

Save our Suburb library – a decision soon?

On 26 July several members of our Action Group assembled at the Town Hall to hear what we expected to be the final ruling on the library.

As you may remember, thanks to your support, we had a petition signed by some 2,500 individuals and had presented that to Barnet Council. We had questioned the way in which costs were unfairly allocated to our very small library (thanks to extensive research by Neville Silver) and we had established that Barnet were legally committed (under the terms of their lease) to continue paying the rent of £10,532 for another 5 years. We had sought, and received, practical offers of help in the form of dedicated volunteers who would be willing to give their time (on a continuous basis) to provide necessary assistance should Barnet reduce their library staff in Market Place.

On their side Barnet were still adamant that they could provide an alternative acceptable venue should they decide to close our library (Indeed, if one looks at the precise wording of Cllr Robert Rams' Strategic Library Review, Barnet seems to

John Marshall



be obligated to provide such an alternative). The choice that they put forward was The Institute in East Finchley. We had objected to this on the grounds that it would be particularly difficult for mothers with small children and the elderly to get to The Institute and it was these people who used our library most of all – Barnet's primary audience.

At the end of proceedings, after much debate between members of the Barnet Cabinet, we achieved a stay of execution, which was probably against the odds and certainly a tribute to all those who had campaigned for our library. The Strategic Library Review was, in fact, adopted but as far as the closure of the HGS library was concerned it was 'subject to the feasibility of any community initiatives that come from residents on or before 31 October 2011'. The Action Group was then approached by Jonathan Seres and Jeremy Clynes who were very keen to take over the negotiations with Barnet on behalf of the Residents Association. It must be said that without the ongoing help of Councillor John Marshall it is possible that we would not have reached this stage at all.

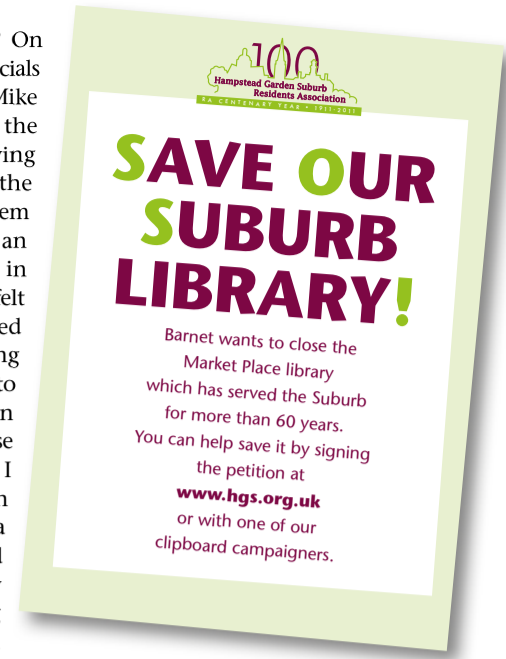
So, where are we now? Well, Barnet's negotiations with The Institute fell through, because the Council was not willing to pay any rent – one might ask why they did not advise The Institute of this in advance. Was it just being used as an option because they believed that our library might close without anyone protesting? Anyway, the demise of that possibility means that currently there are no other alternatives being offered to us. Richard Grice, the Assistant Director of Customer Services at Barnet

Council, has said that the focus at the moment is on the discussions with the RA, which he hopes will progress. The Action Group's position has, from the outset, remained the same ie. if Barnet wishes to close our Suburb library then they must provide us with a suitable alternative. For our part, we have proposed that the existing premises shall remain and we will endeavour, along with the RA, to provide unpaid volunteers to run it, in part preferably. We believe that the Council will ask us to run it entirely and then that would become a debate for the volunteers to have.

Barnet seem impressed with the number of volunteers who have already put their names forward and also their calibre. The Council seem genuinely keen for the RA initiative to work, and would be willing to

provide training for the volunteers over a 6 month period, and the feeling is that they will give some more time to negotiate the employment and health and safety issues. The most thorny subjects currently are firstly, Barnet allowing the volunteers to use its library computer system (to the majority of library users this is absolutely essential as the facility to order books from other branches in the Borough is a must). John Whiting, one of the volunteers and a former librarian himself, points to the practical implications, "A computer system has become so integral to the operation of a library that it would be impossible for anyone serving at the desk to answer most questions or even check books in and out without access to it." Secondly, the purchase and choice of new books for HGS, ie.

who pays for them? On October 19 Barnet officials Richard Grice and Mike Fahey explained the difficulties of giving volunteers access to the library computer system and proposed an additional system in parallel. Volunteers felt that this posed difficulties in training and ran counter to Barnet's corporate plan for more efficient use of resources. When I asked Councillor John Marshall, himself a library volunteer and probably the only person who is seeing this saga unfold from both sides of the fence, how he felt about the situation as it now stands, he answered, "I am cautiously optimistic." As he had just come from a



meeting with Councillor Rams I trust that his words show prescience.

DEBORAH WARLAND

The Centenary Book of St Jude-on-the-Hill

This is a splendid celebratory book, illustrated with beautiful photographs and given a sprightly text by Alan Walker, the present vicar.

The larger photographs are mainly of Walter Starmer's wonderful murals, showing their bold design and colour – his clouds and trees sometimes reminiscent of Clarice Cliff – but also, sadly, their increasing deterioration. It is good to have an account of how the paintings came about and of Lutyens's involvement in their commissioning.

Starmer's Holy Land is a vividly colourful Near Orient, sumptuously draped, which surely must have reminded Dame Henrietta (née Rowland) of the exotic illustrations in the advertisements used to promote the family firm – Rowland's Maccassar Oil. In 1920, Starmer began with the Lady Chapel but didn't paint the Virgin Mary as might have been expected. Instead he filled the dome with eminent women, some of them heroic and many of them identifiable (there is a Who's Who in the chapel).

It's to the personalities involved in the founding of the church and the Suburb and thus to the personality of the early Suburb itself that Alan Walker devotes the first part of

the book, and it's an intriguing tale, well told. He faces up to the odd nature of Dame Henrietta's Christian faith – unlike the Archbishop of Canterbury, who spoke of it 'with fitting reticence' at her funeral in 1936. Henrietta's schooling had been unorthodox and Octavia Hill later wrote – to Henrietta's husband Canon Barnett – of her 'want of real affection for the Church'. 'God is larger than the creeds' – the thought that Henrietta had carved on the Free Church – certainly worried its Elders, quite rightly.

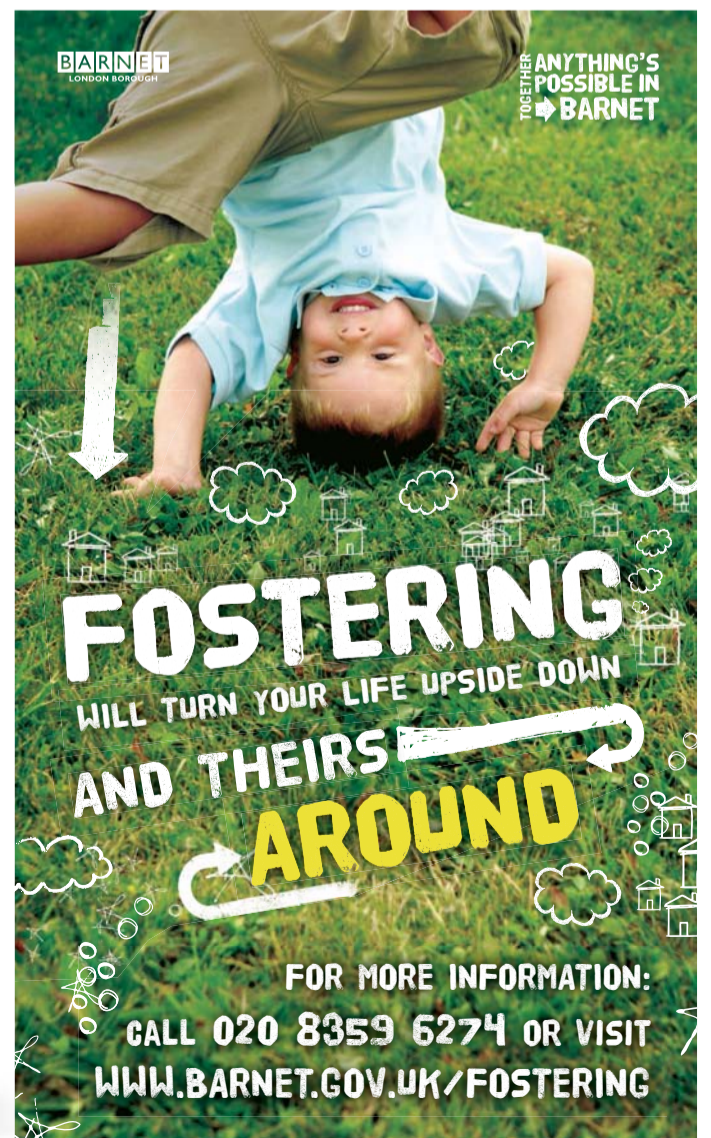
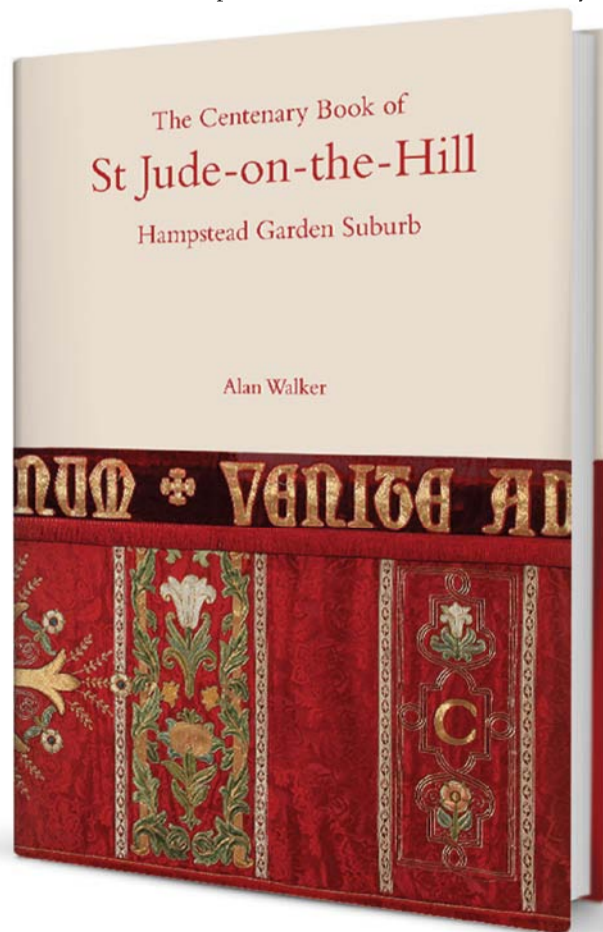
Raymond Unwin's plan for Letchworth Garden City had just been accepted when Henrietta Barnett selected him as her architect. Here was someone else 'who had moved away from conventional Christianity'.

Then came Lutyens to design the Square and the churches – an honorary member of the Theosophical Society! At least, in 1911, with the arrival of the first vicar, the Reverend Bouchier, orthodoxy could triumph. But no. He turns out to have been an extraordinary personality who went to war as a chaplain in 1914, was captured and condemned to death by the

Germans, returned and became a fashionable preacher who packed them in. Among other things, he was an anti-vivisectionist who supported vegetarianism. In Evelyn Waugh's words (quoted at length here) he was a 'totally preposterous parson'. The next vicar found a church fully equipped for Anglo-Catholic worship but

actually, in Alan Walker's words, practising 'an undogmatic aesthetic Edwardian religion of art and spiritual self-discovery'. The Centenary Book of St Jude's, £35, is available from the church, the Garden Suburb Gallery or 8455 9132.

IAN DAVIDSON



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