

Brief history of the founding and purpose of the Saint George Dragon Trust

At the SGDT Trustees' meeting on 15th April 2010 (Minutes Item 5.6) Margie Jackson, a then Trustee, enquired whether there was any documentary record relating to the background and history of the Trust. In the absence of any such document I agreed to produce a paper giving this information. This was done and duly circulated. That paper was produced from memory only with a lack of factual evidence relating to precise dates of events as they occurred. I have subsequently come across paperwork that gives me this precise information, enabling me to rewrite the paper to give actual dates that can be factually proven. (See Minutes Item 5.1 of the SGDT Trustees' Meeting dated 24th August 2013).

The original St. Georges, known as St. George Community Trust, was set up in 1978 by John Jennings, Nick Fogg, John Glenway and David Turrell. To my mind this Trust was to administer just the one building at 47 Milmans Street, London SW10, with the purpose of housing the most desolate and difficult homeless persons. This was an old workhouse, or 'spike' in Chelsea, as mentioned by George Orwell in his "Down and out in Paris & London". It contained about 110 beds for the homeless.

This building was called the St. George's Centre Chelsea. The day to day running was actually done by staff employed by the Centre, but Stonham Housing Association was the Registered Charity with regard to the overall responsibility for the Centre. Milmans Street was therefore a branch of SHA. This was necessary as St. George Community Trust did not at that time have the relevant authority to run the Centre as it was not an independent charitable company in its own right.

I became a member of the St. George's Centre Management Committee in about 1980, joining Nick Fogg, Russell Prescott and David Crawford plus another eleven Committee members and fourteen full-time staff. 47 Milmans Street was a dilapidated Victorian building in severe need of refurbishment at least or better still, knocking down. It was located in a very desirable residential area. Adjacent to the Embankment near Battersea Bridge, (opposite where the houseboat village is), it was owned by the local council and they had designs on repossessing the building to develop it to maximise the true commercial value of the site.

The Council informed us in 1983 that they wished to exercise their ownership rights and repossess the building and that we quit as soon as possible. We took legal advice from our own team of Barristers who advised that we point out to the Council that we would quit the premises as soon as all the residents were rehoused, bringing to their attention their own legal requirements to enable us to achieve this goal. This led to extensive negotiations with the Council, and not being able to avoid their obligations to the issue they agreed to work with us to resolve the matter. This eventually led to a new Council-funded 31-bed Hostel being created at 34-38 Warwick Road, adjacent to Earls Court underground station, an excellent location.

During the rundown period of Milmans Street the staff did an excellent job in acquiring several small units to re-house residents, the first being at 89 Melody Road SW18, which was opened in August 1984. This was opened by no less a person than Lord Scarman, he said he was

interested in us because of the amount of barristers we had on the committee, at least three, maybe four! Barristers, he said, would not support any organisation voluntarily without there being very good reason for doing so.

In 1984 St. Georges Centre severed its link with Stonham Housing Association and became an independent charitable company limited by guarantee, and was known as the St. George Community Trust.

Milmans Street was finally vacated on 2nd September 1986 and Warwick Road Building was officially opened by Robert Runcie, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in June 1987. The opening schedule was at 12 noon. It was planned that the Archbishop would arrive at 11.30, unveil the plaque, say hello to the residents have a cup of tea and a sandwich and be gone by 1.30pm. Not to be, it was a lovely day and he stayed all afternoon talking to the residents in the garden. I asked his chauffeur did he know what time he would leave, he said his next appointment was at the Palace at 6.30 so he would probably stretch it out until then, and so he did! Much to the enjoyment of many residents and staff.

Also in 1987 the then Director of St. George Community Trust, Penny Cooper left, and was replaced by Dudley Savill. This was a time of momentous change in social housing that had great effect on both the council housing sector with its new “right to buy” legislation and the private housing sector which was now evolving into the wider “Housing Association” concept. All this required far more professional and full-time input than voluntary Management Committees such as ours were not equipped to do. SGCT ceased to be and became the Opendoor Housing Association with its own internal and independent management structure.

There remained the difficult task of deciding what financial assets belonged to the original St. George’s Centre and the St. George Community Trust. The easy solution was to give all assets to Opendoor, this was decided against and a new organisation was created called the Saint George Dragon Trust, with a fund of £110K, chaired by Nick Fogg and a body of Trustees with the aim to help people moving on from hostels to their own independent unfurnished accommodation to buy essential furniture etc. for their new home. This was thought to be a useful way of helping those in this situation as it had come to our attention over time that sometimes when people were offered their own accommodation the fear of debt and other financial burdens stopped them from wishing to move on.

We of course realised that to retain our capital there would be a permanent requirement to boost our funds, as you can see from the accounts our fund is slowly diminishing, but we are all right for the foreseeable future. Hence our cautious, and sometimes painful policy of trying to help a very limited band of applicants.

I hope this paper gives a better understanding of where the Saint George Dragon Trust has come from and the purpose of our existence.

Steffan Thomas

September 2013.