

EPISODE VI.
-----Of Human Endeavour; Founding mutual-aid Clubs for
unemployed men in London.

It will be remembered by my own contemporaries at least, that for some years after the 1914-18 war there was a grave problem of unemployment. Now that I was back in London, and "myself" unemployed, I could not fail to notice this. At night, especially if passing at any late hour through London's streets and squares, one was grieved by the sight of huddled figures trying to snatch a brief sleep upon steps, seats, or benches, before inevitably being moved on by the police. Policemen were as lenient as possible, but such were their orders. I was more and more disturbed by what I saw. Many people tried to make me suppose that such men were merely the slackers and idlers of our nation. I did not feel convinced; and still less convinced, after I had made a test by spending several nights amongst these men, clad in an old suit and wrapping myself before sleep in newspapers. I talked with many men, and their stories did not at all suggest that they were slackers. Then I saw by chance a brief newspaper appeal by a Catholic priest for help in giving a warm early morning meal to destitute people in a certain part of the city. I am not a catholic, but I made contact with this priest. I found him a man of disconcertingly dog and unresponsive manner, but he was willing to accept my help. He was indeed doing a magnificent work of christian charity, and his helpers were few. It was a strange task I found myself engaged in. Every morning very early I left my Chelsea rooms for the city. There I met the priest at his "Centre". Soon numbers of disconsolate figures, mostly rather

young, and nearly all ex-service men,— would drift in. There were also just a few derelect old ladies. All were destitute, but only very few men were of the true "vagabond" type. They were on the contrary just such fellows as I had been accustomed to respect and care for as an officer in my own active service days. I shall not forget one man in particular. He was of middle years and direct manner, but looked incredibly ill and wan in the dreary light of an early morning of rain. I talked with him, and he said he had just left a hospital bed after pneumonia. He also had served in the war. I arranged to see him again next day to try and help him; but he did not come again. I have wondered very much as to his fate.

Soon I conceived an urge to start some sort of work of my own on behalf of unemployed men. I heard of a large church at Kennington, which had beneath it a very spacious and unused crypt. The vicar, Doctor Darlington (whose wife was a sister of that now famous Montgomery of the recent war) kindly placed this crypt at my disposal. I gathered around me a dozen unemployed men. Together we gathered a few pounds. I was chosen as "Organizer". The other chaps each had a trade in which he was skilled, but no cash. We decided to try to set up a mutual-aid club as a center for advice and recreation for unemployed men; and so it was that the Crypt Club started. It was one of the strangest episodes of my life, and one of the most inspiring;— it included much labour, some sorrow, frequent disappointments, and the zest of much fine human companionship. In the course of some months our membership had amounted to hundreds; and when I handed over my task at the end of nearly three years, the members, associate members, Women's Club, and families section, in all totalled close on two thousand. Some day I would like to write a detailed record of this strange human experience which came to me.

In a quite different form the club still exists. It is now bequeathed to the good offices of my old college Christchurch Oxford.

All sorts of people became associated with us as we progressed, including the Dons and Undergraduates of my own ^{old} college, and there were great names amongst them, as well as lesser ones. Some of my own relations were kindly helpful, especially young Trevenen James, then a school boy at Westminster who arranged most helpful liaison between the fencing teams of his school and our club. My cousin Bessie Gorell, and her husband Lord Gorell, who had been our Air Under Secretary during part of the time when I was still a serving officer, were both personally helpful; as were also as usual those dear people Lady Lilian Grenfell, her daughters Iris and Daphne and her Sister Lady Norah. John Hanbury-Tracy who has since then become noted as an explorer in Thibet and elsewhere, and as an artist, gave uniquely popular assistance as a Ju-Jitsu instructor; and ^{the} famous young athlete Lord Burghley helped us with our boxing. Last but not least young Russell Stephenson was always around with his cheery and ready help. Poor Russell I last remember him when he and his young wife came to Cairo on their honeymoon, and I lent them my flat. Early in the war he died, soon after joining up, in a tragic accident. All these and many others joined as "associate members" of the club, on the premises of which however there were no differences of rank or status. Those more comfortably placed ~~merely~~ had the privilege of paying membership fees according to their means. An unemployed man's membership fee was one penny a week, or whatever he could afford. We had as our senior member that great figure around whom in later years so much controversy raged, I mean the Prince of Wales, later to be H.M. King Edward VIII, and now Duke of Windsor; a gracious, energetic, and generous comrade to all of us in those days which none of us who knew them can forget.

In a category of apart is to be recorded our debt of gratitude to my friend John-Paul Ross, who gave to the work the wonderful support of his loyalty, efficiency and enthusiasm from the earliest days, and to me the gift of a treasured friendship. In ^{the} recent war his qualities of service were of the same fineness, and he served with great distinction.

The following copies of some newspaper cuttings and letters I find of interest at least to myself, and they will ~~have~~ sufficiently explain some main points of the history of this undertaking, and recall grateful remembrance of all who helped us in that venture.

CRYPT CLUB KENNINGTON (REPORT)

Summary of activities since November.

At the request, and with the cooperation of Dr. and Mrs. Darlington, the plan to open an unemployed men's club at Kennington was undertaken at the beginning of November last. At the first meeting, we had 25 members and a "capital" of approximately £.2.--. At the formal opening about a week later there were about a hundred members. The membership as recorded in the club register at the present date numbers just over 700. On entry to the club, members receive a card and pay a weekly subscription of 1d. The club has been supported throughout, entirely by voluntary effort, both as regards personal service and funds. The premises are in the great crypt under Kennington Church.

From among the first hundred members a committee and club "stewards" were elected. The next step was to start the canteen (no charge higher than a halfpenny) and the workshops (bootmakers, tailors, carpenters, electricians and barbers). Any cash earned through work in these shops is paid direct into club funds.

A library was rapidly collected around a nucleus of books graciously presented by H.M. the Queen (Queen Mary); a reading room with daily papers (to which the newspapers from York House were an early and welcome addition) was opened; an elementary P.T. class was got together, and billiards and other games provided.

The visits of H.M. the Queen and H.R.H. The Prince of Wales did much to encourage the club at its start and at the personal wish of the Prince the idea of P.T., boxing and athletics generally was more vigorously tackled. With this in view, Captain Welsh, head of the Mayfair gymnasium was approached, and he at once offered his free personal services and supervision to the athletic side of the club, and also gave free classes at his gymnasium to parties of young men from the Club. These services he generously gave for several weeks until obliged, through stress of other work, to withdraw.

A good foundation having been laid, the athletic side was then satisfactorily taken on by other volunteers and weekly classes were continued in P.T., boxing, fencing and wrestling.

Further enterprise from helpers brought into use a light lunch counter where three course meals, at a charge of fourpence, have been supplied on Tuesdays and Thursdays. A wireless set has recently been presented to the club and is in use.

Each month there has been a concert given for the members, to which their wives and elder children have also been invited. Artists of note have generously appeared at all these concerts.

At Xmas a dinner and entertainment was given to 330 members. One of the lady helpers has, for some time, taken a personal interest in the wives and families of members, giving coal and supplies in urgent cases. The Crypt Club has also held a distribution of clothing each Wednesday for urgent cases not dealt with from other sources.

During the last few months football matches have been arranged each week at Clapham Common.

On the educational side, there have been weekly classes in French and Spanish, and weekly lectures on subjects of general interest. There have also been ^{classes} in First Aid, and rug-making. By the courtesy of Sir William Morris a special film and lecture was provided from the motor works at Oxford, which was of special interest to mechanics.

All interior fittings in the club premises were constructed by the members unaided by outside help. These include construction of offices and shops, plumbing, electricity, decoration and painting, gymnasium apparatus, boxing ring, the stage with its apparatus, and the light lunch kitchen.

About six weeks after the club started, some difficulty was experienced from Communist "agitation". There was a demand for re-election of the members committee. It seemed wisest to allow this, and although certain of the "agitators" themselves were elected into the committee, it was found that when in a position of authority, their attitude changed and, except for minor 'incidents' their work for the club has been keen and without prejudice.

In organizing the Crypt Club it has been the endeavour to place all possible authority in the hands of the members of the committee itself. There has been no interference in the decisions of the committee if it could possibly be avoided. This on the whole, has worked well.

Throughout the six months, though all categories of workless men have been welcomed without question, it has been necessary to expel only 8 individuals for misbehaviour. These expulsions have all been carried out with the approval of the members committee.

The personal interest shown by H.R.H. The Prince of Wales, in the club has been of the greatest benefit throughout, and markedly inspiring to members and helpers alike.

Signed H. Hindle-James
Hon. Organiser
Crypt Club.

17/4/33

John-Paul Ross
Hon. Treasurer
Crypt Club.

Extract from the "TIMES" - 23/12/33.

OVAL-HOUSE CLUB FOR THE UNEMPLOYED

A large number of unemployed were entertained at the Oval-House Club for unemployed men at Kennington Oval last night. They included members of the club and of other unemployed men's clubs. Lady Lilian Grenfell, Lady Gorell, and Mrs. Rothery, the wife of the sports secretary, who is himself an unemployed member, acted as hostesses. There were also present Lord and Lady Mersby, Lord Gorell, Prs. Parsons, wife of the Bishop of Southwark, Mr. Leveson-Gower, chairman of the M.C.C., Mrs. Ross, Miss. Wilson, Mrs. Darlington, Miss M.B. Scott, Mr. John Pennington, Major Garnier, Commander Ross, and Mr. J.P. Ross. An entertainment was provided by Mr. Leslie Henson, Miss Zelma O'Neil, Mr. George Baker, Mr. Richard Hearn, Miss Hunt, Mr. Hutcheson, and Miss Eda Peel. The entertainers were introduced to the hostesses and the entertainers by SQUADRON LEADER HINDLE-JAMES, hon. organizer of the club, and Mr. HAYDEN, ^{one} of the unemployed members.

Extract from "THE TIMES" - 10/2/34

O V A L H O U S E C L U B

GROWING ACTIVITIES FOR THE UNEMPLOYED

The Oval House Club, to which the Prince of Wales paid an informal visit last Tuesday, is supported in its work among the unemployed by an interesting combination of voluntary agencies. The club owes its name to an informal alliance between the Surrey County Cricket Club and Christ Church, Oxford, to which Squadron Leader Hindle-James, the honorary organizer of the club, belongs. The House last summer lent its camp site at Sutton Courtenay to the club, and two parties, each of about 60 unemployed men, enjoyed there a fortnight's holiday. Other parties have frequently been entertained at Christ Church by dons and undergraduates, and a football match will be played between Christ Church and the Oval House Club in the near future.

The premises of the Surrey Cricket Club at Kennington Oval were placed at the disposal of the Oval House at the suggestion of the Prince of Wales, on whose Kennington estate the ground is situated. Mr. H.D. Leveson-Gower and Mr. Davey, the chairman and secretary of the Surrey C.C., have put all their club's amenities freely at the service of the unemployed men for the winter months. As an indication of the interest in the unemployment problem which is being taken in the public schools Westminster school was represented during the Prince of Wales's visit to the Oval last Tuesday by Mr. Trevenon James, of the school fencing team, who engaged in a bout with a member of the Oval House Club fencing class. It is hoped also to arrange a fencing match between the club and Westminster School.

It is emphasized that the Oval House Club is non-political and non-sectarian, and is run as a private undertaking with funds

subscribed among personal friends of the honorary organizer and the assistant honorary organizer. The members are young men between the ages of 18 and 30. Athletics of all kinds are the club's main activity, but there are also classes in French, book-keeping, mathematics, carpentry, and petrol engines. Most of these classes are run by voluntary instructors. Much help has come from the staff of the Walworth Road Men's Institute of the L.C.C. and from the Lucas-Tooth Gymnastic Institute. The playing field of the 21st London Regiment (First Surrey Rifles) has been placed at the disposal of the club each Monday for football by the officer commanding the regiment.

The club has also a women's section, open to wives and mothers of the members. The women meet once a week to hear concerts and talks, and they do the necessary washing of athletic kit, make aprons, for the carpenters, and perform other helpful work. The women's section is supervised by Mrs. Hamilton Stephenson, helped by Miss Ines Walter.

EXTRACT FROM "THE TIMES" - 19/3/34.

PRINCE AND OVAL HOUSE CLUB

The work of the Oval House Club among the unemployed of the Kennington district came to a temporary end on Friday, on account of the near approach of the cricket season. A farewell gathering was held at the club premises, which were lent for the winter by the Surrey County Cricket Club. About 300 people, mostly unemployed, were present. The visitors included the Mayor and Mayoress of Lambeth, Lord Forrester, and Mr. Leveson-Gower (president of the Surrey C.C.). On behalf of the club SQUADRON LEADER HINDLE-JAMES thanked their many friends and helpers, and particularly the Prince of Wales, for his unflinching interest. As an expression of his appreciation of the good spirit of the club's football team, Squadron Leader Hindle-James said, the Prince had

expressed his intention of providing motor transport from York House to carry the team on Wednesday to Wembley, to see the final for the Sir Noel Curtis Bennett Cup. It was hoped that the club might resume its activities next winter, and that its example would be followed elsewhere.

My speech of thanks in Christ Church Hall, when the Dean entertained 100 unemployed men there:

Mr. Dean, Mrs. White, my friends,

I shall feel it a great privilege if I may be allowed to say just a few words. I am in the happy position of being able to claim membership of both the College and the Club, and in this capacity I should like if I may firstly to express very warmly our mutual pleasure in the most pleasant gathering here today. Being in this Hall of course arouses memories. My time as an undergraduate at this College was very happy, but was abruptly cut short by the war. Like others, I gained in the war years some beautiful as well as many terrible memories. Then I continued to serve abroad till recently I was invalided out of the Service.

I found myself without a job, and I didn't like it. Then by a lucky chance for me, the Crypt Club idea was suggested to me by a kind lady whom we Cryptis all know well, and so we got going. We started with 25 members, and we rose to 720. members, and we learned a good deal in the process.

At the present time England is involved in another war, the war against unemployment. Every one of us is hit by it, but some of your guests here today are as it were from the front lines trenches. It is less spectacular warfare, but just as grim, but mixed with it one finds those very same qualities of the old war days, comradeship, courage and good cheer. Very many people of all sorts have visited the Crypt Club during recent months, but I do not think anyone could accuse us of being a gloomy crowd — but they soon realize too the courage which

lies beneath that cheeriness and that refusal to be beaten by adverse circumstances. The Crypt Club is a widely varied community, and has only two essential qualifications for members — friendliness and willingness to help as well as to be helped, and so all the more do we appreciate the frank spirit of helpful friendliness with which this great college has welcomed us here, not only on this special occasion today but throughout previous weeks. This gesture between Oxford and Kennington seems to have special significance. We have been most cordially greeted, and I feel quite sure of my ground, when I say that your guests respond as cordially and with sincere gratitude to that greeting. When next we all meet at the Athletic Camp I feel that this will indeed prove a most congenial enterprise for us all.

I now have a message to read to you from someone, who more than any other one person at this time works for the cause of practical help and encouragement to those out of employment, I mean H.R.H. the Prince of Wales

(Prince of Wales telegram is read)

Mr. Dean I thank you, and all those associated with Christ Church for the generous welcome you have extended to us, and for your most kind words of greeting.

EXTRACT FROM " THE TIMES " - 4/7/1934

RIVERSIDE CAMP FOR UNEMPLOYED

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OXFORD UNDERGRADUATES AS ORGANIZERS

The Christ Church and Kennington Athletic Camp, which was organized by Squadron Leader H. Hindle James last year as part of his scheme for bringing the undergraduates of Christ Church, Oxford, into personal contact with the unemployed of the distressed London districts is again to be held this year, on the same site, lent by the college authorities, on the banks of the river, near Sutton Courtenay.

It will be opened next Monday and will be run on the same

plan as last year, except that, in accordance with the hoped for development, when the preliminary work is done Squadron Leader James will hand over the entire organization to volunteers from among the undergraduates. At the head will be Mr. J. Nicholls and Mr. Peter Bankes, who are energetic supporters of the enterprise.

About 75 unemployed men will be in the camp, which will last about three weeks. The campers will mainly be unemployed men for the Kennington area and from various branches of the Feathers Club.

The camp, which it is hoped to make an annual event so long as the need exists, again has the personal interest of the Prince of Wales, who last year spent a day in camp with the men, flying from Sunningdale to do so.

Any local support the campers can obtain in the way of gifts of vegetables, fruit, & c. will be most welcome, as also would gifts of camp kit, games outfits, ordonations.

Gifts should be addressed to the Secretary, the Christ Church Athletic Camp, Christ Church, Oxford.

The following extracts are from a few of the many kind letters I received about our work.

Duchy of Cornwall
10 Buckinham Gate,
S.W.1.

Feb. 7th 1934.

"This is just a line to tell you how pleased H.R.H. was with everything last night.

"It reflects great credit on you, and Ross, in getting up such a splendid show.

Yours sincerely,
Hilgrove McCormick.

St. James's Palace, S.W.

21st of March 1934.

"Thank you for your letter of March the 19th, which I know the Prince of Wales will be glad to read.

"The Oval House Club certainly has had a most successful season, and I congratulate you on all you have done.

Yours sincerely,

Godfrey Thomas.

Bishop's House,
Kennington Park, S.E.11,

14th September 1933.

"I enclose a cheque for you to use either towards the expenses of the unemployed camp at Sutton Courteney, or for work in connection with the Kennington unemployed in the coming winter.

"I should like to say as Bishop of the Diocese how much I appreciate what you and your friends have been doing for the unemployed.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Southwark.

The Deanery,
Christ Church,
Oxford.

27th September 1933.

"I know that I am expressing the feelings of others as well as my own, when I offer you our very warm thanks for all you have done for so many months at the Camp for the unemployed on the Christ Church

Grounds. It was a real pleasure to us to give you the use of the ground and to do anything else we could towards helping the Camp; but the burden and heat of the day were borne by you and you deserve all the praise.

With kind regards and grateful thanks,

Yours sincerely,

H.J. White.

19 Cowley Street, S.W.1.

18.1.34.

"Many thanks for your letter. You deserve the highest praise for the splendid work you are doing. Heartiest congratulations.

Yours,

E.D. Metclafe.

Cuttiversdoor,
Ridgeway,
Southborough, Kent.

24.7.34.

"Thank you for your appreciative letter, and I hope we may later have opportunity to discuss schemes for the unemployed. I think all these efforts of yours are really worthwhile.

"Thank God, the patronizing attitude of "Being good to the poor" is not so often met with now, but I am really anxious that all this fellowship work should lead people to recognise the larger problem which it is in the power of this generation to solve.

Yours sincerely,

Margaret G. Bondfield.

The Mayor's Parlour,
Townhall,
Brixton Hill, S.W.2.

6th of July 1934.

"It is splendid of you to arrange again this Camp for the benefit of the unemployed. On behalf of the fellows who are going from Sussex Road I would say how much they appreciate the service you are rendering them.

Yours sincerely,

Herbert Willman.

Mayor.

Surrey County Cricket Club,
Kennington Oval, S.E.11,

24th of April 1934.

" I have the pleasure to enclose an Honorary Member's ticket of the Surrey County Cricket Club which my Committee has directed me to ask you to accept.

Yours sincerely,

A.F. Davey

Secretary.

5 Belgrave Place,
S.W.1.

July the 25th 1934.

"Many thanks for your letter and for the invitation to lunch. Monday will suit me very well. We are having our last Committee Meeting at Lord's that afternoon and I should like to bring the matter up at that meeting. I hope this will suit you.

Yours sincerely,

Lewisham.

The Oval House Club,
The Pavillon,
Kennington, S.E.11.

"I would like to tell you how happy I have been since I had the fortune and privilege of service with you in harness together. My loyalty and devotion to you and to our work is vast, but certainly no greater than that of the many unfortunates who having come under your genial aegis, are now fortunate, in having you as their guide, philosopher and friend, the latter above all else. They realise, as well as I do, though less articulately, what a "rara avis" they are under; and even now one feels proud to have the privilege of saying that you are one's friend; and in time to come many Kenningtonians will achieve an enviable "cliche" by being able to say that they knew Squadron Leader James personally. This is a bad letter, for any utterance on such a theme seems irreverent, albeit I am the fool who steps in where angels fear to tread."

Yours

John-Paul (Ross).

The above various commentaries show in outline how our work developed. There are still just two episodes I personally like to remember. The first is the unannounced first visit of H.M. Queen Mary to our Club, attended only by one Lady-in-Waiting. She knew well that there might be risk,— for the club included all grades of political opinion — yet H.M. did not hurry her visit. She chatted quietly to many men, and then had a long talk alone with me in my little underground "Office". It was a very informal meeting but H.M. was most kind in all she said, including some "understanding" comments about

my own health. As usual H.M. looked "every inch a queen", and with all her gentleness there was also great dignity. Far from any sign of hostility from any unemployed members of the club, her visit left an impression of gratitude and very sincere appreciation amongst them.

My other special memory is of the evening when local communists attacked the Club. The idea was to break in with the object of a personal assault upon myself. The members however stoutly defended the premises, and long before the police arrived the attackers have been routed! For weeks after I noticed that whenever I left the club a small party of members "shadowed" me for some distance. I was at first a little disconcerted; till I discovered that this was an informal "bodyguard" to see that I came to no harm.

I will end with just a note of warning to inexperienced folk who think of launching out in work of this sort. It is a fine undertaking certainly, and very rewarding to the spirit; yet it has definite perils, some of them of the most unexpected sort. There is hard work, and there are frequent rebuffs. There is human jealousy as well as comradeship, and to the unwary there is political hatred which will not stop at personal assault, trickery, and even blackmail of the simple natured. One must be very wide awake as well as enthusiastic, and one must be thick-skinned as well as kindly. I must confess however that my experiences have left me with many welcome memories and only a few unwelcome ones.

I still retain a few personal contacts from those days, one of the most treasured being the kind letters I still sometimes receive here in Cairo from Marlborough House, the Residence of Her Gracious Majesty, Mary, Queen Mother of England.