

# Priory Court

By Bill Bayliss

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In the beginning.....

## **PCRCA - The Committee**

My wife, 6 year old birth daughter, 5 year old birth son and baby foster daughter moved into a 3 bed flat in Priory Court in 1966. The estate had a bad reputation' and was regarded as a rough place to live.

It wasn't very long before I joined the Priory Court Resident & Community Association and shortly after I became a member of the committee. At that time the Association had become rather moribund and badly needed an injection of new enthusiastic blood. Although the other committee members knew that I was a red hot lefty political they were prepared to ignore this provided I was prepared to work for the Association.

## **Social Activities for Members & Their Families**

I became an eager activist and very shortly was playing a full part in the Association's activities. I was determined to make full use of the Association's hall to provide good free social activities for Priory Court residents. We had a full alcohol licence which meant that if we wanted to we could open the bar seven days a week for morning and evening sessions. However, we didn't want to become a cheap drinking club and strictly controlled how the price of drinks to that of the local pubs and the number of sessions that the bar was open. At the time, the hall was let out to private hirers on most Saturday nights. Sunday evenings were used as a family social drinking club to the accompaniment of music played on a record player.

## **Building a Disco & Sunday Prize Bingo**

Together with a chap called Nobby Baune, who was one of the Association's s younger family members, we electrified the record player and attached a pair of speakers. This, together with a microphone gave us the basis of a rudimentary disco set. Using our own records we were now able to provide a more 'sophisticated' (Remember it was 1966!) listening experience for the members. It wasn't long before I persuaded the committee to let me run a Sunday evening prize bingo session.

The Association already ran a Friday evening bingo club for cash prizes. However, this was quite serious stuff and the bingo caller had to stick to am strict protocol of calling the numbers of the selected balls. We wanted Sunday evening to be a fun session and when we called the numbers we were able to indulge ourselves by using all the fairground terms.eg: Legs 11 followed by a wolf whistle. Number 10, Harold's den, Two fat ladies 88, Heinz varieties No 57 etc. Because we knew the families in the audience we were often able to engage in friendly banter with them.

Essentially, there were five Bingo prize games which meant five 'line' prizes and five full 'house prizes. I bought the prizes from the Sunday market that used to be held by the River Lea off of the North Circular. At that time my transport was a moped and this limited the size of prizes that I could carry. I spent an average of 50p for 'line' prizes and £1 for house prizes. It's a source of great amusement to see many of these prizes (Brightly coloured glass fish, Capo di Monte figures, China horses etc) are presently for sale at Boot Sales and are featured on the Antique programmes.

The Sunday evening session started to become very successful and attracted a good number of new family members. On the back of this I asked the committee if I could run family entertainment evenings once a month on Saturday nights. By now Nobby and I were getting more confident about the disco equipment and we now had built a double deck, good size speakers, microphone and two sound- to- light flashing light boxes. We had also acquired some Ultra Violet lamps (Those that make your dandruff shine white) that we could swap with the fluorescent

fittings on the Saturday evening to give a more club like feel to the hall. Additionally we decided to put on simple hot food and run a sweets, crisp and soft drinks bar for the children.

## **Saturday Night Family Entertainment**

After a few months Nobby and I had honed our DJ skills and Saturday evening sessions had become very popular with local families who now had a venue near their homes where they could go with their children and have a nice comparatively cheap evening out. Flushed with our success I went back to the committee and asked if we could use another Saturday evening to provide real live entertainment. The committee as always were pragmatists. That's OK they said as long as it doesn't cost the Association any money.

## **Live Entertainment - Old Time Music Hall Mick Berry Band & Chas & Dave**

Our first live entertainment venture was an Old Time Music hall evening. We hired the entertainers and put on traditional cockney fare of bangers and mash that were served by women committee members and friends dressed in period costume (Mob caps, long pinafores aprons etc) We only charged a break- even cost figure for the tickets as we knew that the bar would make a health profit.

As result of the success of the Saturday evening Family sessions the committee agreed that we could invest in proper disco equipment. This took us into a new acoustic league as we were able to hang the professional speakers from the ceiling of the hall and we had light projectors that played on the ceiling and onto the main body of the hall. We even had a budget to keep the record stocks up to date so we were rarely without ten of the top twenty records of the time.

I was very keen to provide live entertainment one of the Saturday family nights and the committee were happy to go along with this. One of the first bands that I booked was Mike Berry & The Outlaws who were a Buddy Holly tribute band. (Mike Berry had a big top twenty hit with a song called 'The Sunshine Of Your Smile' and appeared regularly in the Children's' TV show 'Worzel Gummidge' and later 'Are You Being Served'). We advertised and sold out the gig and I had the disco set up beside the stage. I played a few records as background while the band was setting up behind the stage curtains. When I knew that they were ready I put on a Buddy Holly record (Peggy Sue) and I heard the band pick it up. I started to fade the sound of the record playing on my deck and announced ' Ladies and gentlemen, Priory Court is proud to present Mike Berry & the Outlaws' and I opened the curtains. There was no apparent break from the record to the band and they played to the end of the song while the audience crowded around the stage in silence. For a few dreadful seconds I thought that I had blown it and that I had gone a step too far until suddenly the audience broke into wild applause and cheering. For many of them this was the first time that they had seen a good live band close up and for a time they had been completely overwhelmed and stunned by the music.

Later I booked and presented a number of bands at Saturday Social Evenings and each time used the same format of running a disco between band sets etc and only charging enough to break even on our hire costs etc. Some local bands played for the experience of working on a stage with a live audience and some we paid for. My favourite booking was of Chas & Dave who are both superb musicians who play Rockney' (Cockney rock and roll.) Dave retired a couple of years ago after the death of his wife but he is now back on the road with Dave. The first time that they did a gig at Priory Court, Chas appeared in the afternoon and took the piano apart. He then completely retuned it to his satisfaction.

My 'farewell' gig was on a New Year's Eve at Priory Court. Ostensibly the feature band was Chas & Dave but all evening musicians kept appearing who had been invited by Chas & Dave to sit-in with the band. At the end of the evening, the stage band included Chas & Dave, some of the Hot Chocolate band and Chas's mum. (Listening to her it was obvious where Chas gets his piano ability from) I DJ'd in the interval and sat in on drums with the band at the end of the night.

## **Walthamstow Carnival & Fete**

### **Carnival - Mad Hatter's Tea Party**

Every Year that I was involved with the Association, PCRCA participated in both the Walthamstow Carnival & Float. For the Carnival we built and fitted out a float to take part in the parade around the streets of Walthamstow. The basis of the float was a flat truck lorry that one of our members borrowed from Hitchman's Dairies. One year our theme was Alice In Wonderland and we built a Mad Hatter's tea party set on the lorry. We had all the main characters (Alice, the Mad Hatter, the White Rabbit and the March Hare) in full costume at the Tea Party and we had a number of young people dressed as playing cards who walked alongside the float with buckets to collect money from the spectators. Before the start from the Town Hall we popped into the Bell for a drink in full costume. This caused a number of ribald comments from the pub'regulars.

### **Carnival - Peter Pan**

Another year we decided on the theme of Peter Pan (This like Alice in Wonderland was a story with a load of characters that meant we could have a lot of young people involved) We decorated the float as a Pirate Ship complete with a drainpipe mast. (We had to make the mast dismountable for when we went under a railway bridge!) we had Peter Pan, Wendy and the Darling Children, Tinker Bell, Pirates including Smee and a swashbuckling Captain Hook. Originally, we had intended to build a crocodile that would be towed by the float but unfortunately this didn't come off. We had a number charity collectors walking alongside with their buckets who were young people dressed as either lost boys and some adults dressed as pirates.

One of the good things about doing a float as a Tenant & Resident Community Association was that because we had our own bar, there wasn't a shortage of beer on the float. Nobby (Captain Hook) and I (A rank and file pirate) were quite merry and on the spur of the moment we decided to kidnap the Miss Walthamstow Carnival Queen from her float and hold her to ransom. So we did. We not only got her but we also got one of the maids of honour. Neither of them seemed distressed at all about the kidnap and seemed quite happy to be on a float with its own alcohol supply. Unfortunately, although we found the incident amusing, others didn't and we were rapidly persuaded to release Miss Walthamstow and her attendant back to their own float.

### **The Fete**

During my period of involvement this was generally held on the George Monoux sports field. Priory Court's presence was eagerly solicited by the organisers because we had a number of stalls including a Coconut Shy. Other stalls included a Win a Goldfish stall (Now illegal) and a fairground quality Spinner stall complete with surrounding barrier. Although I had never seen one, I was determined to build a 'Tip The Lady Out Of Bed' stall not least because it was all profit. So I enlisted the help of several other Priory Court members and we built it. Essentially it consisted of a solid three sided enclosure with netted front so allow visibility and a tip down bed on the back wall. Those having a go paid their money and received tennis balls to throw at a purpose built target that was attached to a trip unit. You not only had to hit the target accurately but it also needed to be with sufficient force to trip the mechanism. There wasn't any shortage of young women who were prepared to lay on the bed in their bikinis waiting to be tipped out and there was a seemingly never ending queue of people wanting to pay money to tip the lady out of bed.

### **Youth Club**

From early on in my membership of PCRCA I had wanted to run a Youth Club. Priory Court was an estate with a reputation for trouble and I believed that a Youth Club would go some way to redressing this situation. By 1972 I had been involved with PCRCA for 6 years and the Committee members were well aware of my ambition and track record and gave me permission to start a weekly youth club. There was a precedent for this because sometime in the 1950's a local chap called Harry Patel had run a Club for younger children.

The people involved with running the Youth Club were my wife, Nobby Baune and his wife Connie and sometimes a chap called Dennis and his partner Joan. All the activities took place in the hall and we had a permanent disco running that was operated by youth club members. There was also table tennis, a small pool table and darts. The whole thing was financed by the profits from a sweet and soft drinks bar.

It wasn't very long before we had a full membership of 100 young people aged 11-15. About half of them were male and about half of them were black. The rules were few but any infringement meant that the offender was banned from attendance for 1-4 weeks depending upon the severity of the offence. Because of the PCRCAs concern that the young people wouldn't cause a nuisance when entering or leaving the estate, one of the rules said that they must come on to the estate and leave quietly without causing any trouble.

### **Self Government Fails**

Quite early on in the life of the Youth Club I formed a Youth Committee who were to make the rules etc. It only lasted a few weeks because the Youth Committee members didn't want the hassle of it.. 'Look Bill', they said to me 'You make the rules, tell us what they are and what will happen if we break them'. In fact it was the very few rules and the fact that we didn't make exception for 'special' cases that contributed to the success of the Youth club. Sometimes a banned member would turn up wanting entry and on being refused would spend the entire evening standing outside of the Community Centre's surrounding iron railings.

Of course the big draw was the fact that members had the chance to operate the Disco equipment. This wasn't the Association's good stuff but the earlier equipment that Nobby and I had made. Nevertheless, it looked 'cool' because it was on the stage with flashing lights. Very early on we adopted a format for use of the equipment. In part this was to ensure that a few s kids didn't monopolise the usage of the equipment and in part was a musical decision. What we found was that the girls would try to play the same half a dozen current chart songs and the boys would play 'specialist' music that they liked. So we adopted a format where the budding DJ's only played two records each at a time.

It was quite interesting to watch and to listen. The girls played current pop music that they could 'formation' dance to in set routines. Some of the boys played Ska 'fighting' music where the boys would dance acrobatically and 'play-fight' each other.

I believe that we were the only Walthamstow Youth Club to attract 'traveller' youth as members. Walthamstow has a long tradition of providing stopping points for 'Travellers' and there was a traditional site nearby in Folly Lane. There too were quite a few local 'Traveller' families who had settled in the Higham Hill area. Every now and again a group of 'Traveller'youths would come to the Youth Club. They dressed similarly and wore 'pork pie' hats. They weren't particularly interested in mingling with other Youth Club members or the Disco. Their big obsession was playing darts.

### **The Problems Of Success**

News of the Priory Court Youth Club spread throughout the Borough and we started to become inundated with mostly black youth from further afield trying to gain entrance. This became particularly intense during the summer holidays when apparently and incomprehensibly the Borough run Youth Clubs closed down. Many youths tried to gain entrance by giving the names of someone they knew to be a member. However, they came unstuck because my wife has an incredible memory for faces and names. One evening I heard her say to one would be entrant 'Look, I know you're not x because he's here already and you're the third person who has tried to get in using his name'.

Our problem came when the member became sixteen years old. We had set the age limit of 11-15 years so that members reaching sixteen years could then feed into the nearby Borough run Youth Clubs. Unfortunately, this was not to be. They simply did not want to leave. So unofficially we changed the age limits from 11-17 years. We became so successful that various Youth Worker from the Borough run Youth Clubs asked if they could come and see what

we were doing. We didn't have a problem with this but stipulated that they were not to interfere. They came, observed and went away.

One of our problems with the management of the Youth Club was in controlling the behaviour of the girls in the toilets. Essentially, they used the Ladies toilets as a smoking/chat/ meeting area. I was forever standing outside the Ladies Toilet door shouting at them to get off the Wash hand basins (That they used as seats!) stop smoking and come out.

### **Social Improvement.**

The results of the work of Priory Court Residents & Community Association were to dramatically improve the reputation of the estate and create a better life for the residents. By the early 1970's we were using the Hall for community and social events 16 hours a day seven days a week. There was a Pre School Play Group every weekday morning, Old Peoples Lunch clubs every weekday Lunch time. Old People Social Clubs three afternoons a week. Regular Committee meetings, We had a number of Darts Teams who had their own social evening, A Drama group, a Youth Club, Friday Evening Bingo sessions, Saturday and Sunday Social Clubs etc.

### **The Waltham Forest Confederation Of Residents & Tenant Associations**

In the mid 1970's I became involved with other Waltham Forest Tenant & Resident Associations and together with activists from some other Tenant Associations we helped to form new Tenant Association on estates that lacked any representation. From this we went on to form the Waltham Forest Federation Of Tenants & Residents Associations that represented residents and tenants at meetings with Waltham Forest Council. I had the honour of being the first Chairperson.

### **We Leave Priory Court.**

My wife and I had been foster carers for Waltham Forest since 1969. By 1975 the pressure on our lives became increasingly intense as we tried to bring up our own two teenagers, our long term foster daughter and at least one other foster child in a three bedroom flat. This pressure was intensified because of the advocacy and advice work that I did for residents that meant that whenever I was home there was somebody needing help. In 1976 the Council agreed to re-house us to a new large four bedroom town house in Chingford. At the same time I had got a new job working as a Housing Manager for the GLC. The move put us about five mile away and the combination of the two events effectively put an end to our involvement in Priory Court Residents & Community Association.

### **Aftermath**

One of my ambitions was to persuade the Council to expand Priory Court's Community Association Hall so that we could provide more activities and social events for the people in the area. This actually happened when the Council re-developed Priory Court. This re-development also included the building of a number of private houses. Somewhere after this time PCRCA went into decline and the new Centre is now run by a Housing Association.

Sadly, Priory Court is now the centre of a Youth gang who call themselves the 'Grey Wolves' who compete with other youth gangs in the area and the estates reputation is very much as it was when we first went there in 1966.

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February 2011