

Leamington Spark

This is the first issue (5th Nov 2003) of the Leamington Spark, an alternative-radical newsletter taking a fresh view at events in and around Leamington. Please copy and distribute!!

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We hope to produce the newsletter on a regular basis - but we need your contributions! So come along to our next editorial meeting where we decide the content of the next issue. For more information:-

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POST OFFICE CLOSURES – WELCOME TO THE FUTURE!

The proposals to close three post offices (P/Os) in Warwick, and one P/O in Leamington, have understandably been met with revulsion by the local community. Communities intuitively understand the importance of local, easily-accessible P/Os to (amongst others) the elderly and disabled, and their role as a social and economic lynchpin in the surrounding community. The revelation by the Leamington Courier that the so-called 'consultation' process has been a sham (with its outcome effectively pre-determined) comes as no surprise.

The Warwick/Leamington closures are part of a national programme of urban P/O closures; the Royal Mail (RM) aims to close 3,000 by the end of 2004. (The postmasters of the local branches cite the government's benefit-payment reforms as an immediate reason for their acceptance of RM's compensation-backed closure offer. This is a separate issue in its own right, but either way these reforms are certainly assisting RM's push for P/O closures.)

Why so many P/O closures? It's part of RM's desperate drive to transform itself back into a surplus-generating company. However, the UK postal service had consistently generated surpluses until about three years ago. So what went wrong? There are various factors but perhaps the biggest is the UK government's ideological hostility to public service monopolies. The UK's postal system is in the process of being opened to the market; this is scheduled to happen in stages until, by 2007, RM will face competition from private operators in all divisions of its business. (There is a similarly neo-liberal EU directive to achieve full P/O market-opening across the EU by perhaps 2009, but – surprise, surprise – that's not quick enough for the UK government.) The UK process is overseen by a regulator called Postcomm, which has an essentially contradictory mandate to open the market to competition whilst safeguarding the 'universal postal service' (UPS) i.e. the bit that ensures all UK citizens get a good quality service at a fixed price irrespective of their location in the UK.

Why contradictory? Opening public-service monopolies to competition is generally incompatible with retaining high-quality UPS. That's because our public postal service has traditionally worked on the principle of 'cross-subsidisation'. To explain, uniform and reasonable postal prices across the UK are only possible because, in effect, 'economically viable' customers (e.g.

city-dwellers and business customers) subsidise the 'unviable' (e.g. country-dwellers, the post office network). When a surplus-generating part of the postal system (e.g. parcel services, bulk business customers) is opened to competition, RM suddenly faces competition from market entrants who have no 'burdensome' UPS obligations (and are only interested in maximising profits) and as a consequence are more 'efficient' than RM. Inevitably RM then loses this market share and no longer has revenues that it would once have ploughed back into core services and/or subsidising the 'unviable'. (Indeed, some studies have shown that geographically uniform postal tariffs inevitably buckle under the pressure of competition.) Thus, we enter a downward spiral of ever-deteriorating UPS: - fewer services, poorer quality, more variable charging. The closure of P/Os – an attempt to excise the 'unviable' - is part of this process, and is the behaviour of a postal operator struggling to maintain UPS whilst becoming increasingly like the ruthless private-sector operators it has to compete with.



Postcomm (which, despite its protestations to the contrary, seems hell-bent on destroying what is left of our public postal system) has recently proposed that the UPS be stripped down to a minimalist core, to allow as much competition as possible. It proposes, for example, that first-class post (which, strangely enough, generated a surplus for RM last year...) be taken out of the UPS, a proposal strongly rejected by the National Federation of SubPostmasters

Post office closures...continued

because, for example, it would mean higher postal prices for country dwellers. It has even allowed private business bulk-mail processors (such as UK Mail) to 'piggy-back' on RM's distribution infrastructure at a rental cost that will maximise their profit margins but further cripple RM.

The struggle to keep local post offices open is a crucial struggle, reflecting our determination that services be provided on the basis of social solidarity, not narrow economic rationalism. We need to fight these local closures, but we also need to take the fight to the government and the EU to insist that a public postal monopoly be re-instated, before it is too late.

CARE HOME CLOSURES CRISIS

The closure of Lillington Nursing Home in Lillington Road, Leamington means that the area loses its third care home for vulnerable elderly people in under a year. Lillington Nursing Home, which is to close on November 13th, is to be converted into 11 "luxury" private flats. The closure follows those of Magnolia House in Kenilworth Road, a specialist home for people suffering from dementia, in February and Catherine House in Warwick New Road in March. The loss of this third home brings to 84 the total of care places lost in Warwickshire this year.

In all three cases one of the major reasons given for the care homes having to close was a lack of available funding. In the case of Lillington Nursing Home the immediate reason given was the inability of the management to replace staff who have left within the last few months. The closures have left former residents facing a growing crisis as many struggle to find alternative accommodation in which their care needs can be met. Some have been lucky enough to find places in other local homes with the aid of relatives. Other families have faced the prospect of having to find homes for their elderly relatives further afield, thus being forced to live too far away from them to keep in regular contact, and those with no living relatives

have been left at the mercy of social services with no idea of their future prospects at all.

The consequences of this are not only upsetting but even potentially fatal. Enforced movement from a familiar home into new surroundings and all the disturbances that entails has been documented to have a severely damaging effect on both the physical and mental health of many elderly people, particularly those suffering from dementia. Within less than a month of Magnolia House closing, five of its former residents died – deaths which relatives believe would not have occurred if they had not had to be moved. Former manager Sandra Coombs said "These deaths were not [previously] expected deaths, so we could be fairly certain that the move had precipitated them. Relatives were left absolutely devastated that the home had had to close."

So why are these homes being closed, when it is obvious that the services they provided were essential to the needs of the people who were living in them, who are now left facing uncertainty and apparent indifference to whether their needs will be met in the future? It seems that the answer is profit. All three of the homes to close this year were privately owned. The owners of Lillington Nursing Home were granted permission by Warwick District Council to convert the home into "luxury" flats on October 21st. Similar plans to turn Magnolia House into 22 self-contained apartments were only rejected after strong opposition from local people concerned about the traffic and parking problems this would have caused. It seems that caring for the needy is not as profitable to property owners selling flats to rich, largely non-local buyers at inflated prices – thus human needs are disregarded in favour of more money for the already wealthy owners' pockets.

Ms Coombs founded the Dementia and Alzheimer's Warwickshire Network (DAWN) after the closure of Magnolia House to support former residents and their relatives from the homes which have closed and to lobby the government about the lack of funding for dementia care. In conversation with the Leamington Spark

she said "We set up DAWN to raise public awareness that dementia care is underfunded and that there is a desperate lack of beds, despite the fact that dementia is on the increase. Within 10 years we will be facing an awful dilemma of where we can place people with dementia."

"The government is not listening to what is happening to elderly people, especially around the issue of dementia. Dementia care is a very specific area and Magnolia House offered this. Watching the trauma and despair felt by residents and relatives after the closure of Magnolia House and the deaths of five residents, we decided that we had to do something. They keep saying that they are throwing money at the problem, but this money certainly does not trickle down to where it is needed. How many elderly people will it take to die before the government will admit that they have to rethink their policies?"

Of course, residential and nursing homes are not in themselves ideal solutions to the needs of those affected by age-related or any other disability. As anyone who has worked in one or seen a loved one placed in one will know, the institutional culture of many such homes means that residents are treated not as people but as problems to be solved, and thus are denied even the most basic of rights and freedoms which most of us would take for granted, even down to choosing what they want to eat and when they can use the toilet. The idea demanded by disability groups is everyone with a disability being given all assistance necessary to live autonomously in their own home, with carers under their direct control. But however inadequate the current provision of residential care may be, it can only make matters worse to take away even that.

Yet the government could very easily fund far greater social care than there is now, if it was to make it a priority. A 2001 study by community care analysts Laing & Buisson found that the cost per person of nursing care for older people was £459 per week, and that of residential care £353 per week (costs which have surely since risen), and this was £75-85 higher than the average fee paid by local authorities. The survey estimated the

Care home closures...continued

public sector would have to find an extra £1 billion per year to fund this difference and thus prevent closures. Yet the estimated cost of the war in Iraq to the British taxpayer is £3.5 billion. The total national social services budget was £17 billion in 2002/2003, approximately half of which was spent on services for elderly people (the rest being children's services and services for people with disabilities or mental health problems), but the total "defence" (read: offensive weapons) budget was £26 billion.

The reason given for Lillington Nursing Home's closure was inability to replace staff. Paying staff accounts for 45–60% of most care homes' costs, yet staff in most homes are paid rates of only around £5 an hour, for what is often both physically exhausting and emotionally demanding work. Agency staff may be paid better, with £6 or £7 per hour, but have no job security or guaranteed continuity of work. Is it then any wonder that people are deterred from going into care work? Many other local care homes continue to advertise for staff in the Leamington Observer and Courier, yet like teachers, postmen, firefighters and nearly all non-corporate, public service workers, care assistants are scandalously underpaid.

The government could easily choose to pay care assistants better, give more funding to care services and thus prevent their being lost due to "unprofitability", yet instead they choose to invest not in caring but in killing – government subsidies to arms companies amount to £763 million per year. Sandra Coombs estimates that an input of at least £50,000 would have been needed to save Magnolia House – yet compare this to over £8,000 for each cluster bomb, up to £445,000 for an air-to-air missile, £62 million for an F15 fighter plane or £590 million for a B2 stealth bomber (figures from Campaign Against the Arms Trade).

With figures like these, it quite clearly shows where both the government's and the profit-, as opposed to need-oriented business owners' true concerns lie, and puts the lie to New Labour's professed concern for the welfare of local

communities. The future looks increasingly bleak for elderly people, dementia sufferers or anyone else needing care and their families, in Warwickshire and elsewhere in the UK, as long as we live in a system which prioritises wars for the benefit of a greedy elite over the basic human rights and needs of innocent ordinary people.

A public meeting entitled "Could You Do It Better?" to discuss health and long term care, organised by the Senior People's Forum, will be held on November 7th between 2 and 4pm at St Peter's Church Hall, Dormer Place, Leamington, with speakers including prospective parliamentary candidates for the Lib Dem and Conservative parties. DAWN will hold a fundraising event on December 6th from 7.30pm featuring local folk group Romany Pie at Warwickshire County Council Social Services Club, Northgate, Warwick, tickets £7.50 with supper or £4 without. Sandra Coombs can be contacted on 01926 613685.

LOCAL PEOPLE WELCOME GM TRIAL RESULTS

Concerned citizens welcomed the evaluation results of the government's farmscale GM crop trials last month. Two out of the three crops on trial (rape and beet) were shown to be more harmful to wildlife than the conventionally grown versions whilst the third, maize, showed slight benefits for wildlife only because the crops that the GM maize were being compared to (the control crop) were being sprayed with atrazine, a particularly powerful herbicide which has now been banned. Many critics, including Michael Meacher, the former Environment Minister who launched the trials in 1999, have called for the maize trials to be repeated because the banning of atrazine invalidates the results. Since all of the crops (and indeed the vast majority of GM crops that have so far been developed) are modified to be resistant to herbicides and pesticides it is hardly surprising that their use is harmful to the environment - essentially crops are being modified to allow farmers to spray more poison onto them. This is clearly harmful not only to

wildlife but also to human health, although the government's trials deliberately failed to investigate this risk. All of this adds further authority to our County Council's decision in May to declare Warwickshire a GM-free zone, as well as the many night-time raids that have been carried out on GM crops test sites around the county by concerned citizens worried about the damage to Warwickshire's countryside. Speaking in response to the results one such crop-puller, who wishes to remain anonymous, told the Leamington Spark "These trials were intended to be a stitch-up, as they refused to consider the impacts of GM crops on human health or the fact that GM pollen can travel for many miles and contaminate the surrounding area. Even limiting them to such a narrow remit the government was still unable to achieve the results that they wanted. Despite massive public opposition New Labour is intent on forcing GM crops down our throats - the only way we can be sure of stopping them is by pulling the crops up ourselves and targeting the biotech companies who are working with the government to foist this unwanted technology onto the people of this country." For further information on how to get involved in the fight against GM crops see www.stopbayergm.org and www.greengloves.org

CYCLEPATH DISASTER

The row over the new cyclepaths being driven through Warwickshire, which irrupted last month, isn't going away.

Leamington Spa resident Aileen Vania started a blockade to prevent any further work by contractors after she saw what had been done to make the stretch of cyclepath from Offchurch to the Fosse Way.

The path follows the disused track of the old Leamington to Rugby railway, with a spur on the Daventry branch. In the machine-pummelled, chemical-soaked, commercial agri-business deserts of Warwickshire, such spaces have become precious remnants of wilderness, quiet and eco-diversity.

But to make one - supposedly peaceful - rural cycleway, just a few feet wide, the

contractors have begun bulldozing carpets of absolute destruction twenty to thirty feet wide, and already miles long.

Literally hundreds of young-mature trees have been destroyed in one stretch only a few hundred yards long. Their mangled corpses lie piled in heaps, eventually to add to air-pollution by pointless burning. What was one of the very few densely overgrown wild places in the area, with just a narrow footpath threading through it, has been turned into a flattened, mud-churned disaster zone.

The final outrage for Aileen was to discover that the graves of two beloved dogs, buried there exactly because it was – had been! - a haven of wild peace and seclusion, have now been obliterated by the industrial earth-shifters.

Already, one blockading occupation of this site has been mounted. But there are still miles more wildtrack threatened by the destroying machines. At least two other stretches have already been smashed open, with the same levels of excessive destruction.

Outraged local people insist that this is absolutely the wrong way to do what most admittedly see as a worthwhile job. To get more information, and maybe get involved, contact Aileen on 07771547576.

SURVIVORS: CAW GALLERY

The 'Survivors' exhibition (supported by the Millennium Commission), consists of 12 digital images produced by 3 artists, who describe themselves as a survivor of domestic violence, a paranoid schizophrenic and one with serious lung problems. All seem content to appear under an 'Identity Art' banner. Two of the images have their absence marked by "This image has been excluded in respect of objection", following a local media campaign. This can only bolster the 'suffer in silence' or the 'hide it under the carpet' mentality that the exhibition questions. The 'family values' brigade forgets that most child sexual abuse (apparent cause of the furore) happens within the family. How many of them have supported government's that have increased child poverty - this is child abuse?

The work is figurative and narrative, and mostly naturalistic in its depiction of the human form, although somewhat generalised and schematised, not unlike mannequins. The figures tend to dominate an otherwise abiotic landscape, which unfortunately has affinities with a certain kind of album-cover art of the 1970s. This seems odd for the images relating to sexual violence/abuse which occur mainly within a domestic sphere. Most of the images include text (often as poetry) and are displayed with more explanation which seems a little otiose (as does the instruction to the viewer to "Start Here"), and would better be placed in an accompanying catalogue, but there was none. It also detracted from the visual experience. The subjects are mostly naked (but not nude or sensorial), and are in the act of illustrating the text, although this is not always how one would read the image without the caption. Bar one, none of the images are particularly disturbing, and the one that is, has its impact attenuated by an affinity to computer game graphics, which are often far more violent and sexual and gratuitously so, and unlike the art, wants to engage the gamer in those activities. The main weakness of the exhibition and this may reflect the software used or the curatorial process, is that little differentiates the three contributors. All the work is all A3 size (you don't have to use default settings!), has similar format, mostly landscape with central horizon and adopt similar expressionistic palettes and all identically mounted and framed.

Kevin Ennis, local ex-painter

LOCAL LISTINGS

Wednesday November 5th - Saturday November 15th - *Believers* by Playbox Theatre Company, The Dream Factory, Shelley Avenue, Warwick, November 5 - November 15, tickets £9.50, box office 01926 419555- Warwick based youth theatre company present an epic multimedia drama based on the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

Wednesday November 5th - Saturday November 8th - *The Cost Of Living* by DV8 Physical Theatre, Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry, November 5 -

November 8, tickets £11.50 £17.50, "A piece about perfection and pretence; about how society measures individuals and how we, in turn, value ourselves", www.dv8.co.uk, www.warwickartscentre.co.uk:

Friday November 7th - The Bob Phillips Street Legal Band presents the music of Bob Dylan, in aid of Myton Hospice, November 7, The Nelson Club, Charles St, Warwick, tix £6, box office 402610.

Monday November 10th - Protests against BAE Systems - 12.30pm-1.30pm: Protest at BAE Systems, Wood Burcote Way, Burcote Road, Towcester, Northants NN12 6TF, 4pm-5.30pm: Protest at BAE Systems (RO), Summerfield, Kidderminster, DY11 7RZ

Saturday November 15th - Coco Express hosted by Club La Pachanga (Leamington Salsa Club), North Leamington School, proceeds to Third World charities, price £9 / £5 conc.

Wednesday November 19th - Vanilla House Band, Star & Garter, Leamington, free - "Hot Club, Gypsy jazz, Latin, Klezmer, Flamenco, Rumba, Bluegrass and thrash metal!", vanillahouseband@hotmail.com

Friday November 21st - Loco Mundo, St Patrick's Irish Club, Leamington, tickets £4-£5, - Jazz, Funk, Latin & World music for dancing. www.locomundo.co.uk

Saturday November 22nd - Anti-fur Demo - meet noon outside Woolworths, Leamington

Sunday November 23rd - Public Meeting: Eyewitness Iraq with speaker Ramzi Kysia, 7.30pm, Dale Street Methodist Church, Dale Street, Leamington, free/donations to Leamington Stop The War Coalition. See <http://www.webalias.com/leamstopwar>

Tuesday November 25th - Vanilla House Band, TOYK, Leamington, free - "Hot Club, Gypsy jazz, Latin, Klezmer, Flamenco, Rumba, Bluegrass and thrash metal!", vanillahouseband@hotmail.com

Saturday November 29th - Anti-Fur Demo - noon, Mell Square, Solihull