

Toc H in Moseley

This article is based on information from the Toc H archives held at the Cadbury Research Library and an interview with Doug and Hilary Geater Childs who were Toc H Moseley volunteers in the late 1960s, before Hilary became project staff in the 70's. Today Hilary is Vice Chair of Toc H and Doug is General Secretary. They have many fond memories of Mark VI and Toc H projects, many of which will surely be familiar to long-time Moseley residents!

The Toc H archive is extensive and is currently organised by theme, which makes it difficult to isolate the materials related to Moseley Toc H. Only catalogue entries which include the keywords 'Moseley' or 'Birmingham' were consulted at this time.



Rev. Philip Byard Clayton (Cadbury Research Library)

Tubby came up with an ingenious solution to prevent books walking out of the house. The men had to leave their cap behind when borrowing a book from the library - he knew that no soldier would dare leave that behind when returning to duty! Tubby also organised events, including concerts and debates. However, the true heart of Toc H was the attic room, which was converted into a chapel, where communion was held and where many soldiers received their confirmation.

Toc H is radio signallers' parlance for the letters TH, short for Talbot House. Talbot House was a soldier's rest house in Poperinge, Belgium. The town, which was called Pops by the soldiers, was close to Ypres and troops were often billeted there on their way to or from the battlefields. Talbot House was the brainchild of Rev. Philip Byard Clayton, an army chaplain, better known as 'Tubby' and opened on December 11th 1915. Tubby had been asked to set up a rest house by his senior chaplain, Neville Talbot and so the house was named in honour of his brother Gilbert who had been killed earlier in the year.

Tubby wanted to create an 'oasis of sanity' for the men, an Everyman's house rather than just a traditional church club. He rented a hop merchant's house, which had a walled garden for relaxation and a kitchen where lots of tea was drunk. There was a noticeboard where soldiers could leave messages for friends who might pass through and even a library.



Talbot House, Poperinge (Toc H)
This is the only surviving early image of Talbot House during the war.



Upper room at Talbot House (Wikimedia commons)

After the war, back in London, Tubby Clayton was pestered by men who wanted to recapture the fellowship and comradeship of Talbot House. In November 1919 Tubby gathered some of the men who had passed through Talbot House during the war, who became the first committee. They chose the name Toc H for their organisation. In 1920 they set out the aims for the organisation, known as The Four Points of the Compass.

The Four Points of the Compass:

1. Friendship - "To love widely"
2. Service - "To build bravely"
3. Fairmindedness - "To think fairly"
4. The Kingdom of God - "To witness humbly"

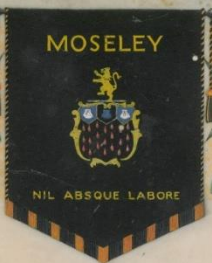


Toc H decided to open a hostel for men coming to London in search of work, and chose a house in Queensgate Gardens. This house was known as Mark I in the army fashion and was a place of fellowship just like the original Talbot House. The men who lived there, known as 'Marksmen' soon began to undertake service in the community around the Mark – fulfilling the second aim of Toc H.

Additional branches opened around the country, and Toc H quickly becoming an international movement too. The organisation gained a Royal Charter in 1922.

Toc H was originally open to men, but some nurses who had used Talbot House during the war established the League of Women Helpers, which then became Toc H (Women's Division) and fully merged with Toc H in the early 1970s. Hilary was the first woman appointed to the joint movement and was based at Mark VI.

Each Mark and branch (non-residential group) had a lamp, and every year from 1926 the lamps were lit for a 24-hour vigil forming a 'World Chain of Light'. Each Mark was quite independent, choosing the forms of service they felt were most needed, and so the work of Toc H was extremely varied, but by the 1930s there were hundreds of branches and thousands of members around the world. In Moseley the Toc H story also begins in the 1930s, and stretches right into the 21st century. The earliest known document referring to Moseley is this beautiful illustrated Lamp Petition from 1931.



REMEMBERING WITH GRATITUDE
 OUR ELDER BRETHREN and
 how God used the Old House for men to
 know that behind the ebb and flow of
 things Temporal stand the Eternal Realities
 we, the Members in Moseley, make our petition
 for a Lamp of Maintenance, that we may carry
 the Light first lit by Sacrifice and maintain
 it by Service to old and young, rich and poor
 hale and sick, cheering the way of the lonely
 with the laughter that is learnt of friends
 so preserving a living memorial of those who
 in all ages have given their lives in Service



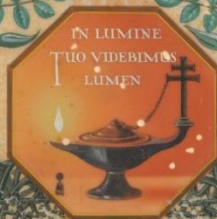
Albert P. Hinton	Aubrey M. Jackson	John J. Raynolds
John G. Stone	Ralph O. Evans	Guy Baker
Ernest A. Brown	Harold Wall	Albert Hinton
Arthur H. Hinchey	David J. Stevens	J. Hines, Runcorn
Worshipful Master	Stanley R. Ridd	John E. Stone
Herbert R. Henson	Edmund G. Porter	Frank J. Howarth
George Austin	Arthur T. Beach	Ernest H. Fry
Tom L. Trough	Norman T. Chapman	William C. Nicholas
George A. Brindall	Ronald A. Hurlings	Vincent Williams
	Alfred A. Taylor	

This petition having been granted, the Lamp was bestowed and first
 lit by H.R.H. the Patron in the Crystal Palace on the 6th of June 1931

Christopher Dasher

To think fairly

To love widely



To witness humbly

To build bravely

RALPH O. EVANS

Moseley Toc H Lamp Petition, 1931

The house in Moseley known as Mark VI was at number 6 Wake Green Road. Toc H moved in during 1936, and the house officially opened in 1937. There was a commemorative plaque unveiled by Lord Austin, which has since been returned to his family. Toc H were based there until the late 1970s when they moved, first into 24 Grove Avenue, a building which was owned by the organisation until the recent difficulties.

Mark VI in Wake Green Road was a residential house, where members lived together and served the wider community. There were 14 residents and a wardens' flat, but the entire ground floor of the house was dedicated to community use. One of the rooms was used by the Moseley and District Drama Group, who were also famous for their Shakespearean performances in the garden, which had been built into a sort of amphitheatre. Hilary, who had studied drama, also remembers working with them on a project in the Cotswolds. The grounds of Mark VI were large and there was a lawn for bowls and a playground with assault course and aerial walkways at the bottom of the garden. There were also outbuildings which contained an office and a 'bunk room' with 2 sets of bunk beds for putting up volunteers.

However, even with the extra beds, there wasn't always enough room for everyone, as Doug remembers from one of the volunteer reunions in the 1970s. On that occasion John Mitchell decided to send those without a bed out on a 'night exercise'. They conducted a survey of homeless people in Birmingham – 60 or so volunteers undertook the survey which proved official statistics wrong. A further project checked derelict buildings. These surveys led to a 'Soup Run' and Toc H working with Christian Action on 'The Birmingham Project' which opened firstly a drop-in centre and then a night shelter.



Birmingham Project 1976 (Cadbury Research Library)

Toc H started doing soup runs 4 nights a week, which ended in 1973 but was later re-started by the churches. The Christian Action drop-in centre was on Pershore Street, opposite the Silver Blades Ice Rink. Toc H completed the upstairs renovation and installed the bathroom. They would also assist the staff member at the centre, so he could take a break. There is still a day centre on Pershore Street today, known as 'The Fireside'. The night shelter in the crypt of St Chads cathedral for 30 men would go onto become an independent charity – 'The Birmingham Committee for Night Shelters', which opened the Trinity Centre. This model was typical for Toc H – lending initial support to a project until it grew and became self-sustaining and independent, because Toc H needed to continue doing other work.

Many of the Moseley Toc H projects were working with young people, especially those from marginalised and vulnerable communities. During the school holidays Toc H was involved with a city wide playscheme called 'Holidays at Home' and also ran their own playschemes. Doug's introduction to Toc H was assisting with Holidays at Home, looking after a group of children who were staying at the Methodist church on Moseley Road, a great location, but one without adequate washing facilities. Doug and the other Toc H volunteers used the slipper baths at the pool, but for the children, the simplest way to keep them clean was to take them swimming!



Above: Moseley Road Baths 1976 (Cadbury Research Library)
Below: 'Holiday camp at home, Christ Church Sparkbrook' 1976 (Cadbury Research Library)



Hilary also led a Toc H project in Balsall Heath, when the area was still a red-light district in the 1970s. Toc H ran a nursery for the pre-school aged children of the prostitutes. Hilary's role included collecting children and bringing them to the nursery. The car was a mini, without seatbelts in the back, and so in order to keep anyone from falling out, she would quite literally fill the car, and was once propositioned while there were 10 kids with her!

Another group Toc H worked closely with at this time was the travelling community, lobbying the council to provide permanent sites for them. Toc H knew that the lack of legal sites caused many problems for families, including making it nearly impossible to send the children to school. With the constant threat of eviction, the fear was that the child would return home from school to find the vans gone and have no way of getting back to the family, or that the family would lose their homes by staying behind to wait for the children.

Toc H would use their 3 week playschemes as a chance to teach the children the basics of reading, on the understanding that if those staying on the site were evicted during the day they would manage to reunite the family. This was difficult in a pre-mobile phone era, but they did have a contact to call who could help find out which direction the vans had been taken in. The closest site to Moseley was in Druids Heath, on the Alcester Road from Kings Heath, an area which later became a housing estate. Toc H also manned traveller sites with independent observers and campaigned for the change in legislation that led to the creation of the 12 van site at Castle Bromwich under the motorway.

Sadly, the community faced a lot of prejudice around healthcare as well as education. One of the girls at the Druids Heath site, called Maggie, was injured by falling into a campfire on the Friday, and by Monday when Hilary came to collect her the burn was going septic. One of the older women asked Hilary to take her to the hospital, to avoid the whole clan going with her and 'causing a riot'. The older woman stayed at the camp to 'deal with the parents'. Hilary took another girl called Winnie along to keep Maggie company. The hospital wait could have been a disaster with the girls getting bored and upset, reacting against the hostility and prejudice. Sadly, it wasn't until Hilary mentioned that her brother was a doctor that anyone would agree to see them.

Both Hilary and Doug agreed that working with Toc H often puts you on 'the other side of the tracks' and that this perspective can be valuable. A change of perspective was also what Toc H tried to offer through the Birmingham Outward Group which was founded by Jerry Norman, a resident at Mark VI who was a probation officer. The idea was to take children from underprivileged backgrounds (some of whom were in trouble, but not all) and give them experience of the countryside and great outdoors. Lots of weekends were spent doing outdoor activities, and the group ran until the 90s. When Hilary was involved, the staff vehicle was a minibus she described as 'lethal', which often had to be stoked with oil as it was driven to prevent breakdowns, and was once observed rolling from lane to lane on the motorway *en route* to a Toc H sports day in London!

If the kids arrived in the countryside unscathed, they were sure to find dangers of their own in those heady pre-health and safety days. One group returned from a trip to Long Mynd near Church Stretton with something they found on the walk, which rolled around the minibus and made a clonking noise. They were staying in Nechells Community Centre, and the next day when the object (which been used as a pillow in the night, and had a pencil poked into the holes) was examined it turned out to be an unexploded shell! Unsure of what to do, the shell was taken to the local police station – much to the horror of the desk sergeants, who turned white when it was placed on the counter... Luckily the shell was disposed of without incident, and Toc H were later able to make up for event by providing blankets for evacuees from the community centre in an unrelated bomb scare!



The Long Mynd (National Trust)

Although Toc H began with a military background, it doesn't maintain a strong military connection, other than taking part in the march past the cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday. It is however still very much a Christian organisation, but an open one which focuses on principles which are common to those of all faiths and none. Toc H is also an organisation with a light-hearted attitude at times, which once made the group a familiar part of Moseley life.

Some of you may remember a game known as 'Chinese Fire Drills'. The game usually involved a car, which had stopped at a red light. Upon stopping, the passengers would jump out of the car, and run around it shouting 'Fire, Fire, Fire!' and try to get back in before the light turned green. The team from Mark VI had their own version, played on the way back from Moseley Road Baths, which seems to be much less risky, as no car was involved! Instead they would run around a lamppost! Once while playing, they were stopped by a policeman who asked "Why were you doing Chinese Fire Drills?", to which they responded "We're from Toc H", and the policeman replied "Ah! Say no more" and allowed them to continue on their way. Clearly the reputation of Toc H had preceded them!

Sadly, the recent history of Toc H in Moseley has had difficult moments, related to difficulties experienced by the organisation as a whole. During the 1990s increased legislation made it more difficult to set up and run new projects. At the same time membership declined as old faces retired and fewer new people joined. Although many of the projects during the 1960s and 70s had involved young people, they were not drawn into the membership and maintained no ongoing connection with Toc H.

At the beginning of the 21st century an attempt was made to make the Toc H owned properties profitable by winning local authority contracts to provide services such as nurseries, but sadly this was not well managed, and the venture failed. During this mismanagement the house at 24 Grove Road was sold, with little prior warning to the residents, an act which has been described as a 'travesty'. Many of the trustees left during this period with only a handful remaining, and the recovery has been slow, but is now beginning to gain pace.

A new model was sought because the Branch model did not seem so compatible with 21st century society, but it proved hard to replace. Although online communication can be a great starting point, it doesn't replicate the benefits of shared experience which the Toc H model thrived upon – people coming together to talk about a problem and suggesting solutions.

Bringing people together was always a big part of the Toc H model – working in mixed communities and fostering understanding. One type of event they organised to encourage this was CAMEOS (come and meet each other) where people with opposing views were brought together to explore an issue – for instance homophobic people meeting gay couples in the 1960s, hoping to inspire a change in their attitude towards sexuality. This is one model Toc H is turning back to, which has been especially successful with young professionals. Some new branches have opened in the last few years too.

If you would like to learn more about Toc H, or are interested in becoming a member, you can use the contact information below to get in touch.

www.toch-uk.org.uk

0121 443 3552 info@toch.org.uk



Toc H