

Hoxton Café
Project
Report No. 3

HOXTON CAFE PROJECT (REPORT 3)

113 Hoxton Street, N.1.

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Committee:

Chairman: Dr. H.M. Holden

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Hon. Treasurer: Mrs. Lynn

Managers: Mr. Ian Guild & Mr. Stephen Brake

Asst. Managers: Mrs. Denise Aspa & Miss Laurel Frank

C.S.V. Worker: Miss Rheta Wall

Mr. Atto

Miss Jones

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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 manager, who should have the personality, experience and training to cope with such adolescents, can then through his relationship with them meet their emotional needs and perhaps help them through his 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 and 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). 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, let us say, a football team. 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 he 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.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Since our last report was published, Mr. Ian Guild has been the full-time manager, and having passed through a very difficult 3 months at the beginning following so many staff changes is now firmly in the saddle. His report follows the Chairman's

Miss Margaret Jones left the project in March 1966 in order to undertake the Youth Leadership Course at Leicester and her co-worker Mrs. Denise Aspa (nee Tutin) is also leaving us shortly having undertaken full-time work teaching maladjusted children. We owe them both a great deal for the selfless way that they took over sole charge of the cafe during the gaps between managers and for their continuous help and support. Our best wishes go with them.

In June, following Margaret Jones' departure, the project was most fortunate in obtaining the services of Brother Joseph, of the Anglican Franciscan Community as an assistant. Brother Joseph, who was hoping to start his own coffee bar project in Soho, wished to gain experience in this field and although he was officially employed in a part-time capacity he actually spent every evening at the cafe. Although he wore 'civilian' clothes, he made no secret of his profession as a Franciscan Brother. The help and support he gave to the project was of the greatest value and his report follows that of the leader.

The experience of having two full-time leaders convinced the management committee that this must be an essential feature of any future plans. The isolation and strain experienced by the leader is too much for any single person and there can be no question of any expansion of the project unless a team can be established. The Inner London Education Authority has fortunately supported us in this and since the beginning of February Mr. Stephen Brake has been appointed as full-time assistant leader.

In addition, The Community Service Volunteers have kindly allocated us one of their voluntary workers, Miss Rheta Wall, who will be attached to the project in a full-time capacity. The exact scope of her role is at present being defined.

Once again we owe it to ourselves and to our supporters to try to assess the value of what we are attempting, and once again we feel it necessary to point out that we can give no objective evidence to show that the cafe is achieving anything beyond providing a place where gravely disturbed youngsters can and do meet and make relationships with mature adults.

Our record of convicted boys remains as dismal as ever and any good that we may have achieved, any increase in self-responsibility among the cafe users, can only be assessed on very subjective criteria.

The continued existence of the cafe is something of an act of faith and it will be many years before we may be able to demonstrate that this faith was justified.

Despite this, the cafe appears to be being used as a model for similar projects throughout the country, and is now becoming a part of the "New Look" of a reformed Youth Service.

The importance of good communication with other social agencies has become increasingly clear to us, and we have been attempting to establish links with the local agencies involved with our families. In this context also I should like to record our thanks to Sir Joseph Simpson, the Commissioner of Police for the Metropolis, and to Chief Superintendent Philpott for allowing us to discuss the project with them at the City Road Police Station. We hope that this will lead to greater co-operation between ourselves and the police.

FUTURE PLANS

Although as yet no moves have been made in the direction of a "second tier" as mentioned in the last annual report, we remain as convinced as ever of its necessity. The difficulties are largely financial but it is also that the present manager and committee would not be able to take on this additional responsibility and that a separate committee structure is required.

Meanwhile the appointment of a second full-time leader allows us to expand the present work along the lines suggested by Mr. Guild in his report.

Many of our clientele are out of work and therefore are "adrift" in Hoxton during the day. Although they would undoubtedly use the cafe if it were open during the day as well as the evening, we do not feel that this would best answer their needs.

Experience has shown that if the cafe manager is on the premises during the day-time this fact soon gets known and individual boys will knock at the door asking to see him. Often they will then ask for help over some personal problem (although such requests may be disguised) and in the comparative privacy may be able to talk much more freely than is possible in the group setting of a cafe evening.

Such requests for help often centre around "job hunting" and we have therefore established a close link with the youth employment service which is of the greatest value. We believe that one of the reasons why some of our clientele have such bad work records is simply that they are afraid

(although this fear is disguised as bravado) and that the presence of a friendly person whom they know and can trust at interviews for jobs may make all the difference.

Our plan then is to extend the work of the cafe by opening an informal advice centre for our cafe users. The exact details of this have to be worked out but we have already obtained the use of the basement room under the cafe for this purpose.

The increased scope of the work makes the keeping of records even more essential both for the café as a unit and for individual boys and girls. It has become increasingly apparent that neither the café nor the

basement is a suitable place for the inevitable office work that is involved, nor for the safe storage of records. and we have therefore obtained at a small rent a room at Toynbee Hall, for this purpose.

LEADER'S REPORT

Brother Joseph's report conveys in most graphic terms how it feels to run a cafe after the fashion of the 'Hoxton Project'. Therefore it is needful only that I give a short account of the progress made in the last year, which coincides, approximately with my year in office as Manager,

Before continuing, I would like to express my indebtedness to the past and present workers on the project, without whose aid and support my tenure of office would have been very brief!

My first three months as manager, were, to put it mildly, a HELL ON EARTH!. and statements such as 'I felt physically sick at the thought of opening tonight' persisted in my daily log up until two and a half months after my appointment. In retrospect this period can be put in its true perspective:

The Clientele had been extremely upset by the troubles which had dogged the Project for the six months prior to my appointment, and were obviously of the opinion that -

- a. I was unlikely to stay very long (a belief they still hold even now)
- b. that perhaps I was not the sort of manager they were looking for.

These were fears that only time could dispel, but it was asking too much of the Clientele to expect them to appreciate this!

My initial steps of curtailing credit and forbidding the use of drugs on the premises were necessary but exceedingly unpopular, especially with the group who were constant takers of 'hash' and 'purple hearts.' The policy was undoubtedly right, but the timing was inopportune. These steps attracted a good deal of hostility even from members of the Clientele who were unaffected by them, and as a result a small group pushed me almost beyond my limits of endurance.

It became quickly apparent that our Clientele split roughly into three groups; younger, middle, and older, elements. If a survey of ages were made, these groupings would not hold good. but they are based on the individual's personal development rather than age. Our main problems were with the middle element, the younger ones following the middle, and the older being content to sit on the sidelines and see what transpired!

This middle element consisted, in essence, of four boys, Frankie, Kevin, Tommy and Larry who are cousins, the age range being sixteen and a half to eighteen years of age. These four held together consistently as a clique in contrast to the continuously changing alliances which sprang up among the other groups. Larry was very much the leader, and I found that through my inability to communicate with him I was cut off from the rest of the group. Although animosity between "US" and "THEM" gradually became less with the passing of time, no real progress took place till the

arrival of Brother Joseph, who managed very quickly to establish the sort of relationship with Larry which the rest of the workers had found impossible.

This was not to say that our troubles with this group were over, but their acts of 'aggression' and vandalism lessened in intensity, and allowed us to form an uneasy working relationship. This new relationship helped to move me into a new phase which was not restricted solely to this Minority.

Although a good deal of my time had been spent coping with this particular group, I had been able to form good relationships with many other members of the Clientele, in some cases with ridiculous ease. The declining influence of the middle element left me a good deal more free than I had been previously, and the Clientele now felt able to make demands upon my time in other directions. Initially this took the form of advice on trivial personal problems, but, as time passed and they became more confident of a positive response from myself, this role became more important, until I found that I was heavily embroiled, mainly with support during their frequent Court appearances. This role continues to expand in scope.

One attitude of the Clientele which has irked me since my appointment eleven months ago has been their obvious sense of possession which they feel with respect to the cafe, without any corresponding sense of responsibility. I have given this question a good deal of thought; - Is it a state of affairs which is inevitable, and with which we have to learn to live? Or, is it fair and desirable that the Clientele be made to feel in some way responsible for the cafe? A great deal has already been said about the Hoxtonian attitude to social work:- i.e., 'It is what THEY do, to, or, for, US'. Have we not already fallen into this trap by providing facilities with out expecting any degree of commitment, however informal? My conclusion is that we have, but the question now arises, 'Where do we go from here'?

I had had in mind for some time the idea of redecorating the cafe, using our clientele as 'labour'. This scheme had been started earlier, but had faltered. This project has again been undertaken, with enthusiasm and zest, and has been satisfactorily concluded. Whether, however, this will in fact elicit any small degree of commitment for the future from the Clientele I cannot say; Time perhaps, will.

To this problem of eliciting commitment there is no quick and easy solution, but it is to be hoped that steps, comparable to the one taken in the preceding paragraph, may bring the Clientele to adopting a more responsible attitude with respect to the cafe, and that this will be reflected in their own lives.

BROTHER JOSEPH'S REPORT

It seems a long time since I first crossed the threshold of "Our Cafes at 113, Hoxton Street. I hope it isn't too nostalgic of me to share with you many of the ups & downs in working alongside Ian the Manager, and Denise, fellow worker. Being eased into the situation and atmosphere was a

lot more readily effected because of their already-established relationship with the young people who frequent the cafe.

From the beginning, I realised I was going to get very involved and was very keen to become an accepted worker in the Project. I wanted to do more than “grin like a dog and run about the city.” I don’t pretend, therefore, that this is a general report as much as it relays the atmosphere of a place from one person’s point of view over a 4 - 5 month period.

There were many young people who influenced me in my work there, and I would like to think - if they were asked - would remember me. But, this small inadequate report is heavily in debt to two cousins, Larry and Tommy, and a friend of Tommy’s whose name is Frankie. In my mind these three were plagued with the problems of adolescent adjustment and had a very great influence on the cafe’s nightly working, and on me personally.

The first few nights were spent “guessing” my profession. Of course, I was C.I.D. and to this day, people like Larry say, “How can a monk be built like a C.I.D.?” My job was declared for certain when Phil came in and said, “I know you. You are the Brother Joseph who used to come into Wormwood Scrubs.” And so it was, the word got round. Maybe it is my imagination there never seemed to be a trial period for me, since I knew the inside of a prison or borstal or what-have-you. Relationships were developed fairly quickly. Jerry was decorating his room and wanted travel posters which I happened to have. Jack collected stamps which I had been saving for someone else. The others needed friendship. And I would like to think that was always there for them.

Hardly had I got to know the youths’ names when we closed for the two week holiday period. I sent several postcards while on leave,

After the break, there the kids were - waiting, friendly, welcoming, glad to have “our cafe” open again, the “poxy hole’ as it was called. The hash started to flow straightaway. But in the next few days, Ian won his argument in having them smoke outside the Cafe. Although they were glad to see us back, I had found Kevin and Frankie almost miles away. It was very hard for them to accept me as someone to be trusted, who was with them. Nevertheless, the great day came when Frankie came to the bar and actually held a conversation - without stammer, and even completed a sentence, if not a train of thought. As Frankie developed, Tommy remained dubious, and so there was a long line of “getting-to-know-you’s.”

Since I have been at the Cafe there has been only one sit-in, and many threats of a “sit-in’ so this side of the kids’ demonstrations is outside my experience. The tensions were more immediately eased - the chairs flew, the seat covering was slashed, and we were called everything under the sun. The prevention of theft and the dodging of flying objects, from our point of view, occupied a lot of our efforts in my beginning days.

One of the best insights into being there with our young people was watching their treatment of a tramp (to whom they used to readily give aid) and Bob, the mongrel dog. Bob slept, was awakened. loved, hurt, but actually was available every night from 7.30 - 11.00. George said very early on “Bob is faithful, isn’t he?” So, I took my lead off Bob.

There have been scaring, pathetic scenes, mainly centred on drugs and their effect. Frankie is so anti—social and so scared of everyone, so threatened, that at times in these desperate moods of his we would almost give up hope. And yet we knew that we were there to be available. But it was often very difficult and I feel myself that I failed on my occasions.

Towards the end of my time in the Cafe, Ian was out with mumps and things were a bit rough. Frankie got into the kitchen, and for spite, poured a quarter bottle of orange into the water boiling for tea. I was really: angry with him, having begged him not to do such a crazy thing. I gave him a good telling off. In two minutes flat he came to me and said, “Joe, I’m sorry I’m so boisterous. I’m sorry about that orange. Here, shake my hand. I’m sorry. I promise - on my life - I promise I’ll bring you a new bottle of orange tomorrow night. I am sorry Joe, really sorry.” Later on that evening he stole the evening newspaper out of my pocket.

Twenty past seven the next night, there was a great thumping and hollering at the door, and there was Frankie - “Joe, open this door (or words to that effect), or else I’ll get rid of this bottle of orange (or words to that effect). At the door, there stood Frankie bottle out-stretched. And he said “See Joe, I’ve done it; I’ve bought you this like I promised. Are you happy with me? Will you tell Ian what a good lad I am? Are you surprised? Oh Joe, you mad monk!!”

Anyone who knows Frankie will appreciate what a victory that incident was. This honesty was never mentioned by Frankie for the rest of the evening, but I told him several times how glad I was and he liked it.

Sometimes things would get out of hand at the very opening and the air would never completely clear of anger the whole night. There were times when the youths would come to the bar, or gather in groups and they would talk, often 2 or 3 at the same time, about sex, what they believe and “know” about a variety of subjects. They would describe the cruel things they’d done to animals. They would discuss in their own way the whole field of criminology. Sometimes we workers were asked to join in, while other times it would have been stupid, or presumptuous, to try to enter their world. All of them had declared ideas. The thing was, come 11 o’clock, it was often difficult to let them know we had to close. Early in my work there, I learned Kevin, a coloured boy, must be melting because several times, it was he who led the lads out of a ‘sit-down’ before it actually got started. He’d simply say “come on, they’ve got to go home. They’ve got trains to catch.”

Things often went in phases. There was a breaking up stage. Everything was ripped up or semi-destroyed. The lads urinated on the floor. Ian, Denise and I believed this was a testing period and it was something which we had to get through, come rain or shine. Not an easy chore, I must say.

There was the telephone stage when everyone had to ‘phone. Who, they often weren’t sure. Sometimes they even managed to make it to Scotland Yard. Not always did they ‘phone out’ when some of them were out, they ‘phoned In’ (with slugs). This episode ended up with a ‘phone call being made to the Fire Department for a major fire at Edie’s the Cafe down the road. The whole thing was a hoax, but inside of a minute the operator ‘phoned to ask if we had made such a call. There was a subsequent visit from Edie Herself, which was something to behold and grasp. For fear of Edie, rather

than the Fire Department. I fear, this era ended. There was an ever more-than--usual stealing phase, when everything in the Cafe's was looked at as a potential theft piece. Things did vanish. We made great to sit on all moveable property. Along this line of thought the vogue was order drink, get it into your hand and don't pay. There were several scenes sometimes maddening, sometimes downright amusing regarding their payment for things. The usual statement when we would insist on payment was, "You means".

We had periods when we played cards or scrabble. The interesting thing about these games was, half-way through, one of the kids would lose interest and just walk out, sometimes having his place taken by someone, sometimes not. These 'game times' proved to be exclusive for someone like Larry, and they were more than he could bear. At the end I decided the best idea was to back graciously out of the game myself if Larry came in.

There was the Liverpool Street stage when a dozen or of our friends used to come into the Cafe, stay for 10 minutes disappear to Liverpool Street Station, come back at 10 or 11, in time for closing. I personally went there on a number of occasions, twice being taken by some of the lads There, they just hung about and appreciated being "in the know" that this was a congregating place. Nothing was really done, but Jack sized it up by saying "It's the most exciting place in London during the week. Kids come here from all over London."

The police moved everyone on occasionally and so the night was I largely spent dodging the station patrols. These policemen were often known by name and the kids had their favourites. A small pub round the back of the station was in favour then, and certainly it catered for a young clientele. It was a 'youth pub' there you were also in 'the Life'

Sometime around the beginning of September, I noticed 17 year old well built, good-looking, Larry, would come to the bar, sit down on a stool and talk. Just talk. Up until this, he would say something, then dart away before I could engage him in a conversation. He had a terrific thing called one—two. 'one-two' meant he would start to say something then half mumbling and stuttering, have to go back to the beginning and start all over again. The while he was doing this, he would be looking over his shoulder as if someone were there. It was pathetic and made us all aware how inadequate he must feel. He found it completely impossible to finish a sentence, to keep interested in what he was going to say. Sometimes he would bring in articles on his two favourite things in life. They represented 'the life' for him certainly. Elvis Presley and Chicago gangland in the time of Al Capone. He would listen intently. Each time I would mention a name. I would have to go back and establish the character's identity because although Larry was very interested, he would completely forget who was who. He found it impossible to concentrate and would say sometimes, "Joe I must be mad."

September 8th was a sensational night. The entertainment was to tie the younger kids to a chair. They were put in the street then. Of course there was great laughter at the victim's struggle to get loose. This made life exciting for a bit and the fun feeling was still around when we closed. What dismay when the next night we came to open and found the place

Broken into and over the floor and walls written in very mis-spelled English was "Batman strikes again." It was done in paint, white paint. And it was a true mess. In addition, the record player and the records had gone, and the breakers-in had had lots of cups of tea, and no doubt, an all-night party. How did they get in? Simple, one had hidden inside and let the others in when we had departed. Of course, it was Larry's work.

The interesting outcome of this was - to this day, no one much complains of there being no music. They simply say, "That Larry". To our relief, no longer did they blame Ian as they'd previously done when the record player had been stolen. So, I knew then that we were over the hump of acceptance as friends.

Round about this time, there was a lot of unhappiness and unsurety: because we had eleven of our lads either in remand, or about to go up in court.

Ian and I were running about like chickens with our heads cut off! We wrote letters in addition. Naturally the feeling of the cafe was wrong. Larry had a long conversation one night concerning this theme. He felt it was very unfair that the police were digging up the past. He was very strong on this point that he felt he had no responsibility for things which HAD happened. The past was past. He wasn't caught then, why bug him now? It was entirely impossible to help him see it was still his work. When the subject was pursued, he got very angry so we dropped it. All of us spent time with the kids on problems of this nature and circling this theme.

There were many times of great happiness in "Our Cafe". There were times when Denise, Ian and I sometimes singly, sometimes as a group, were very, very happy and at ease while in the Cafe. It is difficult to sort but often a happy atmosphere persevered throughout the whole of our opening hours. In my mind, one of these occasions was when Denise returned from her holiday. The kids were extremely pleased to see her back. There was almost an electric current of happiness that night. Another was when Larry had been released from the remand centre. His uncle, who is with a "syndicate" in the West End, was very impressed to meet Ian visiting his, nephew, and subsequently instructed Larry he should hence-forth address Ian as 'Sir'. This you can imagine never happened, but the manager's prestige increased. Also, anyone who has worked in the Cafe, I'm sure, unable to forget the singing of endless songs by Larry of which he knew 2 lines each. He usually assisted the music with a kind of visual movement. There were times when his dancing was as delicate as a ballerina's, other times, wild, hippy, sensual dancing sparked off from films of his hero, Elvis Presley. In between, there were the dramatic scenes when he would capture the attention of everyone in the Cafe - in the middle of the floor, monologuing and monologuing very well.

There were times, of fear though also. Perhaps the best example of this was the time when three rogues of the first degree came into our cafe at ten to eleven and asked to use the 'phone. They were drunk, either on drugs or drink, or maybe a little bit of both. No matter, nearly everyone backed away. Many went outside and waited to see what would happen when I asked them to leave as I swept round them. Even Larry. The declared 'hard-nut' backed away. Who they were, I never found out. These grown up juvenile delinquents were known by our kids, and certainly feared. It made us realise how in touch our kids were with "big" crime, and also I'm afraid, how much they held the doers of this big crime as kind of heroes.