

THE
HOXTON
CAFE
PROJECT

J. B. Biven

HOXTON CAFE PROJECT

113 Hoxton Street, N. 1.

(Tel. : Sho. 3814)

President :

His Worship the Mayor of Shoreditch.

Vice Presidents :

Lady Cynthia Colville, D.B.E., D.C.V.O., J.P

Lady Rose Henriques.

Lord Stonham, O.B.E.

Committee :

Chairman : Dr. H. M. Holden.

Hon. Secretary : G. H. D. Shuttleworth.

Hon. Treasurer : S. Windross.

Manager and Assistant : Mr. and Mrs. B. Biven.

Miss Dawson.
Miss P. Gerson.
Rev. J. Hutchinson.
P. Massie.
Mrs. J. Moore.
R. Pates.

Cllr. R. J. Tallantire
K. Toms.
L. J. Townsend.
M. L. Turner.
Cllr. J. A. Welch.
Cllr. J. D. Welch.

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AIMS AND OBJECTS

- 1 It is generally recognised that there exists in London a large number of adolescent boys and girls who, by reason of their own personality problems are not catered for by the existing social organisations. These youngsters, some of them very disturbed emotionally, are in need of social and psychological help, and in the absence of acceptable social outlets, tend to drift around the streets from one cafe to another, since they are unable to tolerate organised activities provided in orthodox clubs. This problem is well demonstrated in Hoxton where there are a large number of varied youth clubs.
- 2 Since society has failed to cope with the needs of this group, it is proposed to open a cafe which may act as a meeting place and provide a warm, cheerful and accepting atmosphere for this group. The cafe managers, who should have personality, experience and training to cope with such adolescents, can then, through their relationships with those using the cafe, meet their emotional needs and perhaps help them through their understanding and influence, to find more mature social outlets.
- 3 It is emphasised that the cafe is not a youth club and should avoid the temptation to become one. That is to say, there will be no fixed membership, the cafe will be open to the public and there will be no organised activities. The emphasis on teenagers could, perhaps, be implied in its name (as in the 'Teen Canteen' at the Elephant) as well as in the type of facility provided — juke box and light refreshments. It will be run on ordinary commercial lines and be expected at least not to make a loss.
- 4 It is envisaged that if the cafe is a success in the sense that the manager is able to help the clients to feel more secure, he may be subjected to some pressure by the clients themselves to help with the organisation of special groups. The danger of this is that in so doing the cafe will essentially alter in character and approximate more to a normal youth club. It is felt that if this happens it will lose its essential character and cease to attract the kind of adolescent for whom it was intended.
- 5 The character of the manager is of the utmost importance, since it is through their relationships with the group that any changes in the individual users will take place. The Project may therefore be envisaged as an attempt at social group therapy.
- 6 It is further predicted that while many will use the cafe occasionally, a 'hard core' of users will accumulate by a process of self selection, and it can be assumed that these will be the ones who most need the kind of help that is offered. The influence of the occasional users — the more socially integrated boys and girls — may help to counteract that sense of isolation from society that is so often apparent among disturbed adolescents.

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The Barge Boys' Club indicated a desire by the so called unclubbable for a meeting place for social contacts. The Redvers' Club emphasised that young people of both sexes welcomed the opportunity of meeting each other and adults on their terms. These two projects showed clearly the need to help those young members of the community who felt, rightly or wrongly, that they had had a raw deal in their homes, at school and later in the labour market and were tending to act out their resentment against society. Therefore, and because of the threat of a disreputable cafe in the area, some of the members of the committees of the Barge and Redvers Clubs, strengthened by others, began to investigate the possibility of a cafe in Hoxton. The idea was to provide a meeting place in a well clubbed locality for boys and girls who would not be attracted to the normal club and we were encouraged by the support of Sir Basil Henriques and by Mrs. Mary Stewart who succeeded him as Chairman of the East London Juvenile Court. Miss Phyllis Gerson, the current Chairman of the Old Street Juvenile Court, maintains this link with Sir Basil and the Court as does Lady Cynthia Colville, both of them active members of the committee.

The germ of the idea as set out in 'Aims and Objects' was in being and a committee was formed and there followed a long frustrating period when premises became available but no money, an ideal leader turned up but no money, then the money was forthcoming but no premises.

In February, 1963, after five years of negotiation, we were at last in a position to open the Cafe. Sufficient capital had been raised through the generosity of the Gulbenkian Foundation and London Parochial Charities and the London County Council to purchase the underlease of an existing cafe in Hoxton and to equip it suitably and the London County Council agreed to subsidise three quarters of the Leader's and Assistant Leader's salaries.

At this stage there were many uncertainties remaining. Firstly the committee were aware that the finances of the project were most unstable. We strongly suspected that the cafe would not make a profit and in that case the running expenses and the remainder of the leaders' salaries would have to be raised by private subscription. Secondly it was not possible to predict what kind of problems would arise in the running of the cafe, the concept of a coffee bar run by a Youth Leader was still a relatively new one and the area in which we were intending to operate had its own special difficulties. This meant that the committee could not be sure what special qualities to look for when selecting a leader for the project, whether for example training in youth leadership should be a prerequisite. We were also aware of the financial urgency of the situation, delay in opening the cafe could only result in a steady financial drain without there being anything to show for it.

In the event no trained leaders applied for the post as advertised. The selection board unanimously agreed to appoint Mr. M.N.F. as Leader and Mrs. M. as assistant leader. Mr. M.N.F. was a young Cambridge graduate in his 20's, he had gained some experience of youth work in Cambridge where he worked as a voluntary helper in a church coffee bar project. Subsequently, being dissatisfied with the scope of this work, he had with great enterprise set up his own youth project based on his college rooms to try to cater for the needs of those who

were not acceptable in the coffee bar. Mr. M.N.F. was a sincere young man with a keen desire to help those less fortunately placed and very much aware of his own relative inexperience. The assistant leader, Mrs. M. was a widow in her forties with teaching experience whose children had now grown up and allowed her to devote her time to the kind of work which she had always wanted to do.

The cafe opened fairly quietly at the beginning of March. A juke box and pin table had been installed and for the first two weeks the clientele used the place as an ordinary cafe. The boys and girls who came were precisely those for whom it was intended, namely the misfits and rejects from the other clubs, and from the beginning a particular group of boys from one of the few remaining streets in the district where rehousing had not yet been started tended to regard the place as particularly their own, suggesting to the leader that it should be their club with an exclusive membership.

The clients were all extremely interested in the function of the leader and asked him many questions about his role there. Although the leader tried to be honest over this he experienced difficulty in answering these questions in view of the newness of the project and the uncertainty he felt over what his precise role was to be.

After two weeks an outbreak of petty pilfering started inside the cafe. The target for these attacks was usually either the juke box or the pin table. Records, and money were stolen and the leader found that much of his time was taken up in trying to protect the equipment from further attacks in which the whole group ganged up against him. In retrospect one can see these attacks as being directed at the leader himself, as testing out behaviour to determine the limits of his toleration and his capacity to handle them, as indeed attempts to define his role among them. The leader found the juke box an increasing liability and eventually removed it.

At this time there was no adequate voluntary help available and on the nights that the assistant leader was not present the leader found himself alone and increasingly hard pressed. During the next few weeks there was a gradual increase in the tension building up in the cafe, especially when large numbers were present, and the destructive attacks on cafe property increased in frequency. Individually the leader found nearly all the clients reasonable and amenable. In a group they were bored, restless and destructive, colluding with each other in their attacks and constantly putting him to the test. Inevitably the strain of such behaviour began to tell on him and he began to feel that the cafe was not fulfilling their needs, he was aware of a need for more space within the cafe and for less expensive and breakable equipment. At the same time he began to wonder about his own capacity for coping with such a difficult project. It so happened that owing to the assistant leader's illness he was alone for much of this period and it was perhaps inevitable that he should begin to feel depressed; at times the only way he felt he could cope with the situation and define his own limits after some particularly destructive activity was to close the cafe for a night. Unfortunately when he reopened the clients' resentment at the closure resulted in even more destruction. Events culminated in the breakage of a large plate glass window which rendered the cafe unfit

for use and necessitated its temporary closure. Unfortunately the insurance company concerned for some time refused to accept liability and nearly two months elapsed during April and May before the cafe could be reopened. During this period the leader made contact with the clientele on their own home territory, namely the streets of Hoxton, and was able to form quite a close and friendly relationship with the group who were the main cafe users. He shared with them a common interest in motor cycles and was able to enter into their activities to a considerable extent in a constructive way. His role was nevertheless an entirely different one since he was no longer responsible for the property of the cafe and was no longer looked upon by them as an authority. When the cafe eventually reopened he hoped that this pleasant relationship might be maintained but unfortunately this was not the case. As soon as he reopened the outbreaks of violence and destruction recurred and he could see no way out of this situation. Accordingly after careful thought and much discussion he decided to offer his resignation as from June 1st.

In retrospect we wish to express our gratitude to Mr. M.N.F. for the pioneer work he did in starting the project and in showing us the pitfalls. He can in no way be blamed for his inexperience and youth. He had a thankless and difficult task and we hope we have learned from his experience.

During this phase an additional problem was facing the committee, namely the problem of finance. It has already been mentioned that the cafe had operated on a shoe-string budget. Although during the ensuing months some voluntary subscriptions were raised the project gradually sank into debt which could only be dealt with by personal loans from individual committee members. The period when the cafe was closed was especially difficult in that the leaders' salaries were still being paid but with nothing tangible to show for it. Following the leader's resignation the committee decided that a moratorium was essential in order to reappraise the situation and the assistant leader was therefore also asked to resign.

After considerable discussion the committee reached the conclusion that in spite of the apparent failure of the first few months certain very valuable lessons had been learned.

(1) The need for such a cafe as this had been clearly demonstrated, those attending were precisely the ones for whom it had been primarily intended, namely the social misfits. Many of these were clearly emotionally disturbed, they could not tolerate orthodox youth club activities and many of them had records of delinquency.

(2) The boys and girls appeared to be seeking for adults with whom they could make a relationship on their own terms but having made this relationship they seemed forced to fall back on their habitual patterns of behaviour in testing the adults' reactions to them.

(3) The role of the leader is even more exacting than had been anticipated; it calls for a man or woman of exceptional maturity and experience of life, almost certainly with some formal training in youth leadership combined with an understanding of the disturbed person.

(4) It is essential that if the leader is to function properly he must have adequate support. In practice this means that at least one helper should be available in the cafe, whether paid or unpaid.

(5) The cafe can operate successfully only if there is adequate financial security.

With these conclusions in mind it was decided once more to approach the L.C.C. for further financial backing on the understanding that only if the last three conditions were met would the re-opening of the cafe be considered. The L.C.C. most generously agreed to give further support and to help to clear the project of existing debts.

During the next few months an attempt was made to place the scheme on a more secure financial basis and to recruit a suitable leader. Eventually the committee were able to obtain the services of Mr. and Mrs. Biven as leader and assistant leader, respectively. Unfortunately neither of them were in a position to start work until they had completed their training course in Youth Leadership at the National College for Training of Youth Leaders, Leicester, which meant a further delay until March, 1964 before the cafe could open. In the meanwhile Mr. J. Lousada was employed as temporary assistant leader in order to maintain some continuity with the clientele and as a part of his duties he was asked to carry out a survey of the available resources for adolescents in the neighbourhood in an attempt to find out more of their particular needs with especial emphasis on the ways in which they currently made use of their leisure. This survey is now being written up.

The cafe reopened on March 2nd, 1964 under its new manager. In the view of the committee the work carried out by him and his wife more than justifies the hopes and expectations of the project and underlines the crying need that exists in this district (and perhaps others as well) for less formal and rigid approaches to youth work than have existed heretofore. An increasing number of adolescents appear to be becoming split off and rejected by the rest of the community; it is now up to the community to feel a sense of commitment and to find a place for its own misfits.

For the future the leader has pointed out in his report which follows how completely isolated these boys and girls feel from the community and has illustrated this only too clearly in his account of the car ride. He feels strongly that now the cafe has established itself as a working base there is a need for expansion in order that the clients may have the chance of making some contact with the world outside their own incredibly narrow circle; perhaps their preoccupation with cars is an expression of this need. The leader has urged the need for the cafe to own a car in order to help them with this problem. The committee has every confidence in Mr. Biven and are in entire agreement with this idea, only lack of money prevents us from buying one now.

MANAGER'S REPORT (August, 1964)

The closure of the cafe for a three week summer recess brings to an end the second phase of the cafe's development, a natural development after the first stage of destructive testing out of the management, which lasted for two months. Now after five months since the cafe opened two very important points are to be noted, firstly an increase in numbers and the effect on the "Myrtle Street Mob" and secondly the customers' greater identification with the cafe and what it means to them now that it seems to be more of an institution rather than an 'experiment'.

It is estimated that a total of 200 young people use the cafe. Attendances vary from every evening to once a month. The nightly total has doubled to an average 45/50 but fortunately they have never

tried to use the premises at exactly the same time, 25 being the most the cafe can hold with any comfort. (On one thundery night a total of 35 was recorded, literally sitting on each other's laps.) The effect of this increase has caused the 'Myrtle Street Mob,' who are now no longer the majority, to stay away when they feel that their presence will have no impact upon the other users. If they are 'caught' in the cafe by a sudden rush of the fringe Hoxtonians, they adopt a passive, audience role and are only able to take over when the newcomers leave in sufficient numbers. They have accepted this reversal of positions surprisingly gracefully and they, like the management, strive to maintain close contact with each other. However, although the Myrtles are now numerically small by comparison, they still remain the majority of those customers that have discovered their need for a deeper relationship with an adult. They, like the fringe members, want to talk to an 'outsider' and hear his opinions about subjects which interest and concern them. In effect, advice is being sought but they do not wish to say 'What can I?' 'How can I?' etc., they prefer to engage the Managers in the topic, then extract the information piece by piece. It is not always easy to sense what is the point of concern but it remains for both participants an exciting verbal interchange and an interesting game to beat about the bush in ever decreasing circles. Perhaps the most obvious constructive help is given about Who, How and Where to contact agencies, assistance with telephone calls, arranging holidays and so on. Perhaps the most valuable part of a discussion is something which cannot be measured in terms of concrete results.

The second part which marks the end of the second phase is the customers' acceptance and closer identification with the cafe. There have been many small instances, such as sweeping up at closing time, an increasing number bringing their own pictures and paintings to pin on the wall and a greater use of the cafe as a meeting place rather than meeting at each other's homes. This desire to keep the cafe open was illustrated very strongly about a month ago when the Manager and Assistant closed the cafe so that they could attend a committee meeting.

After the meeting was over we called at the cafe and found the small window above the front door wide open and a hardboard pelmet over the window ripped away. We entered through the side door and were surprised to discover that only a few chocolates were missing. The records, record player, money and personal items were all untouched. The mystery deepened, why would anyone go to such great lengths to steal a few chocolate bars? There was nothing we could do but repair the window and go home.

In Hoxton Street we met some of the regular customers who in garbled, excited voices told us 'that the door of the caff was wide open, so we went in and closed it for you, didn't we.' After listening to the customers for 15 minutes we were not sure what was truth nor what story to follow up. However, we thanked them for closing the door and walked home puzzling how and why somebody should unlock the door and then only take sweets.

That night cross checking on all our movements I suddenly realised that I left the door open myself before going to the committee meeting! Prior to the meeting, we had accepted a goods delivery through the front door and I had forgotten to rebolt and lock it. At 7-30 the customers gathered outside the cafe not remembering that we were closed that night. Usually they bang and kick the door until it is opened at 7-30 but this time the door swung open on the first kick. Surprised, they all entered to find the place empty and without lights. Some of

the boys would have been for pinching the lot and getting away as fast as they could. However, such was their 'identification' with the cafe, coupled with the cold weight of responsibility thrust upon them, that the majority were for closing it up and protecting the property, their property!

They decided to do this by leaving one small boy in the cafe who bolted both side and front doors then left through the top window, pulling away the pelmet as he climbed out to make a large enough space. The chocolates were taken as a reward for an action which undoubtedly took an enormous amount of self control.

The explanation the following evening increased their pride when they discovered that the only culprit was the Manager. They were so relieved to hear that no one had broken in that they freely admitted taking the chocolates and sharing them. There followed a good deal of friendly teasing about the Manager's stupidity and how he deserved to 'lose the lot' but not one mention was made about their own 'good deed'. Perhaps the full significance of their action was not realised and perhaps it won't be unless it is drawn into a discussion about the cafe or at a time when the Myrtles need to be reassured of their regard for the cafe and 'that little it has to offer'.

The small service that the cafe provides can be expanded enormously. The most pressing need is to take small groups from the cafe to other areas. One such expedition in the early stages of the new management illustrates the fear and resultant anti-social behaviour exhibited on a trip made by the manager with a group of the older boys from the cafe to collect a car licence from Croydon. It is both alarming and pathetic.

I was asked to go with K. and his six friends only because I held a full driving licence, and theirs was provisional. This desire to keep to the letter of the law by a group of amateur thieves intrigued me. I also wondered why they needed seven people in a car to collect one licence. The car was a very worn and tired Austin estate wagon and with eight people aboard the wheels touched the underside of the wings. This did not concern them at all and I was told it would be "all right once we got going." Weaving through the city traffic at an enormous speed and missing parked cars more by chance than design, I remarked that there was smoke coming through the dashboard. This fact seemed to concern them greatly and they asked what I thought it was? Seizing upon an opportunity to stop, I suggested we take a look. That we should stop at all to look for a fault was completely out of the question and it was obvious that I would have to keep quiet and leave them to the job of finding their way to the Croydon Road.

In a few minutes I realised that they were unable to read the road signs and that a decision on the direction to take was guesswork. This factor accounted for the large number of persons and perhaps they had unconsciously reasoned that the greater the number, the greater the measure of success. However, sudden decision-making at the fork of a busy road only led to the confusion and annoyance of surrounding traffic. In turn the boys got more agitated, rude and even reckless. Their frustration snowballed into anticipating the squeal of brakes from other cars, and they were shouting curses through the open windows. On the south side of London Bridge they scraped together enough money for a gallon of petrol but found they were unable to start the car. We tried to push-start the car for a mile or so without a spark

of life from the engine. At this stage two of the more hasty-tempered boys walked off down a side street to take a battery from a parked car. I frantically tried to start the engine with the handle. Sensing my concern, one of the more perceptive boys helped me until we had started the car. We called the boys back and drove off leaving behind huge clouds of blue smoke. At Brixton the clutch nearly burnt out, and it was decided to turn back when I said we wouldn't get to Croydon. Patrolling policemen eyed us suspiciously as we crawled back to Hoxton at four miles an hour with the engine revving wildly. We dared not stop, so we trundled through red lights and halt signs to the amazement of all, but six of us had to dismount at London Bridge to push the car up the approach ramp on the last lap to the safety of their own territory.

The reason for going had long been forgotten, it became a desire to just go anywhere. But I sensed that they wouldn't like to make a trip like this too often because it is painful. It highlights their inadequacies which are not so obvious in a familiar area. They are deeply concerned about their inability to read but feel it is too late to do anything. They understand little of the workings of a motor car engine but wish to learn. They are sometimes childlike and frightened and at other times mature and sensible adults, growing up fast with a huge appetite for knowledge, interest and understanding. Above all they are likeable, amusing and generous young men who realise only too well the limitations of the cafe but accept what little it has to offer gladly.

Two weekends organised from the cafe recently have shown the sincere desire of the customers to meet and understand people from varying class and cultural backgrounds. However, they find this can be difficult as their immediate reaction is one of rejection and scorn, a reaction nurtured from a sense of educational and social inferiority. They also tend to categorise people too early and simply but once a satisfactory relationship has been established these early simplifications are forgotten. To help them develop mature relationships it is essential that the party is small enough for the Leader/Workers to have close contact with each person for most of the time away. Eight would seem to be the maximum number and the ideal between four and six. Obviously finance controls the number of trips possible but the development of this aspect of the cafe work depends to a great extent upon the provision of a van. The young people that the cafe attracts are mainly those that have been unable to accept any kind of obvious organisation, thus commitment in a physical sense, i.e. saving over a long period, planning and ordering, etc., is at its lowest, while commitment to each other as 'people' is very high. Therefore the need to respond and adapt fairly quickly is very important if the worker is to make constructive use of latent abilities.

Contrary to what was first thought to be necessary, the management find that one voluntary helper each night is sufficient. On one evening a week, when the customers have no money, it is unnecessary to have more than the paid staff. Too many adults behind the counter are intimidating and have been shown to be the cause of a great deal of the earlier difficulties. However, it would be very difficult to run the cafe with less than two, although this has been done on two occasions when the voluntary help failed to arrive. When a van is finally bought it may be that we shall need another helper each night. Until then, so that the customers feel at ease to talk it is important that the number of adults be kept at a workable minimum.

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Financial Statement for Year Ended 30th June, 1964.

Expenditure		Income	
	£	£	£
Deficit brought forward	245	Grants (other than London County Council)	
Salaries, etc.—		Shoreditch Borough Council	25
Salary	727	Grants from London County Council	
Graduated Pensions	8	Education Committee	887
National Insurance	30	Borough Youth Committee	25
	765		912
Cleaners — Wages	9	Donations	659
Rent	312	Canteen	110
Rates and Water	52		
Heating and Lighting	12		
Cleaning Materials	2		
Repair and Decoration of Premises	46		
Administrative Expenses—			
Insurance	29		
Printing and Stationery	7		
Postage	2		
Telephone	25		
Candidates' Expenses	18		
Other	1		
	82		
Equipment	37		
Canteen	86		
Other Activities	15		
Surplus carried forward	53		
	£1,716		£1,716

NOTE. As the Cafe was closed for approximately six months the above does not represent a normal year.

It must be emphasised that these accounts do not represent a full year's working as the cafe was closed for a part of the period covered. An estimated figure for a normal year's expenditure would be £2,123. We can with gratitude expect from the London County Council £1,244 and from individual subscribers about £100. With an expected profit of £50 from the canteen and grants of £120 for two years from the Gulbenkian Foundation we shall still have to raise £600 to break even.

We hope the appeal letter from three prominent local business men to their colleagues in the area will be productive of income, that a raffle and a Garden Party will help and that we can increase our list of individual subscribers.

We wish to put on record our gratitude to all our subscribers. The London County Council has shown continuing confidence in the Project despite early setbacks, as have Shoreditch Borough Council and the Borough Youth Committee. The Chase Charity, the City Parochial Foundation, the Gulbenkian Foundation and the Emil Wertheimer Trust have all given most generously. Several of these charities have broken their normal rules to keep us on our feet; it is therefore all the more important to find alternative sources of income.

We feel now that we are giving value for money and that we can therefore, ask with confidence for your support.

SUBSCRIPTIONS AND DONATIONS

Local and Other Authorities :

The London County Council.
Shoreditch Borough Council.
Shoreditch Borough Youth Committee.

Charities :

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.
Chase Charity.
Emil Wertheimer Trust.
London Parochial Charities.
Old Street Magistrates' Court.

Business Houses :

British Small Arms Co.
Bovril, Ltd.
Crosse and Blackwell, Ltd.

Individuals :

A. Bainton.	Miss M. J. Mead.
T. G. S. Berry.	G. C. F. Mead.
Miss R. M. Braithwaite.	Mrs. J. G. Moore.
Lady C. Colville.	Dr. Pons.
Dr. A. Crowcroft.	R. Rix.
J. Denholm.	Dr. P. D. Scott.
J. Dymond.	G. H. D. Shuttleworth.
Dr. Edwards.	Mrs. G. Smith.
Miss P. Gerson.	Mrs. M. Stewart.
Dr. H. M. Holden.	Miss N. O. Lea-Wilson.
Mrs. M. A. Kamm.	Miss E. Ramsey.

The Coronation Press, Trimdon Station, Co. Durham.