedroom - where I was able to accommodate my daughters in their own room and have them for longer periods of time. Tracy moved in with me in 2002 and we have lived here ever since.

This book chronicles a small slice of history, but one that I consider crucial to communicate. The UK only counts 0.1% of its housing as Co-operatively run (compare this with Norway with 14%) This collection of photographs and histories describes not just a period of time but more importantly an attitude, one that still persists, even though energies may sometimes be low. Consider the recent Government proposals to outlaw all squatting in residential premises and possibly other types of premises in the future, while recent figures (4th Oct 2010) from 'Empty Homes' shows there are 34,422 long-term empty homes in London, which have been unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for over six months. Time for you to set up a Co-op perhaps? On the next page are some useful links. Go for it!

Steve Mepsted. November 2011

# **USEFUL INFORMATION & FURTHER READING**

## **HOUSING CO-OPERATIVES**

**THE CONFEDERATION OF CO-OPERATIVE HOUSING** <http://www.cch.coop>

**CATALYST COLLECTIVE** <http://catalystcollective.org>

**RADICAL ROUTES** <http://www.radicalroutes.org.uk>

**SHELTER** <http://www.shelter.org.uk>

**EMPTY HOMES (CAMPAIGN)** <http://emptyhomes.com>

**ADVISORY SERVICE FOR SQUATTERS** <http://www.squatter.org.uk>

## **LOCAL HISTORY**

**A TROUBLED AREA: NOTES ON NOTTING HILL. PEARL JEPHCOTT**  
(North Kensington Family Study Committee. Research studies)

**Hadcover: 152 pages**

**Publisher: Faber; 1st Edition (1964)**

**THE POLITICS OF COMMUNITY ACTION. JAN O'MALLEY**

**Paperback: 181 pages. Publisher:**

**Spokesman Books (12 May 1977)**



# JASON COPELAND

‘The Political Background to the Co-op Solution’ and

‘The Origins of West Eleven Housing Co-operative’

A rough memoir and potted history.

There were three factors at work in setting the need for a housing co-op in London W11 by the 1970s. Firstly, there was the national crisis of the physical deterioration of the largely 19th-century housing stock in Britain’s inner cities after three depressions and two world wars, and the concomitant rise in homelessness and unmet housing need in the post World War II period. Secondly, there was a particular concentration of those factors in the Notting Hill, Ladbroke Grove and North Kensington district, owing to the peculiar history of the local housing stock. Those first two factors created a need for decent housing of any sort. Thirdly, partly arising from that history, there was a large group of educated “bohemian” baby-boomers living in W11 by the 1970s, largely inadequately housed, who had been attracted to the area by various social and cultural factors; they found themselves with particular needs, and had the potential motivation to create housing co-ops to try to meet those needs.

In the middle of the 19th Century – 1840s to 1850s – there were in the rural district that is now London W11 two main land users: the Portobello Farm, and the Ladbroke Grove stud and racecourse. In, if I recall correctly, the 1860s, both of those closed, and property speculators bought the land to create housing for sale to Britain’s then rapidly growing middle class. The problem was that by the time these houses were built in the 1870s, the British economy had hit a recession, so the five-storey houses, intended for a family and servants, did not sell. Among the first properties hit by this crisis were the unusual “back-to-front” terraces of Powis Square and Colville Square, with the ugly functional sides facing the street, and the pretty sides with the large bay windows facing the private communal garden parks. These and many other large houses built for sale were thus from the start of their useful lives multi-occupied, let off to tenants a room or a floor at a time; and in this condition they continued to be used right up to the 1970s. Over that century or so, most of the changing landlords did not make enough money from rents to keep up with the frequent and cumulative repairs the houses needed, even if they had been inclined to do so: which being, for the most part, rapacious, penny-pinching



petty capitalist exploiters, they were not.

There was another depression in the 1890s, followed soon after by the disruptive effects of the Great War of 1914-1918. During major wars, shortages, of money, men and materials meant no maintenance or repair work got done on most the housing in Britain's inner cities. Then in the 1920s there was another depression and years of economic chaos across Europe, followed soon after by the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 and the Great Depression which lasted until World War 2 (or, in Germany's case, the build-up to it) revived the depressed economies. Not that such mobilisation made life prosperous for the small-scale landlords of Britain: quite the reverse in fact, given the activity of the Hermann Goering Aerial Demolition Gesellschaft from June 1940 to February 1944.

Now while it is true that from about 1870 to 1970 housing stock in all the UK's major cities suffered from the same stresses, in Notting Hill and Ladbroke Grove the stress was worse than in most other districts. The almost complete lack of a significant owner-occupier class, with its culture of investment, responsibility and self-reliance, meant that most of those tall houses continued to be either maintained in a desultory fashion at best, and more often dangerously neglected, and continued to be multi-occupied.

After the end of World War 2 in 1945, the housing pressure in the area increased. Substantial groups of people displaced by the war and its consequent political changes in Europe sought refuge in London, and many gravitated toward W11 for the cheap (if rough) housing, as well as to congregate with other members of their ethnicity. Irish people had long migrated to London, since the potato famine of the 1840s, and were strongly represented in W11. They were joined, after 1945, by Poles, Yugoslavs, Magyars, Czechs and others; then the continuing migration of Afro-Caribbean and other British Commonwealth peoples in search of improved economic opportunities also got under way at that time, and this added to the already complex mix and to the pressure on housing availability, along with (later on) Cypriots and Moroccans; also Spanish, Portuguese and Latino-American refugees from repressive or fascist regimes, and others.

The result was that much or most of the rented housing between Westbourne Grove and the canal became even more intensely multi-occupied, overcrowded and run-down. In the 1950s, the Hungarian gangster Perel Rachman became a byword for the viciously and thuggishly exploitative landlord in W11, "rack-renting" properties, subdividing rooms to increase the rentals. I later lived in two of his properties, by then owned and managed by one of his minders.

By the mid-1960s a catalyst for action was added to the mix: partly educated or over-educated baby-boomer "bohemian" types, younger people escaping abusive or repressive families and looking for the freedom to live their own life-

styles, often involving intellectual, political and sexual freedom (gay and hetero) which they could not find in their stuffy families of origin in the repressive suburbs or regional areas, as well as booze, drugs and rock music, late-night fun and so on. The search for alternative lifestyles and creative self-expression involved, for some, overt political activity. Those boomers included me: I moved into a shared flat in a run-down house in Powis Square in 1966 as a student.

Most of those boomers, however, lived in insecure overcrowded housing, subject to frequent changes, serial episodes of urgent moving and occasional homelessness. Thus it was for me. So, by the 1970s Notting Hill consisted of a complex mix of more or less deprived and disadvantaged groups: people of foreign origin and Commonwealth immigrants, all with less than optimal earning power and often facing racial discrimination in housing; single parents, disabled people and the (at best) semi-employable lumpen elements of the boomer influx, as well as a continuing throughput of students, shift workers, part-time employed people who spent half their lives on the dole or on sickness benefit, petty criminals, artists, dissident intellectuals with MI5 or Special Branch on their tails, musicians, writers and the like, who lived on erratic and often inadequate incomes. As well as lacking purchasing power to get them into better housing outside the W11 ghetto, many of these people (especially the singles or childless couples) lacked the qualifications for the tiny and grossly inadequate supply of public or subsidised housing in the area.

That describes the background of unmet housing need in Notting Hill, North Kensington and Ladbroke Grove. In my other main essay below, in which I sketch out my role in the foundation of W11 Co-op, I will also describe how some of these bohemian types provided the main clientele and the willing workers, as well as the background grassroots political action process by which the ground was prepared for the seeds of housing co-ops as a contribution to solving the problem of unmet housing need. There was resistance, organization and agitation, people demanding improvements in their (our) lives.

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As I outlined in Part 1, there were two main elements in the historical background to the development of W11 Housing Co-op:

1. the decline of the national housing stock in Britain's inner cities, since most of it was built in the 19th century; and
2. the particular history of the speculatively-built housing in Notting Hill.

These resulted in much unmet housing need by the 1970s, especially among the boomer bohemian influx.

For co-operatives to be potential contributors to the solution however, another and quite distinct element was needed: ideology, accompanied by motivation, determination and commitment. The necessary precondition for top-down organizational housing provision is simply that of unmet housing need. The necessary preconditions for housing co-op action are that the affected punters:

- a) have no faith that conventional housing providers are going to do anything for them, and
- b) believe that they must therefore band together, work and organize to bring about change.

It is the same as the difference for workers between trusting the bosses to look after them (as if the bastards would!) and joining a union.

In the early 1970s, the vast majority of the local working class and doletariat in North Kensington wanted someone else to provide them with housing: private landlords, the local authority or other purpose-oriented agencies. While there is a valid argument that the paying of taxes and rates entitles the payer to the provision of services by the relevant layers of government, there is an equally valid argument that in adopting that attitude, the punter hands over his power along with his money, and surrenders the right to wield any influence over the conditions of his or her life. The boomer bohemians, many of them, came to the Notting Hill situation with already developed political perspectives, and were ideologically much less inclined to do as the local proles did. The boomers were possessed of highly critical perspectives on authority in general and the capitalist political economy in particular, and this educational-cultural factor meshed with the tight eligibility rules of the local authority and the charitable housing associations to create a pool of inadequately housed and disentitled people who were pissed off enough by their exclusion to do something about it. Co-ops in many ways potentially fitted the bill, including by their resemblance to the communal experience of flat-sharing, house-sharing and squatting which many boomers had experienced as largely positive. And that response occurred not in an ideological vacuum but against the background of increasing political action in the area.

By the 1970s, there had for some years been a growing political movement demanding and working for change in the conditions of people's lives, operating on a variety of fronts. The history of that movement, which was a very important background factor behind the co-op thrust, begins with a look at the traditional Marxist critique of capitalist society as espoused by the Communist Party and others at the time. In that view, all power in society is based in the political economy, in class

relations in the sphere of production. By the 1960s, a dissident or heretical view was gaining ground: the idea that the other half of the economy, the sphere of consumption, was just as important as a locus of power and determinant of social and political outcomes. For most of the time since Marx and Engels began to write their seminal works in the 1850s, the sphere of production had been seen (somewhat distortedly, in fact) as an exclusively male preserve. There was, therefore, a great deal of implicit sexism in the traditional Marxist view – the idea that power in the political economy essentially grew out of the biceps of blokes, amplified by the hard blokey products (and tools) of coal, iron and steel. This view of course ignored the vital direct contributions of organized women to the working-class struggle in the 19th century, such as the match-girls' strike of the 1890s, and the entry of millions of women into previously blokey jobs in times of war, in 1915-1918 and 1940-1945. It also ignored the massive contribution to the economy of female homemakers, wielding market power by spending their and their blokes' earnings.

By the 1970s, the writings of dissident Marxists and other progressives such as Antonio Gramsci, Danilo Dolci and various anarchists, as well as the critiques of the third-wave feminists, were circulating widely among the post-WW2 newly educated sons and daughters of the old working class, the first beneficiaries of essentially free university education. Those new critiques formed part of the burgeoning ferment of intellectual ideas in wide circulation since the cultural revolution of the mid-1960s exploded in political demos, rock concerts and other events in the parks and streets of Berlin, Paris, London, Chicago and elsewhere. The young left's revolt against the obscenity of the mass-murderous US war in Vietnam was fought out in the cities of Europe and the USA.

The new ideas also circulated among members of the older organised left, many of whom were willing to reorganise in response to changing objective conditions and new ways of regarding the political economy. One of those new organisational forms since the late 1950s had been the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), representing a broad alliance of rebellious and unconventional lefties, Christians, anarchists and others. It organised the annual Easter march from the government nuclear warfare research establishment at Aldermaston, out to the west of London, to Trafalgar Square. Out of the many meetings of minds that CND facilitated there grew a new multi-purpose front, the Committee of 100, which (if I recall correctly) was explicitly dedicated to developing new ways to manifest dissident and radical political critiques. Some of the members thereof, such as John and Jan O'Malley, worked afterward to stir up the hitherto powerless classes of W11, forming the Notting Hill People's Association (NHPA), an essentially open and informal broad-left front to promote struggle on local issues. It was the time of 'issue politics', or "think global, act local", of a million blows against the global capitalist

empire, small blows delivered by previously powerless people finding their voices, organizing to take control of their lives, struggling to improve conditions. The comrades (including some of the more open-minded CP and Labour Party types) set about organizing the kinds of people whom the old male left had dogmatically regarded as unorganisable: women, immigrants and lumpen elements.

One of the first struggles, in the late 1960s or early 1970s, was over the closed garden squares, Colville Square and Powis Square. These were fenced-off and locked private gardens for the exclusive use of residents in the adjoining blocks. Local parents had long been pissed off because of the lack of safe play space for children in that part of W11; there were at the time no pedestrian precincts, so kids just had to play on the footpath, and risk injury every day. The NHPA therefore organised a series of demonstrations in which people with placards broke into the gardens and occupied them for a while, with as much publicity as possible. Eventually, even the Tory grandees in Kensington Town Hall saw the sense of the NHPA's demands, bought the squares and opened them up for everyone. Another struggle, closely related to that one, was the campaign for subsidised daytime childcare facilities, which eventually succeeded.

Another community organisation which partly grew out of the same campaign group was the North Kensington Law Centre (NKLC), a solicitors' office set up to support the disadvantaged of the area with free advice and court representation. It specialised in crime, housing and employment litigation. Crime was an issue especially for the local youth, whom the police picked on relentlessly, and often framed or verballed; housing was a constant struggle for repairs, for rent reductions, and against harassment and illegal evictions. Employment cases involved workplace harassment, bullying, sex discrimination and unfair dismissal, as well as underpaid wages. NKLC, the first free law centre in the UK (the first in the world had recently opened in Boston, Massachusetts) was generated by a long backroom campaign led by founding lawyer Peter Kandler, opened its doors in 1970, and is still going strong.

And then there was the biggest bugbear, housing. Many NHPA members had been campaigning in various ways for years on this issue, and there was little progress by the early 1970s. Eventually, in response to the continual noise, the Council decided to conduct a survey of housing conditions. This did not fool the NHPA folks. They knew that there had been plenty of surveys done before, that well enough information existed for the council to act, and that another damn survey was just a way for the council to avoid taking any real action to change the realities on the ground. They convened a public meeting on 2nd August 1972 to launch the survey, in a council hut in Tavistock Road; The People responded by locking the bastards in for a while. The huge publicity was garnered a few months later, on 8th

May 1973, after a street publicity campaign lasting several weeks on the pedestrian precinct in front of All Saints' Church. I manned the information desk for most of that time, often accompanied by a spook – I never found out whether he was from the Metropolitan Police Special Branch or MI5 – who had tried to bolster his credibility with a planted story in the local paper about the “Battle of the Charities”, which was a put-up job by him and his old military chum James Fraser Horne, who ran one of the charities helping the street homeless. The spook thought we were taken in, the bloody idiot. He must have held lefties in a lot of contempt.

The Council held their second public meeting, to present the survey results, and this time we locked them up all night – with entertainment provided by musicians, poets, and fornicators under the panel table. In the morning, Council fuhrer Malby Crofton raged “I’m not doing any deals with bloody anarchists!” The senior copper on the spot, however, was not to be thus commanded, and sensibly agreed to make no arrests if The People let the Councillors and their wives and satraps go, and we all walked out peacefully – which is what happened. For a week or so, the publicity was magnificent, and the “Siege of Notting Hill” brought The People’s complaints about atrocious housing conditions to national attention. And our spook reported to his political masters that while there probably wasn’t much danger of the Notting Hill People’s Association replicating the Russian Revolution, it would probably be a good idea for the two levels of government, especially the national one, to do something about the problem. About a year after the Siege, Whitehall found five million quid which they had previously said they didn’t have, to subsidise a huge buying campaign by the local housing trusts, Notting Hill Housing Trust and Kensington Housing Trust. And that was a vital development. for without that injection of cash, and continuing support from central and local government, the housing co-ops could not have succeeded in putting roofs over our members’ heads.

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I grew up in housing insecurity. My alcoholic father, traumatised in World War II and a hereditary Aspergian, did not build up any savings, and neither did my brain-damaged and equally traumatised mother – so, that dysfunctional family never got onto the ladder of home ownership. My parents’ relationship was as unstable a my father’s employment, so by the time I was ten I had lived at six addresses, including those of my nan and my father’s parents. When my mother pushed me out of the seventh address at the age of 15, my socioemotional and employment difficulties were already apparent, so I had no chance of consistently earning enough to even contemplate home ownership on my own. I was left dependent, like many others, on cheap and insecure rented accommodation. That all added up to a powerful motivation to seek a proper housing solution.

In fact, the concept of organised co-operation was a routine aspect of my childhood. My mother and her close relatives were members of what was referred to as “the co-op”, a network consisting of regional retail co-op department store chains such as the London Co-operative Society, all of which were in turn members of the Co-operative Wholesale Society. The profits of the enterprise were distributed annually to members in proportion to their purchases over the year. The trouble was, by the start of the 1970s, trade and membership were declining, and the organisation was moribund. The range of goods was terminally old-fashioned, dictated by the staid, conservative and outdated taste of the ageing directors. The fashion and design revolution of the 1960s had passed them by, they remained stuck in the 1940s and 1950s, and they had lost a whole generation of potential members.

I arrived in Notting Hill in October 1966, having already experienced over three years of inadequate or insecure housing since I was forced out of the abusive family home. I and two fellow students rented a flat in one of Rachman’s run-down houses; that was the start of another period of poor housing and frequent moves, punctuated by homelessness.

My first contact with what was in effect a housing co-op was initiated in the summer of 1968, when I did some voluntary work with the Notting Hill Children’s Project (NHCP), an informal weekend and holiday thing run by a group of professional friends who shared a house in North Kensington. They gave country outings in their own cars to the most deprived kids they could find, often on the recommendation of Social Services. Many of those kids had never been outside the ghetto, had never seen the countryside, and didn’t even know what a cow was. The group needed extra hands to help and play with the kids, and I was one of those. A year or three later, their landlord gave them all notice to quit in order to sell the house, and in response they came up with a solution: they registered a housing association to buy the house, and rented it back to themselves. Constitutionally, it wasn’t the ideal fit, but it served the purpose; and that HA was one of the factors which led to the development with the Registrar of Friendly Societies of specific rules designed for housing co-ops.

In the early 1970s, the problems my partner Annie and I had in getting and keeping decent housing led to us opening what became a spreading squat, in Latimer Road W10. Those small, ageing and dilapidated houses had been bought up by the local authority and were gradually being emptied, waiting for demolition and the complete redevelopment of the area. That sort of thing was going on throughout London and other cities at the time: rough but still livable houses were being kept empty which thousands of people were homeless, or close to homeless. Thus arose the squatting movement. People entered (preferably with minimum

damage which they quickly repaired) and took up occupation. Squatting was never a crime, though some police and other thugs did need to be reminded of that. The movement became quite widespread, and gave rise to the later phenomenon of short-life housing, also inaccurately known as licensed squatting, in which building owners, usually institutional, issued short-life occupation licences to needy homeless people. That squatting experience, and the work of the NHCP chums, led Annie and me to launch Abeona Housing Association (named by Annie after the Roman goddess of home and hearth). We used it to apply to the Greater London Council for short-life housing, but the application got lost in the massive bureaucracy of County Hall.

In 1973 I was heavily involved in the publicity campaign which led up to the “Siege of Notting Hill” (see Part 2 above); and a little while after that, the elements of the launching of West 11 Co-op started to coalesce. I had also been volunteering at NKLC while on sickness and disability benefits, and that experience turned out to be very helpful in many ways. Firstly, at NKLC I met the late Anna Malcolm, who became a good friend and was very important in the founding of W11 Co-op. She knew a lot of people who were in housing need and not eligible for the usual institutional solutions, people whom she thought would be strongly interested in the co-op possibility – as indeed they mostly turned out to be. She introduced several of them to me or sent them to the exploratory meetings once those got under way. And of course word spread then to other people in the same position.

It was in 1974, if I recall correctly, that a specific set of model rules appeared for housing co-ops. I vaguely recall that the recently formed co-ops service agency (or “secondary co-op”) Solon (named after the mythical ancient Greek lawgiver) was involved in developing and promoting them. Housing co-ops were in fact nothing new in the world: in a variety of shapes, they had been making contributions to the solution in many countries for decades, but they just hadn’t taken off in the UK so much.

Thus interested parties and prospective members began to meet, and to discuss the formation of a housing Co-op. Many of those people, being good alternative lefties, basically didn’t trust governments, laws or institutions, so rather than just accepting what others had done, they wanted to discuss the model rules clause by clause, and change some to suit our purposes. This is where some of my previous experience came in useful: from my previous encounters with adapted housing associations and knowledge of the work of the Registry of Friendly Societies, I knew a fair bit about the relevant laws and the reasons behind them, and my work at NKLC had expanded my knowledge of the legal jargon and terminology. Thus I was able to lead the exposition of the language of the model rules and explain most of the purposes of the clauses, to the apparent satisfaction of most of



the skeptics. That was not all that took up two years of almost weekly discussions; there were also the need for and the role of service agencies to supply the housing we would use (the role eventually filled by Notting Hill Housing Trust), the division of responsibilities, the tasks that would be left to the co-op members such as rent collection and reporting, low-level maintenance (except where we had qualified members), tenant selection, accounting and other matters.

For much of those two years I chaired those meetings and led the discussions. Some people chafed a bit under what they saw as my somewhat domineering style, and told me so. I did my best to keep the discussions in order and on topic, keep people's attention focused, prevent straying off the subject and time wasting, and bring meetings to clear decisions on how we would proceed. Since many of the members had no experience of participating in formal and purpose-oriented meetings (and sometimes showed it), the necessary discipline had to be imposed, or we would never have got through all the discussions and made the important decisions, so I gladly take full responsibility for being a bit of a pushy bugger. In that way, my Asperger's syndrome was a bit of a mixed blessing: it enabled me to ride fairly roughshod (though not always too rudely, I hope) over indiscipline, and it also ruffled some feathers, naturally. I possibly could have done it all with rather smoother diplomacy if I had been a normaloid; but I wasn't, so things happened as they did.

At some point in 1976 we completed the agenda, having amended the wording of some clauses where that wording was not fixed by the requirements of the relevant Acts; members signed up, and the co-op was formally registered. We ran a couple of fundraising entertainment gigs in All Saints' Church Hall to raise the fees. Then we signed up to the Service Agreement with Notting Hill Housing Trust (preceded by another long and detailed discussion, of course) and started the committee work of selecting the first batch of tenants, appointing volunteers for various tasks, and developing our administrative routines – some of which were required by NHHT, which made life a lot easier than nutting them out from first principles.

I think the gestation period (I remember it as being almost two years) turned out to be a good thing for the co-op's cohesion and durability. Those two years of weekly meetings and intellectual struggle meant that the launching members, by the time we signed the forms, were on the same page in regard to the nature, procedures and structure of the co-op, were clear and united in our purpose, and all had the same things invested in the co-op: time, effort, brain-ache and a bit of grief – and we were not about to walk away from that investment, whatever challenges the future brought. We had been through all the ideological stuff, and were now together for a clearly understood practical purpose, that of getting roofs

over our heads.

I did not become one of the first tenants, as there were other people in more acute and urgent housing need than I was by then. I had been housed in, initially, short-life housing by NHHT since about 1975, as an essential community worker. I still needed a Co-op flat later on though, as Annie and I, joint tenants of the permanent NHHT flat which followed the short-life, broke up and she claimed a tenancy in her own right (as well she might). So in 1980 I moved into my W11 Co-op flat with my then 13-year-old son.

As it turned out, I only stayed there about 18 months, as by then I was getting a bit stir-crazy after 15 years in the ghetto, was looking for fresh challenges, contracted a nasty attack of Hinduistic meditation religion, and moved away. But that is another story. On the way to that departure, I also advised the prospective members of Portobello Housing Co-op and others, worked for a short-life housing co-op in north London for a year or so, and founded a short-life housing co-op for the religious group, which succeeded in obtaining several large homes for use as ashrams through the 1980.

The housing co-op movement in Britain foundered in 1979, just as it was set for a dramatic take-off. The Labour government of James Callaghan, reeling from the cumulative financial effects of the OPEC oil price hikes after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, invented swingeing public spending cuts: and as always, the special project funding – for example, that for housing co-ops – was the first to be axed. So, a lot of hopes bit the dust that year. I'm very glad W11 Co-op got launched before all that came about.

I was not the only hard worker involved in the two-year launch process of W11 Co-op. Without the active, eager and determined participation of the forty-odd people who ended up signing the final rules and the registration papers, all my effort would have meant nothing, so I hereby pay tribute to the stickability and determination of all the early participants. Congratulations to all concerned on the long survival and self-evident success of West Eleven! We did it for us, together, and after 35 years it is still going strong.

When Linda Saunders and Steve Mepsted contacted me on the other side of the planet to invite my participation in this exercise, I was delighted to find out that W11 Co-op still existed and prospered. Indeed, the effort I put in to helping launch it, and the salutary results, form the achievement of which I am most proud. This is a rough memoir, hastily put together some 37 years or more after most of the main events. It presents the story as far as I can remember it.

If anyone thinks they remember any of it more accurately, please let me know, at: [jasoncopeland@y7mail.com](mailto:jasoncopeland@y7mail.com)









# TONY ALLEN

“The way they dealt with all the homeless people who were squatting, was to evict most of them and make them homeless!”

The history of the W11 co-op for me started with housing activism. I came to Ladbroke Grove for the Free Love and squatting; I settled for sexual politics and a licensed deri! (That's from my stand-up act in 1979). By the mid 1970's the number of people squatting in London in properties hit by recession and development blight had reached tens of thousands. I was on the dole and hanging out with a larky rroup of anarchists called the 'Ruff Tuff Creem Puff Estate Agency for Squatters' under the loose directorship of Heathcote Williams. I was spotting empty property by day and breaking and entering by night; then our 'office' would inform homeless people as to the whereabouts. Cos' the law said they could enter but could not break in. "Your honour!" There was a time when Landlords, often local authorities would wreck properties by severing services, pouring concrete down the toilets and smashing down staircases, to keep people like us out. But gradually when it became clear that much of it was staying empty for yonks, they were shamed into doing deals and they started licensing squats on a three monthly basis at a peppercorn rent. The so-called short-life lets. A group of us had a tatty 3 story terraced house in Bravington road for £10 quid a week - it lasted 6 years. Short-life! Hah! In that same period I had occasional rooms in squats in Lancaster road.

Eventually the authorities said they would knock it all down and build their tower blocks, car parks and shopping malls; but mostly it turned out they couldn't afford that shit so they had to tart up all the old stock to and make it look fairly decent. We didn't see it at the time but on reflection the way they dealt with all the homeless people who were squatting, was to evict most of them and make them homeless! But they offered all us activists the option of managing our own property through co-ops – shrewd move - it kept us potential troublemakers very busy and self-absorbed. West11 was one of the first co-ops but it wasn't long before every squatting area had its local housing co-op.

There were various options on offer. I'm not so sure we got it right. Some of the groups that formed after us ended up owning their own places or having a considerable say in the design of their flats, for instance several groups of Frestonia residents under the guidance of Nick Albery managed to get rehoused together and had a large say in the design their new homes. I think it was Anna Malcolm who urged me to join the Co-op. They weren't my immediate comrades – more the bureaucrats of the revolution, bless them, who I don't always get on with that well. So I spent a bit of energy as I usually do in such situations encouraging my more anarchic, bohemian and artistic mates to join, just to give it some balance, cos' we di'nt want the co-op run from Moscow or where ever it was that Trotskyites call home did we?

*Steve Mepsted: Just to paint a picture of how these houses were in '78. They were considered hard to let?*

TA: Not just hard to let – they were hard to Squat!! (Laughs) Yes, they were hard to squat, these ones! I'm not sure of the history of individual houses but I should imagine they'd been voided because this 'ere was 'The Frontline' (All Saints Road) and the site of regular pitched battles between the police and the kids running drugs on the streets. They would hardly have left property 'available'. Even for a hardened squatter, this little corner of the Grove wouldn't have been a first choice. After we'd moved in, there was always a dodgy little crew sitting on the doorstep dealing. More often as not they were selling pieces of our plastic dustbin as prime Afghani black.

*SM: So the Notting Hill Housing Trust saw fit to release a property to the co-op?*

TA: Well, the people that moved into 26 Lancaster road in 1979 - Tom Dunhill, Mary Jane Anderton, Linda Saunders and myself. Were part of a larger group of friends and comrades who'd previously squatted together in various places and, with others, had worked on various local campaigns together; we'd published 'Corrugated Times' which was 'the local newspaper of the Ladbroke Archipelago'; and we were also in the same anti-nuke group – in fact we'd only just returned from the Torness occupation.

*SM: You were single at the time – single – with connections?*

TA: Yeah I was single! But I was multi-connected!



*SM: Was it a relief to be housed?*

TA: No, not really – I'd already been housed; I'd shared a long-term licensed squat. In fact moving into a one-person flat (let), after years of communal living was a bit of a shock. In fact for a lot of the time after I moved in I had various friends sleeping on my sofa.

*SM: Its interesting that despite the reputation that this area had with the pitched battles between police and kids and taxi-drivers not coming into the area; dropping you off up the hill, that the people who joined the co-op were immune to all this.*

TA: Well, this was the epicentre of the 'Frontline'. Once a group of us were busted having a drink in the Apollo Pub on All Saints Road, - all Co-op members - busted for just being in there and being white! Dealers would be sat at tables with big lumps of dope, cutting it up into pieces for the runners coming in and out. I was once arrested at 11am in the morning for the same reason. Me and Mikey from up the road, I was white, he was black and we were in the area together, he'd gone out for a paper and I'd gone out for milk – (laughs) we were just walking down the shops together! They found a bit of lavender in my top pocket! That delayed things at Notting Hill nick.

*SM: So the dynamics of the area and the activists who were already living in it - however they lived in it - were in place, but what about the skills that had to be learned?*

TA: Well, the only skills that are really required are the ones that involve organizing things - running meetings, sitting on committees and sub-committees, dealing with authority, pressure group stuff and those sort of skills we had in spades because we were politicians and already members of groups, and particularly housing and law centre groups. That had been an inevitable part of our political life for the previous five years. As I said earlier, I didn't like the particular way the Housing Co-op was set up. I would have preferred it more hands on. More rough n ready. It seemed that we'd opted to be bureaucrats with the Co-op.

*SM: You mentioned earlier that you feel there may be a rise in legalized and licensed squatting in the face of a prolonged recession. The one thing the Co-op hasn't been able to do is expand, offering more people the chance of being housed. Maybe this will change things?*

TA: Well, what's happening now in parts of London is ad hoc collectives of people are approaching landlords directly, as soon as they've occupied a squat. There's one group of 'Artists who need Galleries' and living space who are more or less quoting the short life riff - saying to landlords "Let us look after the property and we'll review the situation mutually every three months. We'll pay all the rates and bills and make sure no one wrecks the place". Now for some would-be tycoon who considers property as collateral that's a very useful arrangement. It's either that or employ a security firm - a couple of guys in uniforms with an Alsatian dog.

*SM: You've been a member of the Co-op since 1978, what are your main frustrations about the Co-op, and where can it change?*

TA: Yes, well apart from the bureaucratisation of everyday life - giving people jobs that don't need doing. Which is what the wider society does. I do believe there are certain things we can do to enrich the Co-op, its members and the community.

1) We should encourage unhoused members to set up a short-life group under the Co-op's wing and get themselves housed. It would be clear who to prioritise when a flat came up.

2) We should investigate all the options open to people like myself who might want to move out of the Co-op in the near future and find out ways for the Co-op not to lose the property - that would be a very good coup to pull off.

3) The 'Greening' of Co-op property, including money saving things like solar panels, water collection and gardens on rooftops etc etc. That would take a lot of people a lot of time and a lot of energy to organise but it would worth - I can't understand why we haven't done it.

*SM: What about the succession rights of children in the Co-op - I know that that has brought up a few issues around the meeting table?*

TA: It's not a difficult thing really; I think making them members at an earlier age might be a good idea. Then the kids could have the right or the possibility to take over the place when the time comes. I've recently been researching the life of Joseph Grimaldi. When his father died in 1788 Grimaldi was ten years old and his little brother John was eight. They went to the reading of the will and learned that the Lawyers had absconded to the West Indies with all the takings. The eight-year-old John resolved to chase the thieves to the Caribbean. The manager of the theatre

where they both worked bought him a warm suit for the journey. Someone else gave him some money to alleviate the cost of working his passage. They didn't deter him from going! They encouraged him. So, an eight year old went charging off around the world in pursuit of his stolen legacy. Well, if a kid can do that at eight years old, I think he should be capable of joining the fucking Co-op and putting solar panels up on my roof! Are we that different now from how we were then? No, we're just more molly-coddled.

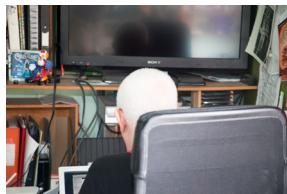
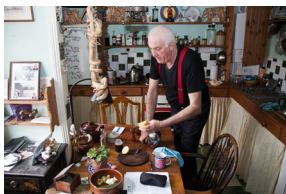
At the moment I am considering my options for moving, at some stage I will make a decision about it. More likely at some point my legs and my respiratory system will make the decision for me! It wasn't until two years ago that I realised that I lived at the top of a hill. And another thing that I'm decidedly aware of is that I live at the top of three flights of stairs. I didn't know that either. Also I'd like a garden, I did have one on the roof but Jim Welby (bless) made me take it down in case the roof collapsed. (Health and Safety gone mentally challenged). But I don't want a garden in Ladbroke Grove any more; I want one in the country.

The Co-op is not an important part of what I do. It's my housing, and it's part of my immediate community, but then there's also my life and my art, all which I deal with in much the same way I suppose. All of it equally 'burdened with democracy'.



TONY ALLEN AT HOME  
AND AT SPEAKERS  
CORNER







SOME EARLY TONY ALLEN GRAFFITI AND SLOGANEERING



(N. KENSINGTON AREA.)

**CORRUGATED**

**TIMES**

Stop the ~~CHAOS~~ Anarchy of ~~HOMELESSNESS~~ Squatters

HARRY'S STORY

Harry is one of the many casualties of Kensington and Chelsea Council's redevelopment schemes, in the Lancaster West area. He wonders what it's all about. In the last 50 years he has worked and lived in the area, as a furniture maker and repairer. He was very involved with the local life of the community and knew everyone in the locality.

The local tenants get together to try to fight the advancing council's bulldozing of their neighbourhood, but are hoodwinked into accepting the council's smooth talk. He cannot understand why the council have built the NEW council housing like "a prison block". He sees squatters moving into the houses that have been abandoned by his friends, and with mixed feelings he watches as the houses are made habitable again by homeless people.

# CORRU



IF YOU WANT TO HELP WITH THE NEXT ISSUE OF CORRUGATED TIMES, WHY NOT COME TO OUR FEEDBACK MEETING AT THE OLD CLINIC, COMMUNITY CENTRE, TAVISTOCK RD. ON MON 16<sup>th</sup> FEB. 8.30 p.m.



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'THE LOCAL NEWSPAPER OF THE LADBROKE ARCHIPELAGO'



**CORRUGATED TIMES**

CORRUGATED TIMES No 12 MARCH 1977.



Local paper of the Ladbroke Achipelago.

inside

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Organ of the Free-range anarchists

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LINE**





# TONY BENNETT

“I lived in a commune in Wales where we were milking chickens, growing cows and maintaining many personal relationships. It was hard work!”

I've lived in this North Kensington, Ladbrooke Grove, Portobello Road area - whatever you want to call it - since early 1976 when I was a squatter in Tavistock Crescent, then all the houses got knocked down there. I had become a single parent with two young kids so I went and begged at the Councils' door and got housed in Bassett Road, the other side of Ladbrooke Grove for a while. I met a woman with two kids as well so we didn't have enough room there. We then managed to get hold of an early 80's Notting Hill Housing Trust property on Westbourne Park Road where I lived for quite a number of years. When I split up with my partner I had to leave the area for a while and moved up to Harlesden/Willesden area in the private sector, which was very different from living round here for sure.

Having known the people in the Co-op for years and years I decided to join and started going to meetings as most people do, the process of how you get housed. I weaseled my way into doing lots of various jobs for the Co-op to get points, and eventually got housed.

I've always believed in Co-ops, I worked in a Free School, in Brighton teaching Art and I've been in Food Co-ops organizing those. So I've always liked the whole Co-op ideal so I'm delighted to have eventually, in December 2010 to have been housed by the Co-op. Its an enormous relief when you get housed, you realise 'Oh I haven't got to go round and look for anywhere again.' You pay a fixed reasonable rent, not as cheap anymore as some of the older properties in the Co-op, you feel rejuvenated, more relaxed, your whole life improves by having a place that you can do what you like to, that is self managing. As to the future of Co-ops I don't know. To the future of Housing Association in general well, it may be in ten years,

after a succession of right wing governments they may decide to sell off all Housing Association properties or rather do a 'Right to Buy' on all of them and move people out. The Housing Association as far as I'm aware doesn't really like Co-ops; they're stuck with them because the early associations and Co-ops are what made the whole thing happen in the first place. In some senses though as long as the rent is getting paid to them from their subsidiary Co-ops and they don't have to do anything to maintain and manage them, then it'd probably be easier for them. They're caught with us, they're a large organisation with 12'000 properties or so and they like to have control, they don't like people telling them, 'well, we're doing it our way'.

*Steve Mepsted: You mentioned that you had held a series of positions within the Co-op along the way, what were they?*

TB: I sat on the Maintenance Committee for the last five years, for the last seven or eight years I have organised and taken the minutes at General and Maintenance Meetings. Doing work for the Co-op is what helps you get housed, but it's also because it helps to be a part of the Co-op too, and I quite like it! I don't mind typing up minutes and booking meeting rooms and so on.

*SM: When you talk to people about the Co-op and how and where you live, do they get it?*

TB: Some do some don't, there are even people in the Co-op who don't get it! There are some people in the Co-op who don't know how lucky they are. To organise a general meeting we need ten people to have a quorate meeting, until last year we were having eight meetings a year and we rarely got a quorate meeting out of the fifty members despite me writing rude notes round to people's houses saying that they only need to come twice a year. We've dropped the meetings to four a year now and formed a 'Management Committee' so that we can make decisions and move forward. However even with four meetings a year it's hard to get ten people to a meeting.

*SM: Why do you think that might be?*

TB: Part of it is history where people have gone to meetings where there were serious arguments; some people have done lots of work for the Co-op in the past and feel they have done their bit for a while. Others just do not like people.

*SM: So the personal and organisational politics have become intertwined so one*

*can sometimes not separate them and do effective business?*

TB: I do think its essential to realise that we are not a family. We don't necessarily have to have those kinds of relationships. What we have in common is property, somewhere to live, we don't have to live in each other's pockets though, have sexual or emotional relationships with each other, though some people do. One needs to divorce oneself from say, not liking Susan in number whatever and get on with the business, some are not able to do that, not able to separate those things off.

*SM: Yes, it true that when I explain what the Co-op is people immediately think it's a community of sandal wearing, tree hugging, yoghurt weaving hippies all in harmony with each other. That's false of course, just like it's not true with any group of people who are made close by an organisation. The wider notions of the Co-op, swapping skills etc.... may be a founding principle but business has to be conducted and so the Co-op has had to form a management committee to do that and form smaller sub committees too.*

TB: Yes, its almost moved the other way, not like a lets system whereby people are swapping skills all the time..."You cut my hair and I'll kill your cow"...We have moved further away from that – there is now a situation whereby we cannot employ people within the Co-op to do paid work as it creates bad feeling.

*SM: Well, forgetting founding principles for a moment, is the Co-op best run by the Co-op or should it rely on help?*

TB: The administration is best run by the Co-op as we know what we need, there volunteer expenses paid for some jobs, some people don't even want them, they just do it anyhow as it's a token amount of money anyway. For people like the Maintenance Convener or Treasurer where there is a lot of skilled work and decision-making they get considerably more money. If you had the skills and were able to repair something by yourself then you could get the expenses for materials and possibly some of the labour.

*SM: It took you ten years to get housed. We have 50 members of whom a portion are un housed members and more people knocking on the door. Is it feasible to be swelling the ranks of the membership when we cannot realistically house people within any reasonable amount of time?*

TB: Its essential to get new people into the Co-op otherwise you end up with white

haired old men like me! The average age of the Co-op is extremely high. People are dying off. Within the next ten or fifteen years a lot of the original members of the Co-op will not be with us anymore, so yes we do need more people, and younger people. On the other hand there is a long wait. There is talk of keeping the list at a maximum of 50 people and discouraging people from joining. When people do come along to General Meetings, new applicants, they sit there with people saying "well don't know what you're here for mate ...chances of you getting housed are slim'. Well its true that people are attracted to the Co-op as they feel it's an easy way to get housed. Well its not! It's a long haul. We have a points system which stops people voting based on their friendships or personalities. The system quantifies how long a person had been in the Co-op, meetings attended, work done for the Co-op and housing need. However a problem is there aren't enough jobs within the Co-op for people to do in order to get points, unless the people who hold those jobs give them up. Also we have a fundamental structural problem in that we only manage 34 units in ten houses. If we had more the problem would be a lot more easily solved, things would move much more quickly. We have at the moment seven unhoused members and we can't do anything.

*SM: So the Co-op is locked in, as it were, not really able to fulfill the need of unhoused members.*

TB: Well yes, however there are younger members getting housed which is good. All the seven applicants are under 40 and one is about to be housed. I had a fantasy the other day that if I won the lottery I would buy a couple of houses to expand the Co-op to house some people. When I moved into the area it was the people in Short life housing and the squatters who maintained a lot of property around here, that's kind of gone now and we don't have the same community that is possible with alternative living. I lived in a commune in Wales where we were publishing and printing books and milking chickens and growing cows and maintaining many personal relationships. It was hard actually. Here we have a great thing where we can shut our front doors, you can have as much to do with the Co-op as you wish or as little and you've got your own space and are independent in that sense. It's the best of both worlds.

We might be able to expand somewhere else and buy property even further away; in our age of Internet communication we could do video meetings and make faces at each other that way. A lot of people are attracted to the Co-op though because of the West Eleven area. We have other Co-ops around, Portobello Co-op, Bramley, Seagull and W 12 but the thing that holds true is that you have to be really tenacious. There is a young woman on the un-housed list who has been a member

now for six years and she's been to lots of meetings and has asked what she can do – she will sit on the next allocations committee and she has stuck to it, she's living on someone else's place on Lancaster Road and most of the time you don't know with people how well they are connected with the area. It was easy for me as I had a warehouse in Acklam Road underneath the motorway for 20 years, I worked in Kensal Road before that and I've had a market stall. I can prove easily that I have huge connections with the area. I've put on loads of gigs with Tony Allen around the area for 30 years so all that's easy. Other people say well I've got some address where I may or not be staying.

*SM: Do you think that there may be better ways of communicating with new members? It is difficult to understand what's going on at the meeting if you are new; there is a new language to be learned.*

TB: One of our members has produced some information for new members and it's good. Another member has set up a blog/website to attract comments and to archive minutes, post news etc.

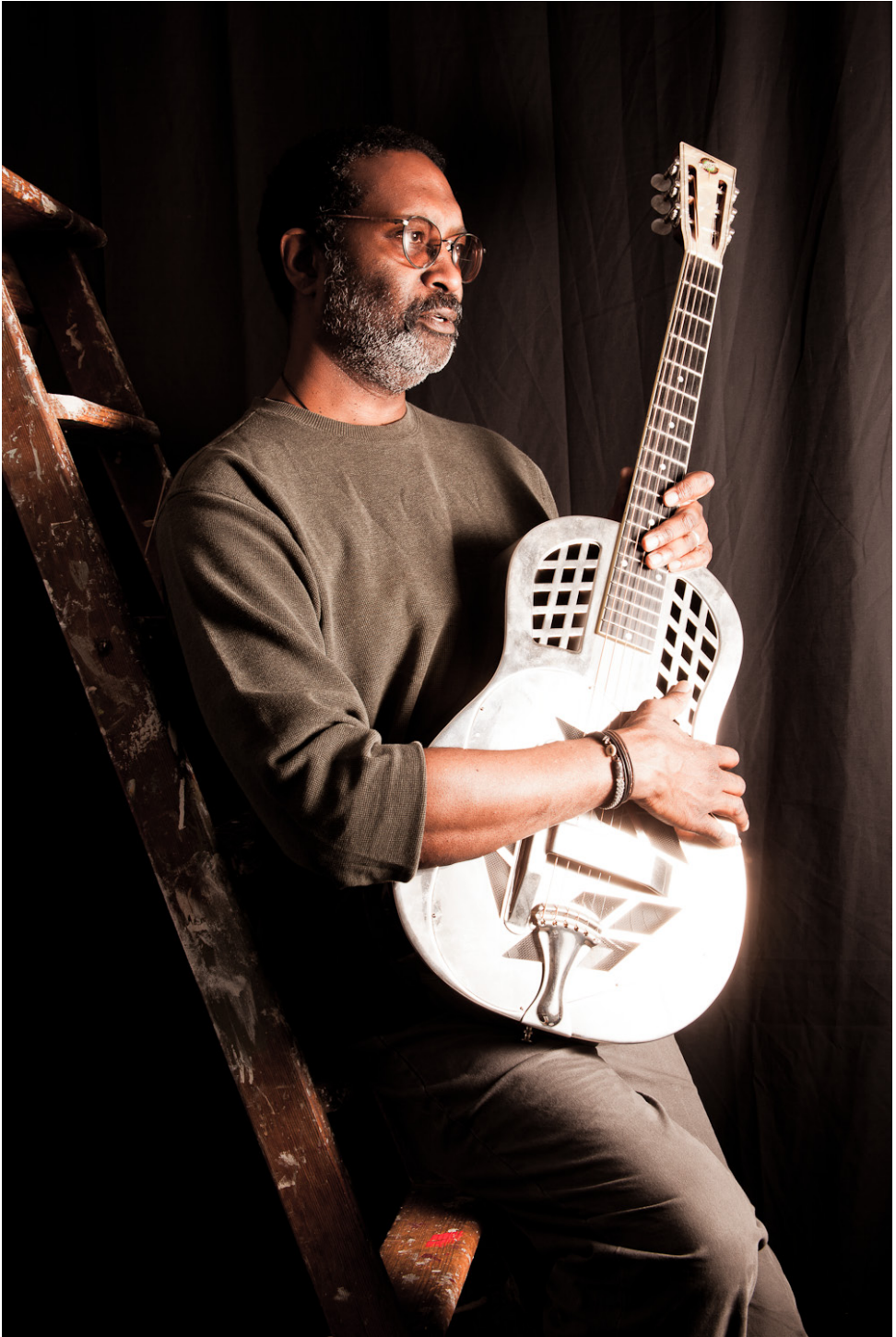
*SM: So what do you think 'belonging to the Co-op' means?*

TB: Well it means some control over ones life, as much as we have any control, it enables one to do things with regards to other people, we are 'herd' animals after all and we live in the middle of a city so its good to learn to get on with people to an extent or to at least have some compromises to make. It's also good to be able to make decisions with another group of people that have an impact on your life and lives. Without getting too airy-fairy I think it is a positive contribution to ones well being. Co-operatives are great! Co-operative shops for example, most of our farms in the UK apart from some of the huge agribusiness ones are Co-ops, that's how farmers work, it works better for them to be working as a Co-op, partly just in terms of economies of scale. There are great principles of Co-ops that can work really well, and importantly, it doesn't need government or someone on top of you to tell you what to do. You're doing it between you, and you have to agree it.









# ALEX BOWLING

“We decided: lets form a  
Housing Co-operative!  
So one evening in the kitchen  
we put some ideas together”

I came to this area in 1973; actually I was just travelling through. I landed at Heathrow and was picked up by this guy Stanley who met me. I had met him the previous year when he came to New York where I was living at the time. He said come through London and you can go to Yugoslavia to see your friends there, so I landed sometime in July, one morning – he was a taxi driver and drove me saying were gonna go down to Queensway and have lunch and we’ll meet a whole bunch of people. We got out of the taxi and the first person I met was Anna Malcolm.

Anna was I don’t know how old – Corann (Anna’s Daughter) was one year old and they had just come back from swimming at the Porchester Baths. I liked the woman instantly – I had an immediate rapport with her – she was incredible. I didn’t think much of it and we went off to have lunch and met some other people – friends of my Mum and Dads’ and he put me on the train to Yugoslavia – the express from Liverpool Street later that evening. I had a Guyanese passport and I landed in Ostend and I was immediately put on the next ferry back to England because I didn’t have visas – when I was in New York I was told I didn’t need Visas because I was in transit – it was a huge problem. I spent the whole week just getting visas and getting to know people in this area and I absolutely fell in love with the place. It was all derelict – there was a lot of it boarded up. There was a lot of it falling down, still bomb-damaged buildings, but the people were incredible, there was such an amazing community spirit, black people and white people living together with no problems like I had experienced when I was growing up in New York. I got to meet Anna a bit more – not much but we registered in each other’s minds. I got my Visas and went back to Yugoslavia and had an awful time. I came straight back and met up with my best friend who had got me there in the first place – he was from Croatia. We fell out even though we were best friends and it was a horrible situation, a loss of innocence, I woke up to the realities of the world. Going through

Germany on the trains there was such heavy security because of the Baader Meinhoff thing. It was heavy going through Europe although I saw Europe, I didn't too; you don't get much on a train, just slices of life. So I came back depressed, having had a horrible time and landed here and I thought OK what can I do? I've got time – supposed to be going back to College in New York but didn't want to; I hated it and hated living in the States as well, Vietnam was happening and people were still having problems with rioting and all sorts of political problems. I decided to lengthen my stay and I stayed for six months and managed to find work as a photographer's assistant. He taught me how to print – it's the first thing you do. And I thought this is exactly what I wanted to do – it was my life – photography! Then my visa ran out, it had been six months and I thought I had to go back to New York and I went back depressed because I loved England so much, loved London, loved W11 so much. I had such a great time with wonderful people but I had to leave. So I went back and I started working at my old job, I didn't go back to College. I worked at a bookshop in Manhattan. They wanted me to stay, they were going to fast-track me into managerial if I wanted. I thought about it – England was in the back of my mind and all I could think about was trying to get back here. The guy I was working for said OK, I'll pay for the ticket and take care of things if you decide to come back. So I said yes and packed up my gear, said goodbye to my mum and came back again a year later. In the meantime I had bought 'Blondie' – my Stratocaster. I bought her in a pawnshop for just fewer than two hundred dollars and it's the most amazing guitar in the world. Loved it and still got it.

I came back, guitar in tow and went back to work with the guy, printing. I got to know Anna Malcolm a bit more and got into a relationship with a woman that didn't last too long. I was having a great time in the area, which was still run down; up as far as Notting Hill Gate and Holland Park was all derelict, it was incredible but still such an amazing area. Jimi Hendrix! He lived and died in this area – it was one of the things that helped me feel the vibe of the area, here was still a hippy thing going on and we started to have the three-day week and by then I'd started a relationship with Anna Malcolm and we thought OK what are we gonna do – it was around 1976, I can't live with her, she's a single mother with two kids and I don't earn enough to keep them and I'm squatting somewhere locally but before then I was sleeping on the studio floor where I was working but each night I was coming back to the area as the studio was in Barnes. I'd come back to people I knew and got to know Anna and her kids better and she decided there were too many people we knew who were homeless or squatting or sleeping on other peoples couches. We decided – lets form a Housing Co-operative so one evening in her kitchen we put some ideas together. My West Indian Uncle Stan was with us the time we were talking about it. He was gonna be involved in it, single men couldn't find places

cheaply and there were so many people in that situation. Notting Hill Housing Trust did not house men. Councils didn't either – you'd put your name down on a list and you knew nothing was going to happen for you, the only thing was private landlords, squatting or other peoples couches.

Slowly we got people involved and we approached the housing Trust as they had loads of empty properties. They were quite happy to help us because Co-operatives were a big feature of London life, especially in areas like this, which didn't have anything else, where people couldn't afford anything else. It was decided that we'd work with the Housing Trust – they'd give us the properties, they would do them up, we would occupy them and we'd have an agreement whereby we'd pay the rent and they'd give back to us in maintenance grants or management grants – exactly the way the Co-op operates today. We got more people involved and registered with the Housing Associations and as a charity. It snowballed and we got more members and more houses. We didn't have a limit to number of members or houses at the time. Number 30 was the first house and I wasn't meant to be living here because there was Emily who lived on the ground floor, Rod and Marie on the top floor and this floor that I am living on was meant for an old Dutch woman who would have been a companion for Emily as they were both similar ages. She was an amazing woman – she was an Old Dutch communist freedom fighter who had had to leave home during the War and wound up living in England she used to tell me all sorts of stories about the things she went through. She was offered a place with better facilities for an older person and she decided to take that offer. I was next on the list and I was meant to be moving into the same house as Anna but on the floor above, she would have the ground floor and basement (at number 32, Lancaster Road) and I'd have the first floor as the Dutch woman moved out of Number 30.

So I moved in here in '78, when I was 26 or 27 and it was one of the best things that ever happened to me, acquiring my own space! I had no money and couldn't afford anything. I was given a beat up old fridge and beat up old stove and I bought on Portobello a big foam thing that was my mattress with a sleeping bag that I had brought over from the States and went all over Europe with me. That was it – that was all I had, I had nothing, this place use to resonate and echo because it was so empty and it's so full now! Oh God! I look at it and think I must get rid of stuff. It used to be neat – I used to be neat, but the stuff I acquired!...we have very few minimalists in the Co-op! But were not Northern Europeans anyway. I'm the only person in the house from the beginning and I'm still here.

There was Anna and myself, Geof Branch a little later and Angie Tieger who was around from the beginning. I am not sure how Ninon and James became involved. There were loads of people but most of them aren't around anymore. Some people from the Law Centre on Golborne Road became involved also.

*Steve Mepsted: It's testament to the characters, the dynamic, energy and drive of the 'early settlers' as it were, of the Co-op – many who had no experience of housing or housing law, who said hey, lets make a Co-op! But thirty-five years later the Co-op is still here!*

AB: Well no one wanted to live in the area! It was so run down. Like so many parts of London that are run down now and people want to get out of. There was a youth in the area, there was energy, Portobello Road was a focus, and everybody came down on Friday and Saturday, did shopping and met up with each other. There are still things existing today out there and still places you walk past and a memory will hit you.

*SM: And that's rapidly changing*

AB: Yea, the Indian shops, where they sell fabrics, you know they were there from the 60's selling cheesecloth to hippies. The Anglo-Yugoslav Café has gone – mind you there's no more Yugoslavia!

*SM: An 1893 newspaper article labeled the area an 'Avernus': meaning 'Mouth of Hell', it prompted a lot of social change in the area. 'Notting Dale' as it was then known was swamped with disease from the potteries and the piggeries that thrived here. The housing that grew around this and from it was clustered around a few small streets. There were open sewers, the size of a lake, up near Latimer Road. Avondale Park is the site of what used to be called 'The Ocean' – an expanse of stinking water which laid in the holes cut for making bricks from the good clay soil. There was not much agriculture happening as the soil was not good for growing. Pigs were kept for eating.*

AB: This place is special. A psychic woman once flew over the area and said there's a blue haze of psychic energy about the place, which attracts a certain kind of person. Artistic and not of the mainstream – slightly 'off' – not nutty, but not conventional either. One of the things that interested me about the area was the fact that you had Lordships living right next to people with a million kids - in New York you had segregated areas, a mini-apartheid from the 30's and 40's, and way back. Areas where there was gathered a 'type'. I lived in a Jewish neighborhood but I lived in the black section of that. It wasn't something I was unhappy with, I didn't know any better, but when I came to live here and I saw how people lived together I just thought wow, this is incredible and I don't know if other areas were like this but I landed here and thought it was amazing – all these old houses and histories. My

father was here in '58 during the riots, he was here during the war – you would talk to people who had buckets out when it rained, the ceiling would be falling down, the walls would be green with mould – there was unbelievable poverty but it was still an amazing area where people had a feeling for each other, they looked after each other, they cared. The changes happened when the violence came, mainly the Frontline – another 'Mouth of Hell' maybe, drugs and prostitution, muggings and all sorts of stuff, people were afraid to come into the area, the police were constantly on raids. People would only come in for drugs and would lose their wristwatches instead of getting them.

*SM: There was the 'Dustbin Hash' which was clipped plastic bin, sold off as top grade gear!*

AB: Yea, or the 'Oregano Marijuana' I remember all that!

*SM: Well the 'Frontline' has changed – you are more likely to see 'Madonna' walking up it now.*

AB: The area changed for the worse. It had to change but it did so in a way that killed the character. They got rid of a lot of the people who lived here – moved them out with the excuse that the house was falling down and we have to sell it. They moved people out and they never came back. With them went a lot of character and a lot of characters and interesting stuff, ethnic vibes - lots of people from all over – a lot have gone. And now there's almost a monoculture. I call it ethnic cleansing. The working class, cheap houses, people could buy a house for almost nothing and if you had the money, which most people around here didn't, you could move in. So you get one family in an entire house, which is funnily enough originally what the houses were built for. This house, number 30 was built in 1895 and it was built for a single family but almost instantly became bedsits.

*SM: So when the Trust gave the Co-op some unloved property there must have been a few new skills to be learned?*

AB: We had to learn how to manage the Co-op and it was all trial and error, we made a lot of mistakes but we were helped by the Trust who had someone who was a liaison person who came to all our meetings, we got to know them very well, and they basically got us through it. They were committed, far more committed than they are now to their neighborhoods. I remember a woman called Shelley who used to come to all our meetings, we got to know her and would go for drinks

afterwards and you know, the Trust cared, they didn't want to see us fail. We had to learn a process and do things properly but a lot of people had that experience from doing other things, being politically motivated for instance, in organisations so they knew how to run meetings, they knew how to elect members, how to lobby to help us run. We had the right people involved. We had very intelligent people but we had to do things properly and we didn't want the kind of problems that might mean we had the houses taken away from us. This meant we had to have people who were committed, mostly single people, obviously some families, some kids. But we didn't have too many families; it was a matter of trying to get single people houses.

*SM: Because that was the need? A lot of single fathers and mothers were around then.*

AB: Yes no matter what your energies you can't live like that forever, most people we knew didn't have any money, there was this housing around but cheap housing was sought after. These were good houses, solid ones not tiny little council ones. I'd been sleeping on floors, squatting, and it's not always pleasant because you are never sure. Fortunately squats weren't so looked down upon as they are now – it was allowed as people realised that the housing stock just wasn't there. You could get a license to squat. There were a lot of workers and shop co-ops that were thriving – 'Portobello Wholefoods' started up that way and there were others like 'Ceres' so it was not unusual for this area. I think Islington had a few as well and here were a few in South London, but it definitely worked in this area.

*SM: We have had a few Housing Co-operatives round here. We have 'Seagull Co-op', 'Portobello Co-op'... We were the first I think.*

AB: Yes – they based their operations on us but their members wholly own them.

*SM: So thirty-five years later West Eleven Housing Co-op is still here! What's been the secret of its success?*

AB: I think it's down to the people who ran the co-op. We had some real leaders but one of the problems we are having right now is that we are not getting enough young people in. People move in and you never see them again, ever, and that's unfortunate because it's an aging co-op which is one of the problems we are going to have within the next ten, twenty years – what's going to happen to these older people, I'm one of them! I'm 60 next year...what's going to happen to me? And will



the Co-op survive once the original members are no longer around to run things?

We had very good people in the beginning, we had committed, political people because it's a very left wing idea, a co-op, and coming out of the 60's and 70's where the status quo was were not going to hand you anything you have to go and fight for it. The equality movements of that period were important, sex equality gay equality and racial quality came out of the period and somehow worked its way into the thinking of the Co-op. But people don't know the battles that were fought to get certain things and because of that they have it easier, they expect maybe to just get handed a flat and that they don't have to be involved, but saying that, we still do have quite a few young people who turn up at meetings and do things for the Co-op and have a voice.

*SM: I raised a point at the last meeting that un-housed members – younger members in many cases, could form their own committee to give them a voice and perhaps some interesting ideas could come out of that. It would allow them to accrue points for housing too. After all they are going to be the people who eventually manage the Co-op*

AB: Yes, and one of the other dangers is that of course we don't own these properties and the Trust might decide that these houses are way too valuable for us to be paying this minimum rent and say well, were going to have to sell the house from under you. I know a lot of people who ended up in Croydon or Shepherds Bush or Hammersmith and it had come close with one of our properties at Number 2 and we fought hard and showed that we are not going to let it happen. We've also come close to folding a couple of times with the political battles that go on in the Co-op and people saying to hell with it, let the Trust have it back. The difference for us is that we know who we are going to put into the houses. If they turn up at meetings, we see them, we have some kind of idea of what they're thinking, we know that if we put them into a house were less likely to have problems with them.

*SM: Yes there has to be a lot of commitment to get housed, its not just 'turn up once and get housed a week later'. I waited and worked 8 years before being housed, others for longer.*

AB: At one point a person from every house had to be on the allocations committee, if a person was to move into your house then somebody from that house had to be on it. So that person could have an input, but that's gone now and we may not really know who is coming in.

*SM: So what do you think of this 'Big Society' idea from David Cameron?*

AB: Oh, don't make me puke! It existed way before he came up with the idea! People have always been involved; while it may be the same people you are not going to get any extra by making a policy. That's just their way of getting out of Government. And of course Cameron lives in the area. And to show how 'in-touch' he is he leaves his bike unchained outside of Tesco and wonders why it got nicked!

I read the other day, about the Welfare State, The NHS, the University Systems that were brought in after the war, because of the sacrifices that the guys made, their wives and their children, they were not coming back to the same old Britain and now they're trying to roll back those things to the same old Britain. We've got toffs ruling the country and all the things that we're now beginning to lose because we have taken them for granted; we're going to have to fight for again. Fight for all these things that I fortunately came into, if I was living in the States now I wouldn't be entitled to free health care and you don't want to lose these things, you don't want to lose cheap housing, they want to take it away. The idea that if an area is upmarket and has social housing within it, then those people should pay the upmarket rents!! Luckily that didn't happen, who says an area is upmarket? When did it become upmarket? I'm sure that if they wanted to get rid of us they could do so. It's happened with the Golborne Estate. We're an attractive proposition, our houses are not run down, they are well maintained and people want to take pictures of them and stick them on their websites – I've been to London and look what I saw. But I don't think they can close us down too easily, not without a fight, which they know we'll give.

*SM: And they know that we have the skills and knowledge built up over the years, to fight them.*

AB: Yes, but as we've been discussing, will those skills be there in another ten years?

*SM: Good point, perhaps the Trust knows this as well and it's a waiting game. But were talking perhaps negatively about the Trust and about the future and threats to the Co-op. How about expansion, do you think rather than sitting still, we need to invest in more housing and petition for more?*

AB: You can't do it in this area, you'd have to go to Shepherds Bush or Hammer-smith and still be the 'West Eleven Housing Co-op'. We were offered a place near All Saints Church and a property in All Saints Road. But it fizzled out. Slowly the Trust started to run out of property round here although we still had the Sesame Housing group, which was Short-life Housing that we could have kept going. Unless the area suddenly takes a nosedive with house prices and people decide to move out. It

doesn't necessarily mean that the Trust is going to buy the property and give it to us to run. I hope the Co-op keeps going after I'm long gone and that younger people found a commitment to the Co-op in a way that they haven't necessarily for the last ten years or so.

People need to be in place to take over from the others who don't want to run things anymore. You know, people get tired of it, if they are the same people doing everything. We need people who are going to be into a co-operative spirit and not thinking, 'oh I'm gonna be housed'! We could so lose everything as a Co-op as we don't own the buildings. This is one of the best things that has happened to me in my life and if it wasn't for Anna Malcolm and her idea...because I never would have thought of it, I wasn't experienced enough to know about that stuff and didn't know the right people either. She had an amazing energy and a lot of us owe her a great deal. It's allowed me to stay in one of the greatest neighborhoods on the planet!



SOME TOP-GRADE  
AFGHANI BLACK



ALEX BOWLING AND  
CORANN MALCOLM

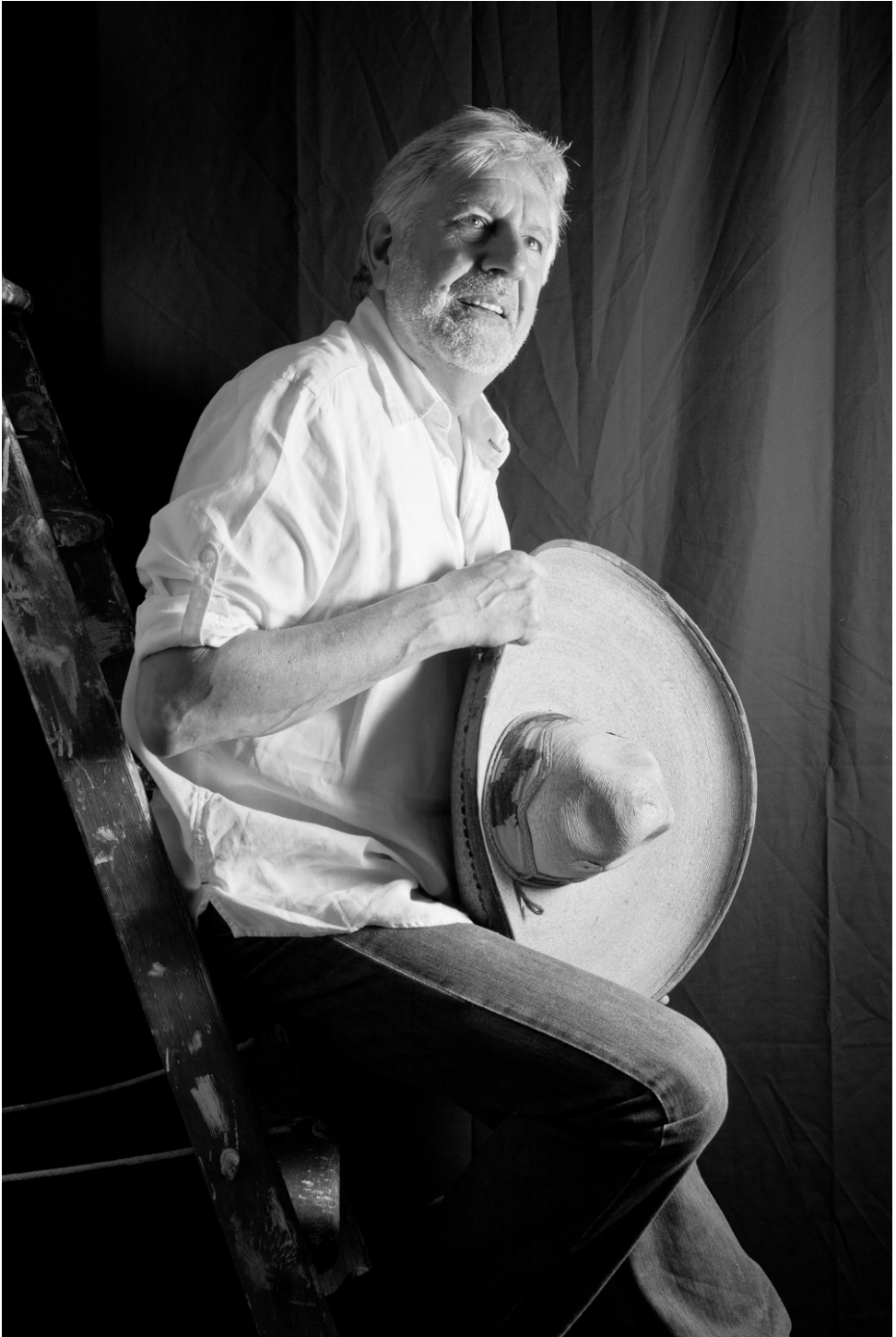
ANNA MALCOLM  
SECOND FROM LEFT



THE KITCHEN TABLE.  
SITE OF THE FIRST  
MEETINGS



EMILY SHORT AND  
BERT ON THEIR  
WEDDING DAY



# GEOF BRANCH

“We burned our Poll Tax cards in Powis Square, Joe Strummer gave me his card to burn”

I'm currently Secretary of the Co-op. I did one stint of secretary from about '87 to '97 and I think currently I've been doing it again since about 2004, something like that. I can't really remember. I did a stint as Treasurer from about the late '70s to early '80s. I was there pretty much at the beginning of the Co-op. I think I was there from about the second meeting; there used to be a community centre where the clinic is now, on Kensington Park Road. It was an old building, it included a printing press, the press moved there from Ladbroke Grove in about '76, '77, sometime around then. I think the first meeting would have been in late 1976, and I think I was there at the second meeting. The main movers at that time were Jason Copeland, who I think was not necessarily interested in living in a Co-op, but he wanted to get experience in setting up a Housing Association because he was looking for a career that way, and Anna Malcolm, who was looking for somewhere to live. A lot of us were squatters; I had been squatting in Westbourne Park Road next door to Tony Allen and people, so we were regulars at the Elgin where some people say alternative comedy started, with Tony having regular sessions. I don't know what night of the week it was, but a lot of people appeared there: The 101'ers with Joe Strummer, Alexei Sayle, I think DuDu Pukwana might have played there with 'Spear'. So it was mostly Jason and Anna who set up the Co-op, got it registered and put our constitution together. I think Linda Saunders actually typed up the constitution.

Jason cut a deal with Notting Hill Housing Trust to give us the 10 houses, which we still have. I think one of the big problems with the Co-op is we've never managed to get any more property and so therefore it does mean the Co-op is a bit inward-looking, we've not been able to expand. So Jason got this deal together, and we got 34 flats and 10 houses. At the time, All Saints Road had become the 'Frontline'; this area was considered hard to let so they didn't mind giving us these properties here, because nobody wanted to live on Lancaster Road and All Saints Road in those days, apart from us.

*Steve Mepsted: How different it is today!*

GB: Absolutely, yeah! I was then living in a bedsit on Oxford Gardens when I got allocated this flat here, which I moved into on April 1st 1980. I think our first houses; were 26, 30 and 22. I think we got the first houses in about '78, '79, like I say I moved into this one in '80.

*SM: So they were staggered? 10 didn't all come at once?*

GB: No they didn't.

*SM: Were there enough people to fill them, if 10 came at once?*

GB: Oh yeah, we had a limit on membership at 50 members. The Co-op's constitution says that in order to be a tenant you have to be a member so yeah, there was a waiting list. The emphasis then was 50% on housing need, but of course all of us were in housing need and 50% amount of work done, and I suppose because I'd done quite a lot of work I managed to get allocated. Which was great because at the time I had a young daughter, who wasn't living with me 'cause I was living in a one bedroom flat. So she came to live with me and sort of swapped between her mother and me for the next few years, but then ended up living permanently with me here from when she was about 11 onwards. That's Lily, and then of course I've got another daughter, Carla, whom I share with Linda, of course. So Carla has lived part of her time here and part of her time at Linda's, so she's another child of the Co-op. I think the nature of Notting Hill Housing Trust has changed along with everything else, we certainly had a better relationship with the Trust in the early days, partly because they had an office in All Saints Road so we were on very good terms, we had regular meetings with them.

There was a Co-ops' forum, a West London Co-ops Forum with all the Co-ops in the area: there's Seagull which is a women's Co-op, there was Bramley's which is just down the road, near Freston Road by Latimer Road tube station, there was W14 and W12 Co-ops, I can't remember if there were any others. We used to meet regularly with the Trust at fairly high levels, at director level, so we've been severely down-graded; they don't really take us seriously, we represent a very small part of their tenancy. Certainly when I was Secretary in the '80s, and also when I was Treasurer in the '80s one of the main projects was trying to get more housing, and if you remember Steve we put that presentation together. There was a big meeting of the area management committee of the trust, which included the local doctor, Dr. Pettifer, who was very supportive of us. I think she was the chair and we



were pitching for a couple more houses in All Saints Road. The committee was very supportive of us but the Trust at a higher management level blocked it. Like I said, part of the problem with the Co-op generally I think, is in our inability to expand. My time as Treasurer and certainly when Geoff Mole had been Treasurer we managed to accumulate a lot of reserves, which we put into a separate fund; I think it might have reached nearly a quarter of a million at one point. I probably shouldn't say this, it shouldn't get out because otherwise the Trust might try and claw it back! The idea was to try and buy some property, but in order to do that we had to be registered as a fully-fledged Housing Association, in order to do that we had to be sponsored by Notting Hill Housing Trust, and they refused to do that.

So we're stuck, we're a Tenants Management Co-op, we don't own any property, we can't own any property. After that, property prices started to soar so I think we pretty much gave up on the idea of owning. We couldn't have owned anywhere around here because the area changed so much. And we didn't really fancy owning somewhere in Uxbridge!

*SM: That's a very interesting thing, just to digress for a second. When I was talking to Tony Bennett he was saying 'oh if I won the lottery, the best possible thing I could think to do with the money would be to buy two big properties and get some Co-op expansion'*

GB: Good man!

*SM: We couldn't expand now under the current situation re. property prices, but could there be any other way one could potentially expand, to allow more members to be housed?*

GB: Well, there have been various projects. We helped Portobello Co-op set up and they did manage to turn themselves into a Housing Association, they bought a property in St Marks road. We helped the Short Life 'Sesame' set up; we've tried various things. The trouble is we've been going for so long now that a lot of the energy has dissipated. I'm really impressed by the children of the Co-op who have carried on being in the Co-op, that's great. I don't want to be too pessimistic about it, I think the Co-op's done pretty well, W12 Co-op completely imploded about 15 years ago. There was a period of something, which we called 'The Bribe'. Thatcher's government, in order to possibly undermine the idea of co-op housing, sold off all the council housing that she possibly could she then offered a similar deal to people living in housing association places that they couldn't refuse, I think there was some legal barrier to buying your own housing association places, but they bunged you

a bribe in order to allow people to move out of social housing.

*SM: Something like £16'000*

GB: Yeah, it was quite a lot of money in the late '70s, early '80s, and a lot of people in W12 took that. I think we've only had one or two people in W11 take it and fortunately we managed to cut a deal with the Trust so we always managed to get first preference on filling the vacancy that was left in the flat. With W12 Co-op though lots of people took the bribe and the Co-op just fell in on itself so I mean we've actually done quite well to survive as long as we have, even though there are problems. We were always very idealistic, we always had this idea that the Co-op had to be run by its members so the sovereign body was the general meeting. But in recent years of course, attendance at the general meeting has fallen off and we've had a problem getting meetings quorate so we've had to change our constitution and revert to a management committee just to get business done. When we started out we had all these fantastic ideas – we were going to convert one of the rooms on the landing into a laundry for the co-op because in the early days no one had a washing machine, we all used to walk down to the launderette on Westbourne Park Road. We thought we'd have a laundry, a proper office, but none of it ever happened. The most we got was the photocopier on the landing at number 16.

*SM: I think there was a little office space there at some point?*

GB: There's a cupboard there, which has a filing cabinet in it. We've sort of muddled on, I guess the Co-op has always been a bunch of eccentrics, maybe less so than it used to be, but I think the whole nature of W11 Co-op was that we were attracted to living around here and a lot of us were squatters when many of the old houses were being pulled down. For me, Portobello Market has always been a defining characteristic of the area, and sadly that's changing. The fruit and veg stalls are hardly there any more, they're just there as tourist attractions on a Friday and Saturday. And they're great the fruit and veg stallholders; they're a little community in themselves. When I had a really bad period in the early '90s when I was unemployed for a long time and I was sort of living hand to mouth, they were really generous. I'm happy to be living here, I know Tony Allen would like to move out of the country or move to the seaside, I think Kiran has found some information about some possibilities for doing that for over-60s, but I'm perfectly happy living here

*SM: When you think back to the beginnings of the Co-op, it's hard to imagine now how crumbling and unloved this little half a square mile was.*

GB: Well yes, when All Saints Road was a bit heavy. It was worrying

*SM: I guess it makes sense that the flats would have been filled by pretty interesting, eccentric people who had drive, energy and experience. Do you think it was just luck; that the dynamic of personalities was enough to actually get the thing rolling and for it to have survived as long as it has, bearing in mind as you said that other Co-ops haven't fared as well? Was it just luck, or did people have to be motivated? Did you have to learn really big new skills?*

GB: Oh yeah, when I took over as treasurer, I actually went on a course to learn basic book-keeping. I ended up teaching it in Wornington Road (Kensington and Chelsea College), but I went on a basic bookkeeping course first. I think I got my first PC probably in 1983, an old Amstrad, but before that we did the books in ledgers

*SM: Do they still survive, those ledgers?*

GB: They're probably in the cupboard in number 16; I don't think Geoff Mole throws any of it away. I'll lend you the key if you want to go up and have a look. There's a filing cabinet which I try and keep reasonably tidy, the top drawer has got all important documents of the co-op with big letters saying 'do not remove'. If you remember we had a 30th anniversary party some years ago.

We had to re-register the constitution, there had been some changes in the law in the 1988 Housing Act, and so we had to revise our constitution. So yeah, it certainly forced me to learn all sorts of skills and I guess other people as well. But I mean, in the end the Co-ops primary purpose was to provide housing, but we've always been very conscious of the fact we're a bunch of people who live in these two streets and we form part of the community. We are represented on the various community associations; although I don't think any of us ever go, because it's pretty boring! There is certainly a community here and also I think we're quite proud of the fact we are self-managing, we have learnt those skills which allow us to, for better or worse, actually run the thing. Like conducting meetings, taking minutes, writing constitutions, forming little committees, all that sort of stuff.

*SM: What is the future of the Co-op? Do you think there are any immediate threats from either governmental policy or the Housing Trust?*

GB: Well I'm not aware of any. I suppose we're all conscious of the fact that we live in a very desirable part of town now and the properties are worth millions. Its entirely possible that the housing trust might terminate the management agree-

ment that we have. I think most of us, I think all of us actually have probably got rights as tenants, so I don't think they can just chuck us out.

*SM: There's two different rights systems apparently, there's 'Secure' and 'Assured Tenancy.' Can you explain the differences to me?*

GB: No! I did know, there are differences. Certainly 'Assured Tenancies' are less secure than 'Secured Tenancies'! But I can't remember what the exact difference is. There's certainly nothing in the tenancy agreement, which explains the difference. The wording is pretty much identical, although that may well be because I think our actual tenancy documents are a bit old and out of date. I do remember about ten years ago the Trust produced new tenancy documents and said you should get all your tenants to sign new tenancies, everybody was totally hostile to it.

W11 Co-op is a management coop, we don't actually own any of our houses but we have a management agreement with the Trust, which says that we retain a portion of the rent for maintenance and for management and we give a fixed sum to the Trust. We've had an argument with the Trust based on the fact that because we've had all these houses for more than 30 years, and we assume that the normal mortgage would be for 25 years, we've actually paid for these houses and perhaps they should give them to us!

*SM: That's really interesting, imagine if they'd gone for that!*

GB: But they wouldn't wear it! So okay we're still a Management Co-op, we do have certain deals with the Trust and there are certain procedures, the person who lived in a flat in All Saints Road originally, was wanting to start a family and we didn't have any 2 bedroom flats so she swapped into a Trust flat somewhere in Oxford Gardens. Our deal previously had been that every other vacancy arising through swaps would give us the right to nominate someone for the first one, but for the second vacancy the Trust would nominate someone. So basically the Trust took someone off the council waiting list and the whole thing was very badly managed, we had informally been told that while we couldn't vet the person that they were going to give to us, we could at least meet them first and explain what our Co-op was and what they were getting themselves into, and make sure they understood what sort of housing they were going to come into. Rod Freeman and I were prepared to meet this chap but the next thing we knew was that he had been given the keys and moved in, so they reneged on their deal.

We do seem to have a fairly high proportion of problem tenants, people for whatever reason are socially inadequate or whatever, I suppose in a small commu-

nity also you're going get arguments between neighbors. That's another thing we try to muddle through and sort of deal with peoples problems, so again we are a little bit more than just a housing management outfit we are something of a community.

Again, I don't know if it's just an accident, but we have had our fair share of eccentrics in the Co-op. I would think the most likely scenario for the future is that the Co-op will carry on pretty much as we are at the moment and any vacancies that will sadly arise are probably because people will have popped their clogs. If Tony is serious about moving out then we believe that will offer a vacancy. The scheme that Kiran seems to have discovered doesn't seem to have any quid pro quo, it doesn't look like we have to take somebody off their list, although I don't know for sure. Its not terribly clear from the website although it does seem to suggest that if you live in social housing and you want to move to somewhere by the sea or countryside then you can, but there may well be stakes. It looks like we'll carry on as we are. Sadly for those people on the waiting list it looks like once every 4 or 5 years we might get a vacancy. When the Labour Government came in in '97 we had, well I had, high hopes. Just before the election I'd been to a conference organised by the National Federation of Co-ops which was addressed by Nick Raynsford who was a Labour MP, at the time he was Shadow Housing Minister and he stated his intention of introducing a housing act which would relate to housing co-ops making it easier to set up co-ops. When Labour came in of course he was shifted to some other job and Labour just carried on Thatcher's old policies as far as I can tell, which is really depressing. Of course there's no way that Cameron or Clegg are going to reform housing in any sensible way, they're just not building social housing at all. I mean for all his talk about the 'Big Society' and voluntary organisations I've seen no clue whatsoever that he intends to do anything for social housing generally, or co-ops at all, so we shall see.

After the riots of the early '80s we had Heseltine stepping in, as far as I can make out it caused him to change his mind and he actually initiated programmes to try and rebuild inner cities. That is another contribution the Co-op has made to our community. The anti poll-tax group was centered on the Co-op. It was Brian Nichols and myself who mostly set it up. We burnt our poll tax cards in Powis Square, Joe Strummer gave me his card to burn and out of that we started a little newspaper called 'Community Recharge' which was Brian and Mark Beasley and I. Tony contributed to it and a number of people in the Co-op contributed. We used to distribute it about every 2 months I think. It lasted for about 4 years.

*SM: Do you think there's any opportunity for doing something like that again?*

GB: Yeah I don't see why not. The reason it was viable was that I had a friend who was a printer who used to do it as a favour very cheap. So we just used to raise 50 quid per issue and we did that partly by getting people to pay for ads. Ninon's bike workshop and various other local businesses, 'Alchemy' in Portobello Road, they used to pay £5 for an advert. The first issues were literally cow gum and paper but then I started word processing it and I used a desktop publishing programme so the later issues were a lot slicker than the first ones.

*SM: And it would be even easier to do*

GB: All you need is a photocopier, which does A3.

*SM: And a creasing machine, you hardly need staples these days*

GB: You don't need staples at all, it was just an A3 sheet folded in half and if you had loads of stuff maybe we'd slip in an extra page in the middle. Obviously it had a political style but it had a creative side as well, with Tony Allen involved and Mark Beasley who were very good at writing funny articles. Yeah, we could do it again.

GB: The Trust have their standard approach to decorating their properties, it's totally bland you know, sort of magnolia. When we started painting out houses bright colours they were very dubious and I remember it was quite a while ago when we were renegotiating the management agreement, they wanted to take over maintenance and I remember saying in a meeting no, we want to carry on doing the maintenance because you're rubbish, and we're good at it, and anyway we don't want you painting the houses magnolia and off-white, so they conceded to that!

*SM: There are two door colours they use; they do the standard royal blue or a kind of ox-blood red*

GB: And I don't know if its still true but you can always tell a trust property cause they always have the same shaped letterbox

*SM: Oh absolutely, always bought from the same supplier.*

GB: But these houses are now famous all over Europe, people come specially to take a photo of them.

*SM: Just like Bath, the Royal Crescent!*

GB: Oh yeah, but much better though.

GB: All we need now is a Jane Austen to write us up and then we'll really have a legacy! And of course when I moved in here, they were horrified that I wanted the whole place painted black. Yeah, I mean I had gone a little bit over the top and of course when Lily moved in she said I don't want my room black, I want it pink. Well now you see it's modified, only the front room is black but the rest of it is different colours because when Carla moved into Lily's old room she straight away painted it back - to black and purple!









'COMMUNITY RECHARGE': BORN OUT OF THE POLL TAX RIOTS

# COMMUNITY RECHARGE

the North Kensington newsletter

the North Kensington newsletter

December 91  
Issue 3

no charge  
donations welcome

## Houses...

### Council Tax Disaster

We got a result on the Poll Tax - but the more we hear about the Council Tax the more we know it is a disaster. Yet another good reason for not voting Tory at the next election. Round here we are talking about starter broom cupboards at £70,000. Very few people in this area will be in the bottom 3 bands. The Royal Borough, which could have levied an additional £39 per head on Poll Tax, are cutting services like Under Fives and Retired Citizens groups. Something wrong here eh? Get onto your local Councillor and then telephone the Council on 071 997 5464.

## ...homelessness...

### Did you know that....?

- There are over 130,000 empty privately owned properties in London, and over 600,000 in the UK as a whole.  
- There are 1000s of empty public sector properties.  
- 20% of all office space is empty at any one time. As we go to press, 27% of all office space between Mile End and Traillgar Square is empty.  
- There are 1000s of empty shops, and even more empty flats over the shops.  
- Local Councils can only spend 25% of the money they make from council house sales on public housing. There's around £8 Billion from sales that they can't touch.  
- 1000s of families live in expensive temporary housing permanently.  
- Up to 100,000 home-owners will have their homes repossessed in 1991.  
- Nearly 2 Million home-owners are in mortgage arrears.  
- The Tories spend 50 times as much on Mortgage Relief in the private sector as they do on council housing.  
- Both the Tories and the Labour Party believe that making squatting illegal and existing over 50,000 London squatters will solve the housing crisis in London.



### Squatting - Not a Crime!

For many young people, squatting is a temporary solution to homelessness. There are now fewer housing options available than ever before. Squatters tend to be people who are not eligible for public sector housing, but can't afford to buy or rent privately.

## ..squats

Its bizarre, then, that a consultation paper was published in November which signals the complete criminalisation of squatting. Its authors (the Tories with Labour support) claim that squatters 'deprive lawful occupants of their property'. In reality, squatters utilize property that would otherwise remain empty and rotting.  
The real criminals are those that leave 100,000s of properties empty while 100,000s of people need places to live.

### Anarchy at 192

After his successful cop-busting appearance on the Johnathon Ross Show at the end of November, Class War Anarcho-Godfather Ian Bone visited the 192 Wine bar in Kensington Park road with his family, friends and comrades.

Inevitably the anarchists soon came into verbal conflict with the capitalist lackeys and class traitors who frequent the establishment.

When asked to leave, they refused to go and instead attempted to hold a

political debate which involved a lot of pushing, shoving and displaying how drunk they were.

Finally the Notting Hill police arrived and shocked all those present by their mild mannered and polite behaviour. This provocative ploy by the fifth was soon unmasked by the comrades who took direct action to restore disorder. They consequently got themselves arrested. The case will be heard in the new year.

Issue 15 Sep 93

A Percent

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Quote



# December 91

## Issue 3

no charge  
donations welcome

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### Introducing Ourselves...

We are a group of local  
people who are concerned  
about the community we live  
in.  
We use to be the W10/W11  
Anti-Poll Tax Group.  
We are still anti the Poll  
Tax, the Council Tax and a  
good many other things too.  
But we are pro plenty of  
things too: the North Kenning-  
ton, Portobello Market and  
saving St Charles' Hospital.

We care very much about the  
damage done to the life of  
this community from which  
resulted from the Tory  
government's cuts in local  
services and public expend-  
iture.

We want to provide a voice  
for people who share these  
concerns.  
We want to air a range of  
views.  
We want to share a joke or  
two, want to share a range of  
If you have something to say  
or something to give or can  
help us distribute the paper  
get in touch.

You can contact us:  
c/o 32 Lancaster Rd., W11  
phone 071-229 7454  
or 071-727 8763

**Write to us!**

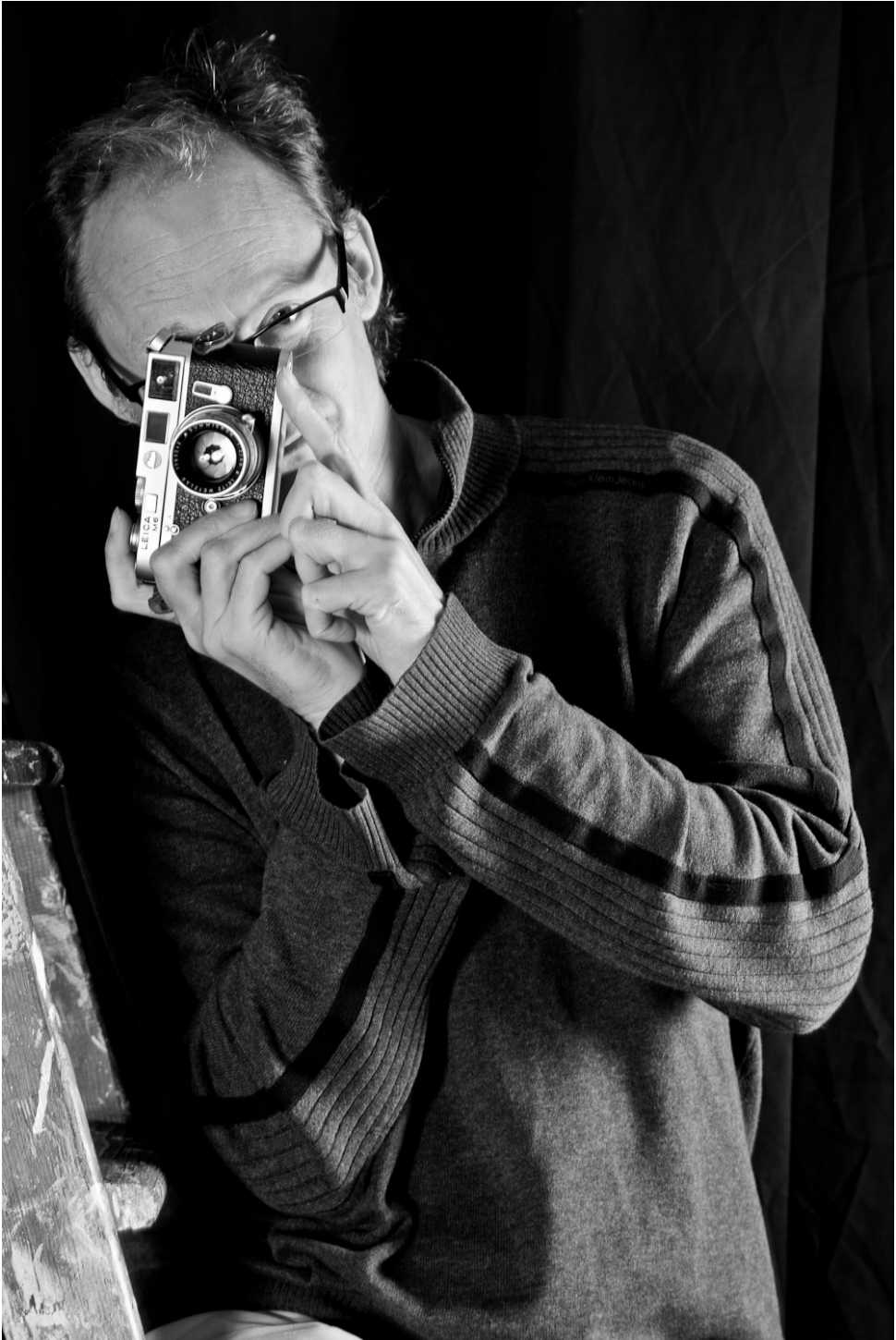
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used for making paper and clothes for  
export to the rest of Britain.

**T**he peoples' pub sells top quality  
home-brewed beer at rock-bottom  
prices, efficiently run bottle-banks and re-  
cycling projects generate vast profits,  
Community-run betting shops complete  
with Gambler's Anonymous meeting  
rooms and relevant therapists, eschew  
horse racing and bet on a new alfresco  
sport where energetic locals compete by  
riding exercise bikes linked to dynamos.

Voluntary (and a Once)





# BEN BUCHANAN

“It feels like I can almost see the finish line, to have a flat in my own name would be an amazing thing after living for 11 years without one”

I was born and grew up in the area. The first place that we lived in was on Pembroke Villas and we moved to Inverness Gardens then Kensington Park Road. I left there when I was sixteen or seventeen and went to America for quite a few years. When I moved back to this area my Mother was still living round the corner from here. She and Angie have always been good friends, Angie had a couple of rooms and so now I live here. Before this when I moved out of accommodation on Kensington Park Road I rented on All Saints Road in a building that's now been torn down. I think it was 43 or 45 All Saints Road above a health food restaurant, it was in 1977 and the rent was about 12 or 13 pounds a week, and I got some free food!

*Steve Mepsted: I've known you for a while now as one of the Co-ops un-housed members, what got you to join the Co-op in the first place?*

BB: I joined because I wanted to live in this area again, London is expensive and I had come back to study Art Conservation, art conservators have never made great money and I realised that if I wanted to stay in this area I would need to join the Co-op. I joined in about 2002.

*SM: Had you had experience of Co-ops or co-operative living before?*

BB: Not really, I was part of a landlord/tenant dispute; there were around 5 tenants so we formed an impromptu co-op to pool our resources for a lawyer to deal with our landlords negligence and his abuse of our rights. We went to court a few times and he was found guilty of harassment and bad practice in terms of dealing with heating, rubbish and rats. He was guilty of several building violations. When

I joined this Co-op I thought it was brilliant, I didn't think it was possible to find landlords who when something went wrong, you could give them a phone call and they would listen to you and come round and fix it. It's very nice!

*SM: Since joining the Co-op what roles have you held?*

BB: I have been the Membership Secretary and the Social Secretary. I also joined the Information and Communications Committee to disseminate information to other members about what other committees were doing and harness ideas.

*SM: Some people believe that there are too few people taking on the roles of committee members and that these people have been doing them for a long time. This means that the chances for a new member to accrue points are stifled.*

BB: Since I stopped being the social and membership secretary I wanted to get on one of the other committees and there weren't any roles going. So I would voluntarily go along to see what I could do, to help out with the Renewals and Improvements Committee and sort of follow them around to see what they do and how they do it so that I can actually sign up for that job as an assistant member when that job may come available. At the moment I don't know what to do, so I am putting myself in a better position by learning what's going on there and learning how they do the job.

*SM: Have you ever found it frustrating? Do you think that you're never going to be housed?*

BB: Well, certainly for the first six years I felt like that but recently, within the last two years the two people who above me on the waiting list have now been housed and now I am next in line, unless something drastically changes with one of the others who are waiting, or policy changes. Hopefully I will keep my position. I am quite far ahead of the next person on the list by about 8 points. It feels like a bit of a game trying to keep ahead of it. I have to keep my fingers crossed. It feels like I can almost see the finish line and to have a flat in my own name would be an amazing thing after living for 11 years without one.

*SM: What do you think about the possibility of new members actually forming a committee and coming up with new ideas that are real ideas, and of benefit to them and the Co-op, rather than trying to apply for too few jobs that are already filled?*

BB: I think it's a good idea. I myself can't think of anything else and also I am stretched at the moment between two jobs and a child, which doesn't give me a lot of time to sit and think about what other things I could be doing. I am trying to keep up with the things I am already doing. The idea of having non-members doing jobs is a good one, there is the fact that as soon as some people get housed that's it, they give up and you never see them at meetings and do work. There is a handful of people who do work hard and I don't know what would happen if they were to stop, non-housed members doing work shows willingness. It does take a long time for flats to come up though. Between the last two was a period of three years I think. Or rather there was one before that and then 3 years gap and a couple came up together quite quickly.

*SM: Like buses!*

BB: Yes, even though I really need two-bedroom flat, if a broom cupboard came up I would take it, to be in the running for a reshuffle. In a lot of these buildings there is space for an extra floor to be built and I really think the Co-op could look into that. I would imagine one could get planning permission, there are a few building that have done that. If there is a shortage of housing and there could be an extra room built of the top of every house then that's going to ease it.

*SM: Do you see any potential threat to the existence of the Co-operative?*

BB: I think a potential threat could come from the Notting Hill Housing Trust, with whom we have the agreement to manage these places. They manage hundreds of other buildings and might think why shouldn't they manage these now as well. Or the council may feel one rule applies to all and make us council tenants. I can't really see why they would want to do that as they would not be able to manage us as well as we can. They also have to fulfill their quota of statutory social housing that supports people like alcoholics and addicts.

*SM: If there was one thing about Co-ops that you would want to publicise what would it be?*

BB: I don't think I would want to publicise Co-ops as there may well be hundreds of others applying to them! The best thing about Co-ops to me is that they are somewhat of an unknown.

*SM: Some people feel that the waiting list should be closed as there is such a long*

*time to be housed it is therefore unfair on members in this situation, what do you think?*

BB: Well yes, I would close it after about 5 un-housed members; I would think that's enough until someone gets housed. It has taken me 9 years to get to this point. A point where something might now come up – it could come up next year or five years time, that would be 14 years waiting and luckily I can live here with Angie, but Angie really wants to move back and she may decide to do that before a flat comes up. I guess with a smaller waiting list you would get people committed, you could say it may take ten or even fifteen years, and you will allow people to think 'Well, I better look at something else'. My Son's school is here and most of my clients for work are also here. If I had to move it would be a major problem.









# TAMAR DAVIES

“Importantly, it was never banner-waving, badge-wearing stuff, it really was kitchens, families and kids”

The wonderful thing about the Co-op is that my Mum (Angie Tieger) was one of the founding members, she was a single mother with 2 children and the Co-op's primary aim at that point was to house people who couldn't be housed

*Steve Mepsted: Single people?*

TD: Yes, single people, my Mum was a group of five or six women who had children and I was one of the oldest in fact I think I was the eldest. It took something like 7 years of formulating the initial ideas with the key group to get housed. Once I got to 15 years old and curious enough to join, I started attending the meetings even though i wasn't old enough.

*SM: So your mum was housed for 4 years before you joined the coop*

TD: We were housed as family in 1979 but in order to be housed in 1979 we started attending meetings in 1975. Prior to 75 there was a lot of pro-activity in the area to try and have coffee mornings and meetings with Anna Malcolm and someone called Jason (Copeland). There were key people in the 70's who worked in the voluntary sector in the North Kensington Law Centre, they recognised there were potentially some houses available to house a collective. A lot of my parent's generation were part of the left wing arts liberal community of the area. They all came to London because of politics and arts and moved into Powis Square. Many of us were living in Powis Square prior to living in the Co-op. So much of my childhood was spent in the streets of Powis square and the Tabernacle and a lot of the meetings were happening in our kitchens so it was very empowering as a kid to feel that you

were part of something that was potentially a group of friends getting together, and could all be housed together.

*SM: So you really felt that as a child? You felt at an early age, a culture and a community around you?*

TD: Absolutely it was very exciting; there was a real spirit of solidarity. Anna Malcolm in particular, with my Mum, was proactive in making sure that we all felt we had the opportunity and the kids all consequently grew up knowing that we were part of this. It was very empowering, and what was really exhilarating was when they showed us the house that they were going to give us. It took 2 years then to renovate the house because it was a tumbledown. So we knew in advance which house my Mum and my brother were going to live in, which was number 2 Lancaster Road, a particularly lovely house with a big garden. And the key thing was that at a young age I realised this sense of there being a group, like if people got together as groups and decided they wanted to do something they could make things happen. I learnt that at a very young age. Going to the co-op meetings between the ages of 15 and 18 was good, at 18 I got my certificate of membership but prior to that I just came along and everyone used to hang out in each other's back pockets, it was lovely.

We were finally housed as a family in 79 at number 2. We had the maisonette. There were 4 families that had maisonettes, there was Wendy, Anna, Roger and Milena, and so they were the 4 houses. There were other families that came along later, you being one of them, but that was the initial core family group. The rest had 2 bedroom family units, like Geoff Branch, Milena and people had kids later but the wonderful thing was because I went to Holland Park School and Colville School, you grew up on the streets of Portobello and you felt part of the community and the ethos of the Co-op was to generate this sense of home. At one point we had some romantic belief system that we could knock all of the walls of the garden together and have a Co-operative garden, we would have a Co-operative laundry room where we would stockpile washing liquid and loo rolls.

*SM: The Co-op stores!*

TD: It was really going to be the hippy dream! If we bulk bought then everything would be cheaper, but in fact that never happened. So the dream of all being mates meant that we got houses but actually the proactive, Co-operative thing didn't.

*SM: Ok, so talk a bit about that.*

TD: I think inevitably in any community people will gather together with the people they like. You can't enforce liking people, so the people who had a common bond stayed friends and the people who didn't, didn't. People split up, a lot of people bust up in the early days...became split families with all sorts of histories. What was interesting for the kids was that we grew up feeling a sense of ownership of the streets, the houses, confident at night, playing on the street, knowing that we were always safe. That was a really important thing and we saw some amazing periods of time in the 70s and 80s where the area was fragile in that the race riots were still happening, the National Front were still around. For those of us who went to the local schools obviously we were 'Frontline' children we experienced those events. Often the police would turn up en masse, late at night, arresting people here there and everywhere, and not necessarily the right people. One instance I was in court in Marylebone Road defending one of the Co-op members, Wendy Craig, she got arrested as she was walking home, so helped get her off from obstructing the police.

*SM: Other Co-op members have mentioned being arrested in the Apollo for having a meeting because white people did not go into the Apollo unless they were dealing or buying drugs. It took the police a long time to believe that they actually lived next door and still said, "Why do you come to this pub? It's a black pub". So these little divisions, this W11 apartheid was happening and in the middle of this you've got this community. I'm interested in the dynamic of it, cos the people were bound-together out of the necessity to be housed.*

TD: Well the ownership was Notting Hill Housing Trust, our managing landlord... their housing stock was massive. There were a lot of unhoused people who needed homes so we were housed here. The historical importance of All Saints Road, is that it is the junction of our Co-op demographic, we have 8 houses in Lancaster Road, 2 in All Saints Road. It meant that we knew a lot of the old timers, a lot of the Caribbean families and we all went to school with their kids, so we were part of the community and are still; that sense of it being not so much apartheid but essentially part of the North Kensington sense of home for a mixed race environment. Importantly, it was never banner-waving, badge-wearing stuff, it really was kitchens and families and kids and that was what was important for Anna and people like my Mum. It wasn't necessarily politics, just living and surviving all in the same environment, economically.

*SM: And shot through all of this was a strong management system?*

TD: In essence yes there was, but not necessarily. It grew into a management sys-

tem; we learnt how to do it. People brought their relative skills. There were lots of people who worked at the Law Centre and knew the kind of system of having a Treasurer, a Secretary taking minutes and creating sub-committees but a lot of people didn't have the necessary transferable skills, it was more a sense of realism. How do you make sure you get the right number of rooms for a family? So, we did have a say in how the houses were constructed and converted, we put in our requests and often the architects would negotiate with people, 'what do you need, how many units do you need?' We were instrumental in that as well.

*SM: I guess the people who had been politically active before the Co-op started to liftoff had that sense of meeting and organisation and how to run a meeting so these different skills got taught and eked out. Other people had to learn real skills. But we can't follow through on the notion of our own maintenance to exact standards because we need to tender out to get things done, which is a shame. We have a couple of builders in the co-op, but we can't be seen to be self-serving.*

TD: I think that what happened is we are obliged by law to uphold the property. I think the management agreement that's been put in place gets reviewed every few years by NHHT. I think because of the legality of the insurance process including builders insurance, it is better to employ builders from outside of the Co-op than people within the Co-op because of the fairness of what we are doing. We maintain properties for other people who own this house so we can't all be paying each other 1000s of pounds to paint the front of the house. It's a very straightforward transaction, but importantly what we have had though is the chance to make decisions in the quality of the maintenance and renovations so that we actually, compared to other NHHT tenants, get to enjoy our liberty in terms of how we paint our houses and how we maintain the insides.

*SM: It's been often said that our cyclical maintenance is much better than the Trusts*

TD: Our management system is such because we have learned to do it well and consequently key people have kept their jobs and their roles...significantly, some have got tired of it and wanted to hand it to other people, train other people up. They do it so well that the key roles: Treasurers, Secretaries, have been passed round but come back to the same people and that's an interesting point for the future because what we might have to do is think about people retiring or moving soon because people are in their 60s now and that sense of role and responsibility needs to be handed on. That's an important part of what we are looking at for our future. I've been Treasurer, Secretary, Maintenance Convenor and for about 2 or 3

years I was the Improvements Convenor so I got to help renovate all the kitchens and bathrooms on a 2 or 3 year programme which was really enjoyable, because after nearly 30 years of being here I could input into the homes positively. That was a really nice role and I will probably be going back to that soon.

What's really interesting is that we are in social sector housing, the cost of renting or buying these houses now is amazing, we are sitting pretty. We pay our rents of £85 - 95 per week when other people have had to spend 3½ million for a house.

*SM: In Britain during and after Thatcher, nobody considered renting anymore, everybody had to get on the mortgage ladder.*

TD: We've done really well to stay where we are. The voluntary sector in the 70s was a consequence of the 50s and 60s, people didn't just march or have riots, we actually put in place frameworks that were supporting many parts of the community and a lot of my mum's generation were part of that process and the benefits of growing up with that means that I have been involved in the community in a way that impacts on the things I do in my career.

I am now a teacher in the local College, prior to that I was setting up voluntary sector self funded projects for RBKC, because I knew all of the community centres, the youth centres, knew all the families that worked there, made sure there were always art projects in the borough. My ethos of being comes from having grown up within the Co-op, so I feel very proactively part of the community.

*SM: Its become your life hasn't it?*

TD: And in a wonderful way I feel quite piratic as I can always set something up and I feel the Co-op has given me those skills. I like to problem solve and the Co-op's always given me that strength. I'm always outside of the box. I always feel I can make something happen, be dynamic.

*SM: It goes back to that empowerment feeling you felt at 15?*

TD: Exactly, so I never have to work within a system, I can look outside and think yes that needs doing so I'll do it. Make a positive impact and a move. People can get together and proactively see that something is worth doing and be supported.

*SM: If I was an outsider looking in at this I would say, "Middle class, lefties, sitting pretty in their flats..."*

TD: They have no idea...the responsibility...by no means would I say that my Mum's generation were middle class. They were working class, came from somewhere else, and came to London in the '60s. They had their children, realised that renting privately in single rooms was crazy, my Mum and Anna lived in 2 rooms with kitchenettes and a toilet, they lived like that: my Mum, me and my brother in 1 room. Anna, with her first child Chris Malcolm, we lived like that in Powis Square for 3 years, so my childhood was going on marches to Kensington and Chelsea town hall to open Powis Square so we could have somewhere to play. This was not middle class; the fact that it looks middle class now is circumstantial.

*SM: It's to do with the perception of this area as well*

TD: It's the impact of social mobility to a certain extent, because the north/south divide of the Borough is encroaching on what is our heritage. I don't have a problem with the encroachment because I think enough of the infrastructure of who we all are is here. If we'd all had to move then it would have been tragic. NHHT are not housing people anymore, it takes people dying or being very ill to vacate a property, so the stagnation of the housing programme is the problem, had we been in a position, and NHHT had more stock, we would have taken on more houses. We managed to save £150,000 to reinvest in the housing stock that we had proved ourselves to be effective caretakers of. We looked after the budgets so if they'd had stock we could have put all the waiting list into the 2 new houses easily and manage that property, but they've chosen to sell off that housing stock. They even sold their offices in All Saints Road to make money.

*SM: Other members have had theories as to why we are in an economic crash at the moment and that housing in general is going to be really problematic, that it might show a slight rebirth of Notting Hill Housing Trust, there might be houses (that) become vacant round here...*

TD: Doubt it, they'll sell them...NHHT is a landlord that goes out as far as Ruislip...so West London, their demographic is massive. NHHT are not an ungenerous landlord and I think they have a remit to support co-operatives; we're not the only co-operative they support. They could have closed us, they can rescind our management agreement and we can therefore revert back to being NHHT tenants. At times when the workload of the management committee has been such that we aren't always ticking over very well, when the meetings aren't attended very well it's very frustrating because new people always hope they are going to get housed and I personally think it's time to look at a waiting list. I don't think it's politically correct



to have 10 people waiting for housing for 15/20 years. The key roles of the Secretary, the Treasurer, the Maintenance Convenor, Improvements Convenor: all these roles need deputies and I think transferable skills, especially after the last meeting I believe we should be offering training to the housed and unhoused members. I think, for instance, people who roll up at meetings, who've never taken minutes before, should be introduced to how to do it. At the meeting we can help them, so that's a life skill, so if they go for a job interview (they have) transferable skills. I do feel we are offering more than just housing, we are offering life skills and I think if we shared it better than that would be very inclusive and support the unhoused members.

Obviously, as a child of a formative decade, my Mum's long view was massive. With Anna Malcolm, you are talking 10-15 years. That initial 10-15 years of work paid off and some people are very upset that the old timers don't come to current general meetings, there is a kind of a bugbear about that. My Mum's opinion is that she put a lot of bloody time in from the early days to set it up, and it wouldn't be here if it weren't for the old timers who are now in their '70s. The collective spirit was carried forward, the next generation, of which I was part of in the '80s and '90s and that model should be revived because now we are in the process of reviewing our tenancy agreements, with Geoff Branch, I think we are in a position, managerially now, where we are maintaining the ship. The 10 properties need to function, they are Victorian, 1860s.

The current Maintenance Committee is very efficient; the Treasurer is very good; the Secretary is very good; the Improvements Committee is functioning really well. Everything functions well. The fact that we have a management agreement where we now have bi-monthly meetings with the management sub-committee and the general meeting, it doesn't require 100s of people to function so this notion of a new crop of people, what is their social cohesion? How can they create an infrastructure that carries on the ethos of the early co-op and Sesame? If we give them the pointers, will they take the baton up and make it move forward. We can only prompt them. The only problem is, we are in this amazing situation where properties are worth £2,000,000 now so will the Trust listen to them? We can support them by writing covering letters and saying, "We have 10 unhoused members, would you have a property we could rent on a short life basis?"

*SM: I think that has to be done. I think it would be timely to test the waters and see what happens.*

TD: Well I think the point is that now we function well. I think people like the status quo, people like the fact that we are slightly removed from the Trust. We function

well, we report annually with our accounts. It all goes very nicely, very smoothly. To take on a responsibility of a new house managerially requires overseeing, and that means people, not the unhoused members, but the current housed members doing it and that's a responsibility that maybe they don't want to take on. I do think that it's about people being empowered and that is my core belief about the co-op. If people who are willing to come to meetings but then don't want to be pro-active... Well, we can't make them be proactive.

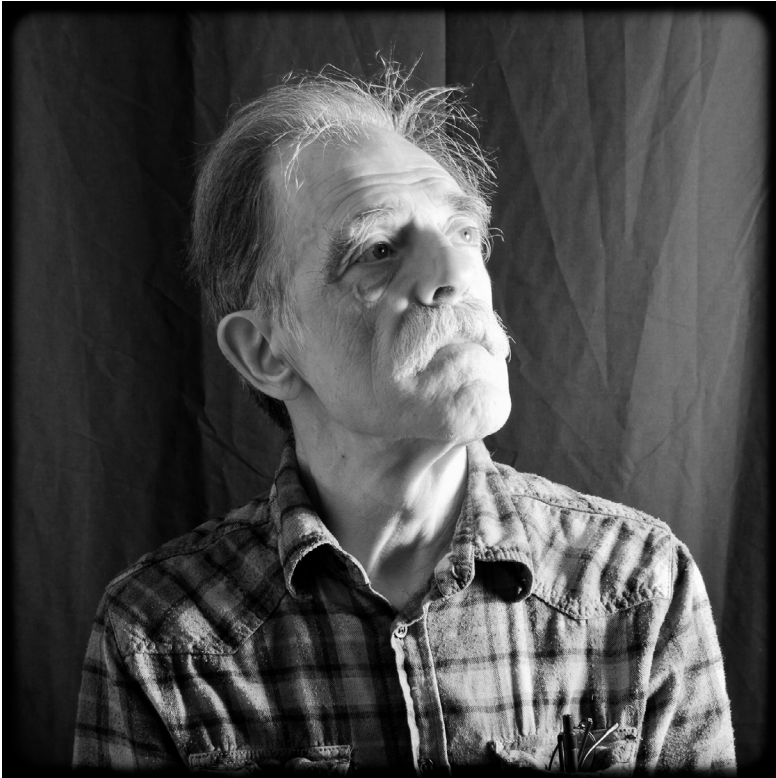
*SM: So, to close...if you could sum up for me...the Co-op started, no one knew it was going to last 35 years...what do you think has been the secret of the success?*

TD: I think the initial cohesion of people, families and friends, believing that working together to make something happen between each other, against the toughest of odds was what kept everyone working forwards. This belief that we could get something that meant we had a shelter, rather than endless private renting scenario also. We did have a kind of naive, romantic dream of all happily tilling the soil and growing our potatoes and hanging our washing out in a 1940s style back garden, that never really happened although we did try. We grew potatoes and runner beans in our garden. I think that what's been lovely is to see everyone flourish. Every person in the Co-op has flourished in their own individuality: people's homes are really interesting to walk into; there's a lot of arts taking place, the dynamic creativity and the fact that we are not isolated, the infrastructure of friends in the street is great: we all know our neighbours, it's not just the Co-op it's the whole street. It's been a really effective, serendipitous sequence of events. I don't think it's been easy and there has been lots of arguing, lots of meetings with lots of fists on tables, but we are all still talking to each other...just about!









# ROD & NILLA FREEMAN

“I don't care what  
Cameron has to say  
about the 'Big Society',  
we've been living the big  
society for 35 years here”

Rod Freeman: In 1976 I was a refugee from a relationship abroad and came to London principally to join up with musicians that I knew. I met up with Johnny Clayden, Anna and Rosa's father, whom I had known before, and we used to play together. I was living in Leamington Road Villas in a five pound a week bedsit. He came round one night and said 'there's some people down the road who are thinking of starting a Housing Co-op, are you interested?' I didn't really know what a Housing Co-op was and I thought 'well, I'll give it a go'. I went to a meeting and there was Anna Malcolm, Jason Copeland, Milena Tadini. Johnny and I used to go to these meetings and people like Anna, Jason and Milena had already had meeting with Notting Hill Housing Trust. The Trust had put out an initiative in 1975 or '76 saying that there are a lot of single people living in bedsits, there are lots of one parent families living in difficult accommodation, and we want to develop an initiative looking at Co-operative Housing where the Trust would provide the houses and allow the tenants to manage them. So after going to all these meetings and not understanding the housing speak, like 'HMO' (House in Multiple Occupation), eventually this bunch of people managed to form a Housing Co-op under the aegis of the Housing Trust. We wrote a constitution with Geof Branch and others and the Housing Trust approved it. We got our first house, which was number 30 Lancaster Road. I was with Marie at the time and our son, Brynley, who has just reappeared again last year age 33. That relationship unfortunately ended because of Marie's mental state. It frightened the shit out of me and I decided to move out. I moved to Twickenham.

I still kept contact because of the musicians I knew in the Co-op and eventually in 1979 I got a phone call from Ninon to say 'we have a flat at number 16 and you're one of the people who could be eligible, are you interested?' It was a bit of a tug for me as I was living in a house with other musicians and it was probably a

bit more expensive than social housing, but it was great. I would also have loved to have my own place and to be close to Brynley who lived down the street, so I reluctantly left and moved into 16c Lancaster Road with two tea chests of books, a guitar and an amplifier. I didn't even have a bed. I found some bits of foam and slept on them for about three months till Ninon gave me a mattress. She was upgrading her bedding and gave me her old one; beats sleeping on two bits of foam and waking up sweating. So I was back in the area and I used to see Brynley occasionally.

There has always been the ethos of Co-op members managing their own houses by collecting rent and conducting our own maintenance and those were the two most important things, which we did through a general meeting. And in those days, the early '80's, a lot of us were part time workers or artists, photographers, writers and musicians and didn't earn a lot and it was erratic anyway so we all had problems paying our rent, as a consequence of which we were rather lax in the collection of rent. If someone were having problems we'd say 'Yea, I know mate!'

*Steve Mepsted: So there was almost too much familiarity to actually conduct the business of the Co-op?*

RF: Well you might know that someone's last gig was six weeks ago, and you'd wonder what they were living on.

Nilla Freeman: The flip side of this was that one could get in touch with the rent committee and say 'I have a gig coming up, I know I am in arrears but I have a well-paid gig coming up'. We could then say 'OK don't worry' because we knew that at least with a couple of people the money would eventually come through.

RF: The day to day management was a bit 'Old Hippy', in respect of 'Pay when you can, we know...we trust you...' But we were good at the maintenance programme from the outset. People like Johnny Clayden who was also a plumber and had worked for the Trust when the Trust offices were in All Saints Road; he was on the maintenance team there, having been in the area for years. We had plenty of skilled people, carpenters, plumbers and painters. So that has always been good. I heard years ago, unofficially, that the Housing Trust was rather envious of our standard of maintenance.

*SM: Was part of the forming of the Co-op to provide a well-skilled set of people within the Co-op? Was that a requirement from the Trust or did that happen by luck?*



RF: There were no formal criteria set by the Trust regarding skills. I can't remember if there was even a requirement of proof of your difficulty in housing. If I had said 'I'm a single male and I live in a tiny bedsit', I think they would have just accepted it.

NF: You know I think those records still exist. We sorted out the filing cabinet in Lancaster Road and I think Geoff Mole had taken care of all the archives. They weren't looked after before and I think he's done a good job.

*SM: So if there was a certain luck with some skills in the Co-op already existing, were there still skills to be learned?*

RF: Oh yes, there were a few. Anna, Milena, Geof and Jason who had been involved in housing to one degree or other and knew the 'housing speak', showed us what we had to learn. I remember sitting in an early meeting, thinking 'what am I doing here? I don't understand any of this' But you learn. We had the general meeting which had to approve any spend and any policy and gradually members joined a number of different committees. There was a rent committee, maintenance, finance, and a number of others. At one point we felt ready to apply to the Trust for more houses. Gradually we developed into ten houses. The people that moved into the houses we knew from the area, people that had been in relationships or particular social groups, somehow we all seemed to know each other because this area is composed of a lot of creative people or people who worked in the building trade or down the market. There was a points system which still exists now – one of housing need which was the most important and the second criteria was a commitment to co-operative living and the third was what skills can you offer.

*SM: That's interesting because the emphasis now is slightly different. At the last allocation the criteria was 'housing need' still at the top of the list but 'Commitment to Co-operative living' is no longer there and also 'skills offered' is also not stated anymore. Now there appears: 'work done for the Co-op (while you were on the waiting list)' 'number of meetings attended' and 'length of time as a member'. They seem to be more quantifiable criteria whereas before they were a little looser and perhaps reflected the 'Hippy' notions of commitment and values which were less quantifiable and more about principles.*

RF: That's developed, I think, because we all grew from those early experiences and times changed and also there is more pressure from the Housing Trust regarding allocation of flats; they in turn have the auditors breathing down their necks over the last few years meaning that the criteria have had to be more formalised

and bullet pointed. Our relationship with the Trust has had to change and funnily enough, in recent years, it has changed almost to the point that there has been hardly any contact between us; they seem to have forgotten about us. But that means that they are not concerned about the way that we run the Co-op, in the way that they have been concerned about at least two other Co-ops in the area that I know about. We developed our skills and there has been talk in the last ten years, of the Trust running training courses for our members and I think some members may have taken them up on the offer. In the mid '80's if you wanted any advice you counted on a very good relationship with the Trust when they had their offices in All Saints Road; we could go round anytime and talk with them, they were much more approachable.

*SM: So you were living at 16c from 1979 and you had been there ten years when you managed to make an appeal to move down a floor, to 16b.*

RF: There was no carpet on the floor and I was working at 'Elgin Music 'and Chris Webb lent me the money to fit some. Because I was having music rehearsals there I also needed to fit acoustic underlay so I didn't disturb Ninon who was living underneath me. I moved in February of 1989 and in August I met this loudmouthed, opinionated Swedish Woman!

*SM: I'm sure you wouldn't love her if she weren't! Now's a good time to pass over to Nilla!*

NF: Yes, we had mutual friends and in rather a round about fashion I met Rod sitting on his amp and with his guitar at a friends place and I was flirting madly with him. I was very young and it was bizarre but it worked! I more or less challenged him to date me! So we did; he had a market stall and I went down and asked him for a date. He said OK I'll meet you at The Windsor Castle on Ledbury Road and I had gone off with some friends and a friend of mine took me to the Pub and waited outside in the car because I didn't think Rod was going to be there, and he didn't think I was going to turn up! But there we were. I went out of the pub and waved my friend off and the rest is history – that was twenty-two years ago. I basically stayed, I was here as an au pair and had met Rod in August – he came out to see me for a long weekend in Sweden and I came back in October of '89.

RF: I was 46 and she was 18! Only numbers!

NF: I was going to be finding my own place and he phoned me up and said 'well

you know we want to be together so we may as well be together so jump in at the deep end and move in with me'. So I said 'yea, alright!' Even when I came back in October neither of us knew if it was going to last: Rod had doubters over here, more than I did at home funnily enough, because the age difference is huge. But it was so irrelevant and it worked.

*SM: And did you become a member of the Co-op soon after?*

NF: Yes I did.

*SM: So you moved in with Rod and moved into the Co-op and became very much a part of the Co-op?*

NF: Yes, I think I became a member after Christmas. I did go along to meetings quite early on and that was very interesting because there was only really Brian (Nichols) who could see beyond my age and my sex. A lot of them only accepted me because I was Rod's girlfriend. But they couldn't see past the fact that I was only 19, blond and Swedish and a girl. Brian fought my corner quite a lot for the first couple of years so that people would listen to me. I come from a tradition of voluntary work, I grew up with a strong mother who had always done this kind of work so I grew up knowing how to conduct meetings and how you are supposed to do things. At every Co-op meeting the questions pops up, 'who's taking the chair today' and sometimes I said 'well, I'll do it' and people would talk over me, 'til I banged the table and brought the meeting to order. I didn't always know the terminology but I knew how to run a meeting. Rod would sit back and smile, as if to say 'See, she's not stupid!' But I made friends very quickly and got involved because I love the idea of it; it goes along very well with my convictions.

*SM: And then you had your first daughter, Susanna?*

NF: Yes, very quickly. We had Susanna in 1990 and Ella in '94 and we were overcrowded very quickly in a one bedroom flat. We had to move at some point and we worked to get allocated this flat (14 McGregor Road) and I have to say we thought, what if our marriage doesn't improve with moving, what are we going to do then? We had been blaming every single thing on the fact that we were overcrowded and I can say that 95% of the problems were due to the fact that we were overcrowded. So when we moved in here it was a great relief. It proved to be true. It is amazing to have this space, for us and for the girls.

RF: This is a Housing Trust place. The Housing Co-op couldn't rehouse us and I was going around trying to sort out mutual exchange or something through the council and we were very close to taking anything just to get more space. We weren't even shown this one – there was an old boy who lived here, who we could see from our kitchen window at number 16. The old man as we called him was digging his vegetable garden and shouting at his Grandchildren and we used to say 'Oh, wouldn't it be great to have a flat with a garden', then unfortunately old Kenny who was living here, well, someone did for him; he was murdered. He was involved in prostitution, he was selling drugs and we didn't know this till we moved in. He was a sweet old man as far as we knew from our kitchen window.

NF: When we had our housewarming here the people from the road told us about it. The flat had to be gutted and we were quite aware of the history then.

RF: We even thought about getting a priest in!

NF: We're completely non-religious but we thought that we should get it 'cleansed'. Also he (Kenny) hadn't looked after his plumbing and hadn't reported it to the Trust so there was sewage under the floor and they had to tear the floors up and put new ones down; they rearranged the entrance because our upstairs neighbour had so much trouble from Kenny's way of life that she asked for separate entrances; it was a problem for us, we had to enter the flat through the basement, but I can understand why she did it.

RF: Apropos of the worries about the 'vibe' in the house: the first time we brought the kids over to see it was when it was completely empty, the girls, both of them ran around screaming with delight and I figured that cleared the air!

*SM: So you got this place and have been here ever since. But even though you had officially left the Co-op you now hold the position of rent workers.*

NF: Well, Rod was always involved in committees and I got involved in the Rent Committee while we were still in 16b for a good few years. Rod was Finance and Rent Convener for the last few years we were there. There were a lot of problems at that time and changes of policy; we had a few tenants who were just impossible to deal with. But, I enjoyed it and because both of us think like that, if we have the privilege of living like we do, we need to give something back. Because we had those roles, both of us for quite a long time, and we were doing it just before we left the Co-op, we were almost formally approached by the Co-op who needed to

have someone who knew the ins and outs of it and could take on the drudgery of the role, also we weren't inside this slightly incestuous situation. I was glad to be out of it but Rod wasn't. He was such a long time in the Co-op and missed it. I never really missed it because we had stayed in the area and still saw people and being a Trust tenant was a lot more impersonal and made life a lot easier. When the Co-op formally approved it, it was the first time that the Co-op had created a paid job. There had been remuneration for some jobs within the Co-op but that got abused. The formal arrangement with us worked and I did it with Rod for two or three years and now it's only really Rod who does it. I stuff envelopes! It's now down to Rod and the rent collection is infinitely better than it was, and infinitely better than the Trust's records. When we were running the rent committee back in the day we got the rent arrears down to 14% and the Trust congratulated us then; now it's down to 1.6%. Sometimes it's a real headache but Rod's done an amazing job.

*SM: The Co-operative is getting older and so are some of its members. Where do you think the future of the Co-op is?*

NF: I don't know, my thinking changes from time to time. Sometimes I think we should just convert to the Trust; we are slowed down by our meeting system, which is good but takes time. If you've been in the Co-op since 1978 you may feel that you've done your bit, should you carry on? But on the other hand I think you can't give it up, how can you? We had the 'Sesame Shortlife Group' and those people were so committed (and were eventually housed). We used to get phone calls at least three times a week from people wishing to join. We'd say 'of course, join the list. You must attend three meetings before we even consider you and then you must keep coming to meetings and you may not be housed. We can't just promise you housing'. We'd tell them it could be between 5-10 years before they may be housed.

RF: And of course we have the 'Children of the Co-op'. Corann was two or three years old when I met her. There are a number of these 'Children'

NF: There is a policy of succession in the Co-op. I think if we had stayed in the Co-op and not moved out the girls would be members already, but it wasn't a consideration at the time. But if we stayed we would have still been going to meetings and there would have come a time where we would have said to the girls well 'you come along too'.

RF: The only slight bit of paranoia on my part is that I can see that at some point in

the future Notting Hill Housing Trust could sell out or hand over management of the Trust to a private company. It's just the way that the current political situation is going in the last few years. The Housing Trust could hand over the day-to-day management of their organisation to a company who would have shareholders who would demand a profit so rents may go up. They might start focusing on the Co-operatives. Questions like 'What are these Housing Co-operatives that you've supported for years, we'll have a look at those – the rents are rather low aren't they?'

NF: At the moment I think it's easier for the Trust to take a step back and acknowledge that were doing very well. That's not wholly positive though. In some cases the Co-op could have done with more support from the Trust, but on the whole it's good. We know now from living in a Trust house that the maintenance of the properties is not as good as the Co-op's.

RF: I think the Co-op will continue because despite those of us who are approaching three score and ten, there is still a feeling amongst members, albeit begrudgingly sometimes, that it's a good thing. I love the fact that I can walk down to Tesco and say hello to 5 or so people on the way. It's a big plus. I don't care what Cameron has to say about the 'Big Society', we've been living the big society for 35 years in this area. It will continue even though were getting older and some people are begrudging some of the work now. We talk of the younger generation and there are two sides to this; some of the older people who have been doing the work for the Co-op don't want to let it go because they don't trust the younger people to take it over and do it in such a thorough manner as they would do it. However that's what you start thinking when you get over 50! But younger members are going to have to take on these bigger jobs. There is enough positivity there and they are getting the experience, not really what we had; having to learn from the ground up, but there's good stuff there amongst the younger members. The Rent and Finance and Maintenance jobs in particular are serious, you don't want to go into those blind, it takes some experience.

NF: Well I really hope there is a future for it because it is such a unique way of living, and it's important to present it, to say it can be done. We had a discussion with (daughter) Ella last night about it and she said 'Why does it have to be so political? 'Well, because it is I'm afraid!' It's something I really believe in, why would I want to buy? I don't want a mortgage, I love renting actually. I was born in a tiny little place in Sweden and there was the same spirit in this tiny place that there is in this area of London and in the Co-op. We have some people in the Co-op with health problems, mental and physical and people are allowed to 'be'. They've been

included and accepted and looked after and they drive you crazy sometimes, but that's really a major thing for me to be able to live in the middle of massive London and have that still happen. It's a great area, I've never felt unsafe here. When I came in 1989 I had friends from Streatham and Brixton telling me 'you must be crazy moving to All Saints Road'. I came just after the raids and after they had cleaned up the Frontline but it was still dodgy – not as gentrified as it is now. The biggest thing in the late '80's was the youth selling off small pieces of plastic dustbin lids as hash! then in the 90's there was crack on the street and that's a different game. Now I have friends in Sweden saying, 'Wow you are so lucky to live in Notting Hill', because they have seen the film! Lucky I walked into that place all those years ago and saw Rod, and that he turned up at The Windsor Castle!





ROD, NILLA, SUSANNA & ELLA FREEMAN









# CORANN MALCOLM

“I went to the Co-op meetings early on with my Mum as it was a social thing. Mum would organise fundraisers and dances and most of the Co-op members would be there. There was never a clear divide between my Mum’s socialising and the Co-op”

*Steve Mepsted: In 1976 you were three years old and your Mum, Anna Malcolm, had this idea of setting up a Housing Co-op. You were too young to know what this was about, what it meant— at what point did you become aware of the Co-op?*

Well I knew that we were going to be moving and that we were moving not too far away because we lived in Talbot Road at the time. I knew we were going to be moving soon from a one bedroom flat where my brother and I shared a room at the front, which would have been the living room I guess and Mum had the bedroom. We did all our socialising in the kitchen, everything happened in the kitchen. I must have been seven or eight when we moved to Lancaster Road and the great thing was that Emily Short and her companion or partner, whatever they were, lived next door which was great for me as Emily was like my surrogate grandmother and I got on with Bert really well.

*SM: So it took a little while from the first thoughts and meetings about the Co-op for it to become a reality.*

CM: Yes, when we moved in it was 1980 and there was a tramp living in the next door because it was still derelict before becoming our Co-op property. He was a

very tall black man who used to have old robes on. I was never scared of him but was very curious. I do remember that they soon started to renovate the house.

*SM: So you've grown up in the Co-op.*

CM: Yes, I moved into number 32 when I was eight and moved into number 30 when I was twenty-eight. So that's twenty years in my family home and then I moved just next door!

*SM: When you were young did you have an inkling that this was different – that this was not a 'normal' way of living?*

CM: No, not when I was a young child, I knew the other children in the road; we went to each other's houses. I lived with my Dad part time in Harlesden and knew the children there as well. So I was just being a child – also my Mum knew everyone round here. In Harlesden people certainly didn't seem to know their neighbours like we did round here. When I was a teenager I would go to friends houses and realise that sometimes they didn't know their neighbours at all. Also I went along to the Co-op meetings early on with my Mum as it was social – we had our AGM at the Venture Centre and remember having really nice food there and music and a bit of a party atmosphere. Mummy would organise fundraisers and dances and most of the Co-op members would be at those dances and at Jumble Sales under the Westway. There was never a clear divide between my Mothers socialising and the Co-op.

*SM: Your Mum was obviously a well-loved figure. She is credited with having the idea to set up the Co-op; she had all this energy for fundraising and community. What kind of person was she, from your experience?*

CM: Oh my gosh! It's interesting because I was a child with her when she was active in the Co-op. I remember her being constantly busy doing all these things and having a part time job at North Kensington Law Centre and always going out onto All Saints Road when there were problems with the police and representing whoever had just been arrested. I still occasionally get some man come up to me and say 'You're Mum was great – she got me out of jail' or 'Your Mum was great – she fostered me when I needed somewhere to stay' I would find out things about my Mum from other people, but I don't necessarily remember them. During the Miners strike a lot of people around here got together and were hosts for the children of the Miners. I remember that. So I remember all this, being busy with fundraisers

and I remember her being scatty. I also remember thinking 'One minute you're here doing this and then off doing that, and I just want you to be my Mum'. She would cook dinner really late and would garden at night, and I just didn't understand it when I was a kid. She was very, very sociable taking forever to go from Colville Primary School when she picked me up, down Portobello Road and up Lancaster Road, it could take between half an hour to an hour. I was the moodiest child because we kept stopping and she talked to everyone, and now I do it! We went to the Apollo pub on All Saints and the Landlord would tell her off for bringing me. There were not supposed to be any children or dogs in the pub. It was all right to have drug dealers in though! They did have standards!

My Mum instilled in me that if I did not join the Housing Co-operative as soon as I was able then I was going to find it very hard to find somewhere to live. So I joined when I was eighteen and was as active as I could be. So I really became aware of the Co-op and its importance then. Also I began to make better connections: all these people who were at these social events that my Mum had organised, were also members of the Co-op. So I learned a lot of socialising and social skills from my Mum. I remember when she passed away and we had her funeral people came up to me and said this is just like a party your mum would have organised! It was upbeat and something I just got from her.

*SM: After you joined at 18 what roles did you hold in the first years?*

CM: I was involved in the setting up of 'Sesame Shortlife', I wasn't sure what I could do to help but I was always good with Maths, so I offered to be the Treasurer. We then had the 'Information and Communication' committee, which was an attempt to harness all these great ideas which people had at meetings that would never be followed through. I was on one or two Allocations Committees and then Treasurer for two years. In the second year of being the treasurer I became pregnant and since that point I haven't had any active role in the Co-op, as I have a young child, but I still attend the meetings when I can. It's a real learning curve being a member of the Co-op, because I started when I was eighteen I was around new members who had a different energy and would work in a particular way but on the allocations committees there are the older members who worked very differently again. I got to know these differences and I found that it opened my eyes as to how the Co-op worked as a whole. It helped me when I started working, when I went into a workplace for the first time I found it helped with all the office politics and I knew when people talked of policies and constitutions or trustees I had something to reference. It made me more comfortable to think probably no one else here knows what to do in his or her role either! But you knew that you had to find out if you

were to be any good at it. I joined courses to help me with the Treasurer post. I had to find out the links available for me to get advice, especially legal advice.

*SM: There has been a notion in the Co-op, not a concrete ruling, that when parents of the Children of the Co-op die then the children will automatically get the tenancy for the flat? However I seem to remember that when Anna, your Mum died that wasn't the case for you?*

CM: Well there are two things to this. Outside of the Co-op within Housing Associations, and their tenancy agreements, if the child is living in the home and their parent(s) pass away then they do have succession rights to the home. In my case Mummy moved to a nursing home because she was ill and that was the major difference, she had not passed away at that time. If she had passed away (while she was at home) then the deal would have come under Housing Trust agreement. I remember it being one of the most stressful times. I took a year off work to deal with my Mum moving and my moving, I ended up not going back to work and did other things, I had found other interests work-wise. The Co-op was actually a lot more supportive than I thought they would be, and also towards my brother. The Co-op understood and agreed to offer both Chris and I flats to move into. But it was still a very panicky time because there was a worry that the Co-op may say that there were no other flats and we would have to move out. The Co-op members were as reassuring as possible though. In terms of succession: the whole ethos of the Co-op needs to be more firmly instilled in us all. At the time my Mum thought this might be a mad but great idea! There were all these derelict properties that we would be happy to live in and manage and we'd have a home and the properties wouldn't be run down. It's a win-win situation. At the time that was fine, now were in one of the most expensive areas of the UK and there aren't the derelict properties that need managing, the attitude is now different because there aren't that many opportunities to be housed as there were when the Co-op started. If you were willing to work hard and found the time to do it then there were possibilities and opportunities; people are now applying to be members of the co-op for totally different reasons, the ethos is changed.

*SM: For what kinds of reasons do you think people are applying now?*

CM: There's a naiveté...a desperation, perhaps people are thinking it's an easy solution. It's really not easy! It takes a lot of work, especially for single people trying to be housed. There is no way a council is going to house you and so it is really worth putting in a lot of effort with the Co-op as we have those kinds of properties, and

they are like gold dust. People don't realise the amount of time and effort involved.

*SM: I look at un-housed members around the meeting table and I wonder maybe the time is right again, because of the current economic and housing crisis, to review the empty properties around here, make a proposal and advise and guide the un-housed members to petition the Trust to set up another Shortlife Housing Association like 'Sesame'?*

CB: Yes, this goes back to what the Co-op was set up for. I think there needs to be a serious revisit to the ethos of the Co-op. New members don't understand the Co-op; we don't have any structures in place to communicate how they could become active and the benefits of becoming active.

*SM: Yes, I remember being in meetings in my early time as a member, I felt confused, I didn't know the language that was being spoken here, I didn't know if I could talk or even raise my hand and sometimes I thought what the hell am I doing here.*

CB: I think for our Co-op to thrive and move forward there is a lot of hard work to be done. There have been people in the past who have really tried and older members haven't always passed on the gauntlet to younger and newer members to allow them to do it. New members do not know how to come forward and say here are my skills; this is what I can offer. When Sesame Shortlife was started everyone had a purpose and each worked hard to get housing and people who didn't have skills before certainly developed new ones.

*SM: Yes, as a founder member of 'Sesame Shortlife' I remember it paid dividends back into the Co-op as a whole. It made people realise that they were active in housing issues. Perhaps un-housed members need to form their own committee and audit their own skills, pool contacts, ideas and resources and feel part of something. They would develop a voice at meetings and feel less left out in terms of the language being spoken and the procedural matters. If such a committee could be officially recognised and become a reporting committee, then the newer members could be accruing points and the Co-op might just find that the skills and ideas of the newer members, once revealed and listened to, could bring great benefits to the Co-op as a whole. The un-housed members would be better placed to feel that they were an integral part of the activities of the Co-op at all levels: that on the one hand they were actively contributing to their own potential for housing, but also via their actions; to the Co-ops ultimate survival.*

CB: Yes, at a simple level the written report that each committee convener supplies to the meetings, so that business can be done, needs to be mandatory, not just dependent on whether the person turns up. There must be a written report of the committees business ready for each meeting. It helps for organisational business to be conducted but because it is shared, there is the chance that other members may be able to help with contacts, or have a skill, which should push the issue to the next stage. So often convenors would come to a meeting and just talk about what they could remember being said six weeks ago and not have minutes to hand out. This is time wasting and any organisation needs these simple things, like reports and minutes so that we can move forwards, to new ideas. The gauntlet that is being handed down at the moment is an old, embedded way of working.

One thing that was put together when I was treasurer was to allocate a certain amount of money for training and the Housing Trust also allocate some money. I don't think a lot of people know this and why is that? People should know this, a lot could benefit from training, courses that are linked to roles in the Co-op.

*SM: So why don't people know this, what is wrong with our communication?*

CB: It's a question of energy, the younger and newer members have the energy but it is not being tapped or space provided for it. People like Mary and myself, when we in roles brought energy to them. We have such a poor way of interviewing new applicants and this leads to discouragement, because new members are often recommended by the older members who say 'Oh, don't worry, just turn up and no ones going to ask you anything'. Hypothetically we could just close the membership waiting list now. But I think that membership should be reviewed every year, reviews of attendance, of current housing, whether the member is still living in the area and has connections with the area, is there still a housing need, has the offer of training been taken up. If the answer is positive and can be proved then they should stay on the waiting list. If there has been no action then they shouldn't. When I went to University I wrote a letter asking to be kept on the waiting list stating that I would not be attending meetings or up for any roles for a while because I was at University. I was always a concerned un-housed member and I was not complacent.

*SM: The Co-op is 35 years old this year. What do you think the co-op needs to do to survive another 35 years?*

CB: Think of our current climate and the talk of "Big Society", some of our members are in active community public service roles, at Kensington and Chelsea College, working for the council etc....they could be realizing that we could play on these



ideas and say that we are a part of them, that we fit into them perfectly, you could support us or fund us to do what we should be doing because we reflect the aims of your ideas. No one really knows what the “Big Society” is, so we could tell them! We could approach our Conservative council saying we would like to increase our stock so we can carry forward the ideas of the “Big Society”. Everyone who has been living in the Co-op had already been ‘doing the big society’ for 35 years.

It’s a skill set issue again, Pat Mason (local Councillor and Co-op member) could help us word it; to be a benefit to us and to un-housed members. There are a lot of properties out there, which are not let or are under-let because of the cost of them. There is talk of a review of the under or over-occupation of previously full Housing Association properties, and that there may be a ruling put in place that gives power to the Associations to move you if you are taking up a lot of space. I think that’s a worry. I feel that that could be a threat because to a certain extent that is true, there are council and Trust properties which are very under-occupied, one person living in a three bedroomed house for example, and it’s also true the other way round, a single mother with three children living in a two bedroom or even one bedroom flat.

The Government could say to the Local Housing Authorities you have been well aware of these discrepancies and haven’t done anything about them, so we’ll take them away. Housing need on the other hand is constant, its what had kept me in the Co-op, I couldn’t afford to go on the private market for property, if I was on the private market I couldn’t do my part time job while I have my child and I certainly couldn’t live round here. I would have a totally different life. In terms of survival, the other thing that has changed from when the Co-op was first an idea is our work, and the amount of time that we as a society work. We work much longer hours, and often need to.

New applicants are often living in privately rented accommodation in the area, because that’s where their work or their children are. They have to work really hard to make the rent and it’s hard to get the time to volunteer for extra roles and responsibilities that a Co-op demands. A lot who have managed to take on roles have found that they soon have conflicts with their time. It would be a good idea to rotate posts every two years and that would be good for a potential training programme. I hope the Co-op is still here when my son becomes 18 and my brother’s son too. I hope that they will be members and for the right reasons, that they will know what they have, and they will be willing to contribute.



ANNA, CHRIS & CORANN MALCOLM











# LINDA SAUNDERS

“Three of us were cycling around the area putting red crosses on the doors of empty properties, to show how many there were”

I grew up in Stockwell in London and I was looking to move from my parents house and I met someone called Pascal Preston, he was living in this area in 1974 and I had a little scene with him and then we became friends. He and I and Mary Jane Anderton who was also an early Co-op member, squatted a house at the other end of Lancaster Road, now called something else because they have built a big housing estate, ‘Lancaster West’ in the middle of Lancaster Road cutting the road off. It’s right near Latimer Road and ‘Frestonia’. We were friends with all the ‘Frestonia’ gang and they came to our parties and we went to theirs. We did gardening together. I actually ran a Food Co-op in Frestonia with two other people. Bramley Co-op was one bit of Frestonia and there was another lot as well. There were probably more than two camps.

*Steve Mepsted: Exciting times then?*

LS: Oh, it was great living around here then, it was absolutely brilliant. Tony Allen, Mary-Jane and I were in the ‘Empty Property Campaign’ and we used to cycle round the area and there were loads of empty properties. Pascal, Mary-Jane and I took over a property which needed a lot of work on it and we did it up and improved it enormously, a lot of people were doing that. Tony was doing that somewhere else and the three of us were cycling around the area putting red crosses on the doors of empty properties to show how many were.

*SM: That’s a good bit of Agit Prop, reminds me of the placing of crosses on doors during the plague!*

LS: Well, Rachman was in this area immediately before in the 1950's and early '60's and that was how the Notting Hill Housing Trust grew, out of Rachmanism. So I came to live here and stayed in that squat for five years and two other people joined us. Mary-Jane and I were part of the people who founded the Co-op and there was Alex Bowling, Tony Allen, Johnny Claydon, Anna Malcolm and Jason Copeland, the meeting with Notting Hill Housing Trust was very much Jason, Anna and myself, there may have been some other people. The Trust were doing these houses up and it was a slow process.

*SM: To paint a picture of these houses at the time we are talking of. You wouldn't believe it now but they were hard to let and dilapidated. Especially around All Saints Road and this end of Lancaster Road.*

LS: It was the era where Housing Co-operatives were flavor of the month with the Housing Corporation who is the body who dish out the money from the Government to Housing Associations and it was very easy for us to set up the Co-op in a political climate which was welcoming. That changed later. The Housing Trust were very clear they were going to give us ten houses and that was it. From the very beginning they said ten houses, that's 34 flats. They were consistent in that, in reality it took them a while to do them up so we'd get one house here and one two years later and a year later again. I attempted to get us registered with the Housing Corporation independently so that we could buy houses because I had been very involved with setting up West Eleven Housing Co-op I had become quite knowledgeable about housing co-ops and how they work. I went off and worked for three housing co-ops over a period of years and bought houses for them through the Housing Corporation and we could have done that quite easily for W11 Co-op. But, the politics changed.

*SM: In talking with founder members it strikes me that there was an almost accidental and providential dynamic that existed between the members having the will to do something, but also the skills in order to do it. How much training had to happen in order that one could communicate with the Trusts and Corporations?*

LS: Well, this is where Jason Copeland was pivotal; he had the knowledge from the beginning that I acquired later. He did a lot of the guiding in that respect, I was 19 at the time and I didn't really know anything but I was very willing and I learned a lot from him. I did a lot of work in setting the Co-op up as I was learning. Skills like accounting, I suppose myself and two or three other people had those skills to a greater or lesser degree and when I first squatted two of us had done the house



up so I became interested in building work and I did what was then called a 'Tops' course, in plumbing, a six month course and I became a plumber for ten years. So, I had began with those sorts of skills and I did a lot of the 'snagging' of Co-op flats. When we were taking them over, they were being done up by building firms and they needed to be checked and someone to be in liaison with them. The Housing Trust would buy a derelict house with money from the Housing Corporation, get a firm to do it up and I would check a lot of the work on the houses as they were doing them. I later became a building surveyor – an unemployed one at the moment because I stopped to do an MSc. I had to do my thesis and I was working for a firm of architects and it was too much to do the thesis at the same time. I gave it up and now it's a bad time to get back into things but I'm looking in lots of different directions. My thesis was on reducing Co2 from buildings in London and asking if the planning process is doing enough.

*SM: Yes a few people have talked about the opportunity to do something special with our properties. Potential 'Greening Schemes' and eco-maintenance schemes, in your opinion what could we do?*

LS: It's a great pity because they had to replace the roof at number 26 and were going to replace the whole structure. If that were going to happen again it's a golden opportunity to create a 'green' roof. Its quite straightforward to create one, but it does need to be a flat roof, one can't really do it on a centre-valley roof like ours, but you could use the roof space for solar to generate electricity or solar thermal which generates hot water and heat, we could do that. It is always much easier to conserve energy than to create energy so insulation is the key and we need to have insulation in our lofts. We have seven of our ten houses with north-facing backs so it would be very easy to do external insulations on the backs of the properties, which would be quite revolutionary in terms of the amount of energy it would save us and householders. Those backs are very difficult to heat and if we insulated them we could then also put double-glazing in, the secondary glazing we have at the moment doesn't really do anything. The Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales, known as 'CAT' has a science symposium every November and I am about to do a paper for them based on my thesis.

*SM: I'd like to talk about the communication within the Co-op and how that is managed. There exists a lot of politics and that can have a detrimental effect on energy and amount done for the upkeep of the Co-op, what do you think?*

LS: Well I think that with only 34 flats we don't actually have to do so much work.

We are making a big meal out of something we don't need to and it's a shame in a way because I find the Co-op very introspective now, its too inward-looking and that can be quite negative. I moved away from the Co-op in terms of going to meetings and doing work a long time ago, when the politics became nasty. I was maintenance convener for 17 years of the Co-op's existence, in three separate stints and I was Treasurer for four years so I have done loads of work. I've done more than my fair share so I can just move back and do nothing now. Especially after trying to get the two ideas for expansion off the ground and that being not OK for some people. I feel we've kind of over-egged the pudding in a way because we've got both sub-committees and a management committee now whereas we used to just run by the general meeting, one meeting. Then we went to sub-committees and we keep adding layers so if you've got sub committees normally you would not have a management committee as well, but we have. This rule of people needing points I am not sure I agree with. I think it's a bit much to ask people to do masses of work for the Co-op before they are housed. So I think the Co-op has become a bit introspective, a lot of the positivity that was around in the beginning is not there anymore. We were very political, a lot of us, coming together to do something positive and I think over the years it has become a lot more negative and that's a shame because it could be switched around, we could look outwards more and expand a bit, its become a bit stagnant I think.











ANNA MALCOLM





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest thanks to all those who participated in this project, to the interviewees: Tony Allen, Tony Bennett, Alex Bowling, Geof Branch, Ben Buchanan, Tamar Davies, Rod and Nilla Freeman (and Susanna and Ella), Corran Malcolm (and Terrel), and Linda Saunders, who managed to track down Jason Copeland on the other side of the world.

You are good people all, and I am grateful for your time and memories, and your mugs for shooting.

Warm thanks to Tony Allen and Geof Branch for copies of 'Corrugated Times', and 'Community Recharge' Newsletters, and for other photographic material and anecdotes. I am indebted to Corann Malcolm for the box of slides and prints of her Mum, Anna Malcolm.

Thank you also to Rod Freeman, always an encouraging person to talk with, and a veritable one-man library of Local History books.

Many thanks to Tracy for transcribing interview work, advising, supporting and putting up with me.

Finally thank you very much to Jason Copeland, who when asked by myself to provide a couple of sentences regarding the setting up of the Co-op, responded with a three-part in-depth essay and personal history; well written, illuminating and amusing.

**This book is dedicated to two women, for two different reasons:**

To the late Anna Malcolm without whose energy, drive, commitment and enthusiasm for the collective spirit, the West Eleven Housing Co-operative may well have never got off the ground.

And to my late Mum, Lynn Mepsted, without whose 'candle factory' I may never have experienced Portobello Road, and made it my home.