

# The Blenheim Project

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*An Experiment in Social Work  
with Young Provincial Drifters in London*

LONDON SEEMS to have been an attraction for young people seeking fame and fortune over many generations. Perhaps the same might be said of any "big city" the world over. This constant pattern of migration from the provinces to the capital is well known in the traditional tale of Dick Whittington. However, it is a story which does not tell the whole truth. It leaves out of account the story of those who do not succeed. It does not tell the story of those young people who come to London not to seek their fortunes but to avoid problems elsewhere or to escape from difficult situations at home or simply, in desperation, to become lost in the crowd. It is a story which does not tell of the youngsters who succeed in establishing themselves but who had narrow escapes on the way. The story of the

Blenheim Project is the story of Dick Whittington gone wrong; the story of the youngsters who come to London, for whatever reasons, and who do not survive the pressures of city life.

## HOW THE PROJECT STARTED

Over the past 10 years the statutory agencies such as the local authority children's departments have become increasingly aware of the substantial number of young people living in central London whose parents are in other parts of the country, who appear to do no work, and to be in need of some sort of help. They have become known as "out-of-town drifters". The former London County Council wished to make an organised attempt to reach out to these youngsters and to provide them with acceptable help. It was felt that the work could more appropriately be undertaken by a voluntary body

with the backing of the local authorities and in 1964 a grant was made to the Notting Hill Social Council to enable them to employ a social worker. This experimental social work became known as the Blenheim Project and its specific aim is to provide an informal social service for the young out-of-town drifters between 16 and 21 years old. The specific method of the project is to go out into the wider community and to contact these youngsters where they are to be found. The worker would consciously detach himself from the community in an effort to be among the drifters and to present the possibility of a way back to a socially stable life. This kind of social work which has already been attempted in the United States is known as detached social work.

#### STREET WORK

I began my work "on the streets" and my main object during the early months was to make a general survey of drifters' haunts and to establish a number of primary areas for observation and participation. It was a much more formidable undertaking than I had imagined even in my most realistic moods but moments of discouragement were often relieved by the humour of situations. After six months regularly using one café, a youngster eventually enquired about my occupation. When I told him I was a social

worker he replied: "Well, best of luck mate, I'm off". Another reacted by expressing the wish that he too could be paid for hanging round coffee bars all day. Most youngsters displayed a prudence born of bitter experience of many adults in Soho. They suspected that I might be a drug pusher, or a homosexual or an adult recruiting for criminal groups. When they eventually accepted that I was a social worker that was even odder!

After six months' work there was sufficient factual evidence to suggest the working hypothesis that the provincial youngster in London tends to move through three stages. The first stage of arrival at the railway station and the settling of very short-term accommodation. A second stage characterised by a natural tendency to wander about the West End and the "sights" of central London, as an awareness of these generally constitutes the provincial youngsters' existing knowledge of London. The third stage is marked by the drift to such places as North Kensington either by sheer force of circumstances or on the basis of recently acquired knowledge of suitable areas peripheral to the West End. Furthermore, it seemed to be a marked characteristic of the drifting youngster that he cannot

be absolutely identified with any of these stages—drifting back and forth from one to the other. With this hypothesis as a framework I was able to undertake the field-work in a systematic and productive way. Since that time I have regularly visited three places in Soho and one of the main line railway stations.

#### MAKING CONTACT

It is one thing to establish which pubs and clubs in Soho are most frequently habituated by young drifters; it is quite another matter to establish the kind of relationship with an individual drifter which will enable him to accept more consistent and constructive help. As time passed it became clear to me that the quality and efficacy of the helping relationship depended on my being known from the start as a detached social worker. I have already shown how this sometimes brought meetings to an abrupt end yet it remains the only firm basis of a social work relationship. Most of these boys and girls have had good cause from childhood onwards not to trust adults and they would be quite right to suspect an adult who seemed, for example, to delight in the pleasures of the juke-box or who behaved in an adolescent way. I am not in the clubs as a rather odd adult interested in what may appear to be anti-social teenage behaviour but as a dependable adult with social service resources.

It is very difficult to make a relationship with young people who are not sure of their own identity and in conditions which are not settled. One girl remarked that she "was phoney half the time but then, most people are to some extent: the trouble is that some people's extent is greater than others". While the worker, from his side can consciously develop his understanding and methods, the out-of-town drifter is more likely to become less well defined to himself as well as to others. A drifter will be moving from place to place, visiting none with a regularity that can be foreseen by the worker. One boy said that he was frightened to stop travelling. Although the drifting youngster responds or succumbs to the chance dictates of his environment, it shouldn't be overlooked that there is a more positive aspect to his drift, often unrealised by himself.

This positive aspect is the anonymity of drifting, the exchange of a life directed by personal decision for one entirely directed by circumstances, and the weakening of social communication. An Irish lad said that he couldn't understand anyone else and he didn't want to be understood: "People just don't know". These factors are described as positive because they not only enable the drifter to avoid facing the problem, whatever that may be, but also to avoid making decisions in relation to

the problem. The longer he drifts the less chance there is of stable contact and communication.

### THE KIND OF WORK

My working predicament is twofold: first my use of occasions must be urgent and complete in itself. I must be able to offer a definite solution to an expressed problem. If a young drifter urgently needs a bed or a job he wants practical action at that level rather than an interpretation of his predicament. Yet, at the same time, the very urgency of his situation can make him more susceptible to an interpretative comment. Take Jimmy, a schizophrenic boy who had discharged himself from a mental hospital and who had become a homeless drifter. He had left the hospital because he "wished to try and cope with real life". Every effort to arrange work and accommodation came to nothing because Jimmy just could not keep to arrangements without being taken by the hand. This was not always possible because of the demands of work with other clients. On one occasion he was five hours late because he had "been looking at the lights in Leicester Square" and a bed was lost. On another occasion he failed to arrive at work after definitely being offered a job. It was possible to use his distress at being without a bed and a job to point out that as

much as one respected his attempt to cope with life "outside" his pattern of behaviour really indicated that he needed to continue his treatment.

The second aspect of the working predicament is that my use of occasions must produce further occasions. More often than not my approach has been so direct that this may well play into a young person's problem and incapacity to use supportive relationships. One youngster responded to the offer of help in finding a job with the comment: "God! If I told anybody that I depended on someone else to get me a job they'd think I was in a pretty bad state". Although some youngsters have been scared off by such a rapid, direct and open offer of help, others have been relieved to accept. The knowledge that a resourceful person is drifting around at least gives them a link with the possibility of getting help. They are placed in the position of choosing to act constructively or on an avoidance basis. The choice properly remains with them. Presenting this choice is one of my main functions.

This is well illustrated by the instances in which youngsters do not feel able to accept my offer of help until they have reached the end of their tether. The third or fourth night without a bed, or the second complete day without

food, may well be the final motivation that helps them to overcome their natural suspicion of "that guy who offered me a bed". I always leave with each youngster a small business reply card which briefly states the function and resources of the Blenheim Project and which gives my telephone number—for use in emergencies. A number of boys and girls have 'phoned for help quite some time after the first, often brief meeting. Some of these young people, when we first met, have told me to "get lost" in no uncertain language! The point that I am trying to make is that I leave them with a possible "life-line" which they can freely decide, in their own time, to use or not.

I first met Ann on King's Cross station where she had arrived after leaving her home in the North West. The police had picked her up and ascertained that she was over 17 and that her parents did not wish to help her. She had been placed in an emergency hostel but this couldn't go on indefinitely and she was having difficulty in finding work. She agreed to meet me on the next day but failed to turn up. A week later she 'phoned from Trafalgar Square and said that she was homeless again and that she had a girl from Scotland with her who was in a similar predicament. "Could you help us, please?" Work with Ann included

the finding of suitable accommodation, work and liaison with the Magistrates Court at home. She is now just about managing to survive in London and progress is being made in effecting some reconciliation with her parents.

People often say to me how difficult it must be to go out into the clubs and to make contact with young strangers. The fact is that the making of contacts is not too difficult, is often a matter of chance, is frequently a matter of time, and is not basically a problem. The crux of the work is nurturing such contacts and this is where the real problem and difficulty of the work lies. The fullest use of the spontaneity of these first meetings with young people is an essential objective but the reality of their situation is what they most want to avoid. Drifters are often either brooding over or living in the past or they are wandering in a future of fantasies. Another boy explained how he started petty thieving at nine years old said: "I've tried so hard, it's no good, I'll never be like James Dean. I always get nicked for small things". Young drifters often cannot stand the present and what it really means in personal terms. If one makes it real one is always likely to be rejected rather than accepted. Nevertheless, to present reality sometimes results in a contact

where communication and action are precipitated. One young girl who spends her spare time "conning" in Soho was bemoaning the fact that other people don't understand what "the rest of us have to put up with". When asked what she found most difficult to tolerate, she replied: "Reality". At least it is possible for her to talk about her "reality" with me and to come to some understanding of what it means.

### HOW THE PROJECT WORKS

The functions and resources of the project can be clearly seen in my work with Jack, an 18 year old boy whom I met in a club in Soho. He looked as if he had been "on the road" for some time and he was very talkative as a result of a recent dose of "pep-pills". I sat next to him and it required no prompting from me to elicit his story. As a homosexual prostitute he had become used to talking to strange men. This was his first visit to London and a week previously he had hitch-hiked from South Wales where he had done some casual labouring work. He had no money and seemed to have very little idea of how he could best use the appropriate social services. Some older men had told him how he could make money by "rolling queers". This is a technique whereby boys make dates with men and then demand money not to tell the police. In short the

blackmail of homosexual adults. I explained why I was at the club and that if he agreed I could provide him with emergency accommodation for a few days while we tried to sort things out together. He wouldn't accept the offer until he was satisfied that I was not an "official" of some kind and that I had no statutory powers.

One of our initial tasks on the project had been to establish a list of private householders who would offer free accommodation at my request without prior notice and "no questions asked". A tall order but we have a list of a dozen such people. I took Jack to one of them and he was accommodated and fed. I arranged to meet him the next day. We first went to the N.A.B. where I was able to authenticate his claim and he received sufficient assistance to survive for the next few days. As his story unfolded it became clear that he had been very deprived as a child, his father had left home when he was two years old and his mother had died when he was nine, and until a few years previously he had lived with an uncle at his home in the North of England. He had been in a number of jobs since leaving school at 15 and six months previously had illegally obtained a British Visitors Passport at one of the Channel Ports and gone over to the continent. He

eventually found his way to Sweden where he formed a close relationship with a girl of his own age. In telling this part of the story Jack insisted that the girl was pregnant by him—"three's a family, isn't it?"—and that at long last his "search for a family had ended". He had made a family for himself in Sweden and this was where he intended to return when he had some money. This was the myth that gave point to his present life and we even obtained legal advice about his passport irregularities. It came out that the authorities had expelled him from Sweden because he had exceeded the legal period of residence and he made his way to Germany. There he was arrested for trying to illegally cross the border into Denmark on his way back to Sweden. He was classified as a vagrant and formally deported to England. He spent an uneasy Christmas with his uncle, had a row, and drifted to South Wales where he had been before I met him in Soho.

He did not wish to return to his uncle's home and had agreed to let me find him a suitable hostel until such time that he was sufficiently established to find a room of his choice. I helped him to find work and although he failed two appointments as a result of pill-taking jaunts in Soho,

I was able to persuade the personnel officer to keep the job open for him. Eventually he started work and settled into a hostel. During this time I was able to ascertain that he was becoming habituated to pills and making extra money by soliciting homosexuals in the West End. Taking this together with his childhood experiences it seemed appropriate to suggest psychiatric advice. I suggested this to Jack and he eventually accepted the idea. As we have a consultant psychiatrist to the project it was possible to arrange this quite quickly. I received helpful advice in handling Jack but he gave up his job without warning and left the hostel after telling the warden that I had arranged other accommodation for him.

Jack disappeared for a month and the next I heard of him was when I received a telephone call from the police saying that he was in custody on a charge of larceny. He had asked the police to inform me and I was able to liaise with the probation officer who was preparing the court report. Eventually I attended court when his case was heard. I told the magistrate that I wished to continue working with Jack as our relationship had continued through all his failures to use the help offered but that some form

of statutory supervision would be useful. He was placed on probation with a strong admonition to keep in touch with me. He was assigned to an officer based near me. It was agreed between us that I should continue the day by day work with Jack on account of the relationship that had already been established and the probation officer would, in this case, use his function to represent the court as and when necessary and to remind Jack of the terms of his probation.

I brought Jack back to London and the process of finding suitable work and accommodation continued. After a while Jack disappeared again and just before the probation officer applied for a warrant he 'phoned me from another part of the country. He had found work and lodgings and he wanted me to arrange for his supervision to be transferred to the local probation officer. This was done and since then he has kept in touch to say how he is getting on. He seems to be managing reasonably well. The one thing that keeps him going, so he insists, is the thought of returning to his "family" in Sweden. He cannot accept that I have verified through the appropriate Swedish social service that the girl is not pregnant and that she does not wish to see him again. To this he replies: "It will be

different when she actually sees me on the doorstep". It certainly will.

I think that the story of my relationship and work with Jack demonstrates the variety of resources, whether it be, for example, medical, legal, accommodation or employment, that can be readily made available to young drifters by the Blenheim Project. It also shows how one must accept the false starts and how this acceptance is expressed in the readiness to provide second chances. The young drifters really are free to choose and this goes some way towards strengthening their feelings of independence and allows them some scope for initiative. I appreciate that not everyone would agree to this approach but it is a technique fundamental to the Blenheim Project. In the end Jack himself solved the short-term problem by removing himself from the anti-social pull of London. One cannot tell whether he will ever find a home where he is accepted as he is.

### USING SITUATIONS

With young drifters one is generally working in crisis situations which cry out for urgent practical measures. Often, one is left "holding" a difficult youngster while expert advice is being sought or more adequate permanent arrangements are being made. This is a difficult



situation which, I imagine, many prison staff have experienced and with which they will probably sympathise. It seems to me unfortunate that the proper emphasis on the professionalism of social work has often tended to cloud the good case-work possibilities inherent in urgently providing a practical solution to a practical problem of existence.

My experiences with these young drifters have confirmed that acceptance, practical assistance with "existence problems" and support must come first and serve to authenticate for the drifters my capacity to respond to any need for counselling if this is eventually expressed. This practical and immediate assistance has often led to a more regular contact which has enabled me to meet a young person regularly. It is sometimes possible to point out the meaning of a drifter's predicament and perhaps lead him to an awareness of an underlying problem and the possibility of specialised help. At this stage I am sometimes able to act in an interpretative role between the youngster and the community with its facilities for more specialised help and to support him when seeking this help. In this sense I may be seen as a wandering representative of the community's concern and I present to the drifter a point of contact with the community's resources. My primary function is

simply to be around "holding the door open". In the daily life of prison staff I expect there are many similar social work opportunities waiting to be taken.

In so far as the Blenheim Project may help young people to resolve critical situations in their lives, it may make a positive contribution towards developing personal stability. The resolution of a crisis can be turned into an experience of success which will help some youngsters confidently to face the future problems which will almost inevitably arise. In this sense it can be seen as educational in facilitating a young person's innate capacity to overcome other predicaments. I am not saying that it is always so or that it is an advantage for them to be at the risk of the type of crisis I have described. I am simply suggesting that as these youngsters are already in such critical situations, they ought to be used with constructive spontaneity.

This is well illustrated by Marlene, a young German girl who had originally come to this country as an *au-pair*. When I first met her she was depressed and incoherent as the effects of large and regular doses of pep-pills were wearing off. She could give no exact account of herself or where she lived but kept repeating: "I must get out of this". She didn't seem to understand explanations of my work and

facilities, not because of any language difficulty but because of the drugs. She came readily enough when I suggested that we should go back to my base for coffee. She hadn't eaten for three days nor slept. I found her an emergency room where she was properly cared for and she slept for the best part of three days.

Once she had recovered from the drugs she was rather resistant to any further help but it was possible to encourage her by frequently contrasting her serious predicament in Soho with the "normality" and security of her life in Germany. Her *au-pair* arrangement had fallen through and she had drifted to the West End where she had become a prostitute. She said that she would not have come away from Soho with me unless she had been in the state I have already described. At a superficial level she found her life satisfactory in so far as there was a steady return of money with which to buy expensive clothes and so on. All her personal property and travel documents were in her Soho room which she shared with another prostitute. She was afraid to go back there to collect them on account of the ridicule and hostility she expected to meet as someone who had "given up the game". It may be that in so far as she felt the pull of her life as a

prostitute, my assertive use of the crisis in which I had found Marlene had effectively removed her from Soho. Sometimes the best solution is to run away from the problem but I felt in Marlene's case that she would be better helped to stay away from Soho if she could, with support, be brought back to face the realities of life there. Accordingly she was encouraged to go back and fetch her property and I accompanied her to the room in Soho. She gathered together her belongings and the all-important travel documents while holding a very acrimonious conversation with her former partner.

Her successful participation in this task was courageous and considerably boosted her self respect it marked the beginning of real co-operation in the help provided and arrangements were made for her return to Germany before her landing condition expired. It emerged that contrary to advice she had discontinued psychiatric treatment in Germany just before coming to this country. It was possible to help her to see that her present difficulties arose from her attempts to avoid her personal difficulties in Germany. She agreed that I should write to the psychiatric clinic in Bonn and in this way it was possible to carry over her constructive attitude from the London situation

to the provision of a more fundamental help in Germany. She returned to Germany five days after I first met her.

#### WHAT SUCCESS?

The Blenheim project has been running for two years and I have attempted to give a descriptive account of how its function and methods have been developed. Of necessity I have left some aspects out of account but perhaps I have indicated that the main needs of the out-of-town drifter who arrives in London are practical help with accommodation and work, supportive friendship, and help with what might be called orientation to the metropolitan environment. The key lies in extending the network of contacts in the fieldwork areas. We generally refuse referrals from other agencies and so far 95 per cent of youngsters have been met in the clubs or referred by other young clients. It is difficult to measure success in individual cases as people have such different expectations. Some youngsters settle into a socially stable life in London; others can't cope in London and are forced to return to an unsatisfactory home; others keep returning for help in recurrent difficulties; while others may derive information about social service facilities or work from a single fieldwork conversation but seek no further help from the project.

Perhaps this description of the Blenheim Project has shown how

one sets out to find and use opportunities for helpful social work with young people. I am usually in the position of referring myself as a social worker to the youngsters—initially they didn't choose to come to me. Prison staff who accept their social work role may be in the same position in so far as the inmates did not choose to be open to the officer's social work possibilities. We both work in situations very dissimilar to that in which social work is usually conducted and our potential clients don't turn up by request or invitation! I expect many other comparisons could be made.

No firm conclusions can yet be drawn but already the Blenheim Project has been able to make social services and adult support available to a group of young people who would not normally be reached. In a project of this kind the first years are inevitably a time of assessment and we are confident that the task has been sufficiently well defined to proceed with the development of an appropriate service to meet the needs of young drifters. This account of the background and progress of the work may be seen as representing a significant step towards an accurate and concerned appreciation of their predicament.