

THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGN MINI-CONFERENCE 24 October 2015

from Keith Martin, Contribution campaigner from Barnet

The experience of a small branch library in Barnet has some relevance to issues facing libraries everywhere, and it is useful to be aware of shifts during recent years in the attitude of one local council towards libraries and literacy.

On the letterhead of the London Borough of Barnet, and displayed in large letters in the council offices is the motto
PUTTING THE COMMUNITY FIRST.

The recent history of the council's attitude to public services would suggest the contrary. The Library Strategy in 2011 envisaged the creation of a new Landmark Library at artsdepot, an arts centre, and the closure of three nearby libraries.

What happened was that the Landmark Library project was abandoned, but on 5 April 2012, despite strong local opposition, Friern Barnet Library was summarily closed.

The case of this small branch library deserves our attention. Its story is recounted in a book *Friern Barnet - the library that refused to close*.

The community campaigned first not to close it, then to reopen it, but got nowhere with the Council until, one day, word got round on the grapevine that, five months after the closure, a window would be open.

Members of the Occupy movement – some of them veterans from the steps of St Paul's - climbed through the window, found a deserted library with no books on the shelves, and invited the local community to donate books and join them in providing a library service.

This development caught the Council on the wrong foot. Council officers tried at first to be conciliatory and to offer the squatters a building in a local park - Friary House - instead of the purpose-built library. Like estate agents, they showed us round Friary House.

When it was pointed out that the building was secluded with no lighting on the path from the park entrance and therefore totally unsafe for schoolchildren after dark to walk there, the council officers lamely admitted: "Oh, we had not thought of that."

The Council then changed tack, refused to negotiate at all and instead issued an eviction notice on the squatters, and refused the judge's suggestion of mediation.

The case came to the County Court where, influenced by the argument of the barrister for the squatters, who quoted human rights legislation on cases such as Greenham Common and the Occupy tents on the steps of St Paul's Cathedral, the judge ruled that the enforcement of eviction be delayed for six weeks to give the Council time to negotiate a lease with representatives of the community to run the library.

This is what happened and now, three years later, the renamed Friern Barnet Community Library is run by local volunteers. The lease, initially for two years only, has been extended by fifteen years. This security of tenure opens the way to the receipt of large grants from bodies such as the Heritage

Lottery Fund.

On the wider front of the Council's attitude to public services, its hard line from 2010 to 2015 of replacing in-house council services by ten-year contracts outsourced to large monopolies like Capita is the subject of our debate today.

The discredited plans to axe the library service budget are yet again the subject of consultation with the public. Barnet Council's ruling majority is currently less obsessed with closing libraries and instead is holding the volunteers of Friern Barnet up as a gleaming example of how libraries should be run.

THE REPLACEMENT OF PROFESSIONAL LIBRARIANS BY UNTRAINED VOLUNTEERS IS NOT AND HAS NEVER BEEN THE AIM OF THOSE WHO RUN FRIERN BARNET COMMUNITY LIBRARY.

Barbara and I are here today with the Save Barnet Libraries Campaign to support The Library Campaign for the users of all libraries.

Keith Martin
24 October 2015