**Keith’s Paper for Wednesday 14th November 2018 5.30 p.m. York Room Central Library**

**Community Associations: Untapped Potential**

**Introduction**

Before I begin, I would like to challenge your mental maps. And the way I will do it is to introduce the word “glocal”. It is not a particularly happy or catchy one, but it will serve to connect what is being discussed this evening (that is neighbourhoods and local authorities) with what is going on worldwide. Local and global are inseparably interwoven. They depend on each other for their very existence. Without a living planet, there is no local life. Without individuals, households, and communities there can be no human life on the planet.

We could brainstorm this, but here are some pretty obvious and uncontroversial aspects of the context in which we all live, move and have our being: Electronic communication, social networking and challenges to representative democracy; Amazon and multi-national corporations uncommitted to helping to sustain neighbourhoods and high streets; issues of personal identity; concern for the future of the planet in the Anthropocene Age because of pollution including plastic, rubbish and air quality; searches for new forms of efficient energy; trends towards obesity due to changing lifestyles; changing demographics with people living longer and a growing percentage of third age people who have retired from full-time employment; parking problems; changing perception of publicly-funded services; woodland schools and an appreciation of the importance of outdoor activity and play; global travel and migration…for starters!

What I want to say about a particular neighbourhood, and the borough in which it is located, is set within this context, and I believe chimes with it. Put simply this neighbourhood is going with the grain of history. No neighbourhood or person is an island entire of itself. So what I am about to describe is to be heard at all levels. Is this a model that could be a key to solving some of the seemingly intractable problems that are faced by local and central government, as well as those seeking to work internationally? Could this be your neighbourhood, I wonder?

**Some Background to the Maybank Area**

A short ride from here on the 123 bus would bring you to South Woodford, which is virtually coterminous with the postal district E18, and surrounded by Woodford Green, Woodford Bridge, Wanstead, and Waltham Forest. It has the Central Line railway cutting through it from south to north, and the A406 from east to west, and is bounded by the River Roding and M11 on the East. It was formerly part of the borough of Wanstead and Woodford, and still looks to George Lane rather than Ilford or Woodford as its natural hub.

It had found ways of adapting to and coping with the challenges of local government reorganisation, the A406, the M11 as communities do, and much of it continues to do so. But there was one part of South Woodford, mostly London E18 (but with a sliver of Woodford Green) that is nearer George Lane, rather than Woodford station, that 40 years ago found itself virtually cut off from George Lane and much of the rest of the physical world. This exclusion was caused by the major road and motorway developments in the 1970s. The barrier is impressive by any standards. It is 100 metres wide, and resembles the Berlin Wall when seen from the end of Maybank Road, which used to be the main artery between the neighbourhood and its heart. What is more, houses and flats were demolished, along with a post office and eight shops, a garage, a local meeting place, Child’s Corner, and the iconic pub nicknamed after its owner, Charlie Brown, but in fact called The Roundabout. (In passing you can see why the name Charlie Brown is more helpful to those wanting to know where they are, than “the roundabout”! And in case there is any doubt, Charlie Brown was not a Schulz cartoon character, but a publican from Limehouse.)

This isolated neighbourhood comprises about 1000 dwellings, 3,000 residents, and over thirty businesses. There was one place of Christian worship, a park, a charity founded in 1899 called Mill Grove, and some council-run allotments. The area had no name (which is a pretty serious state of affairs for any neighbourhood), and so it follows that are no signposts to anyone from outside seeking to reach it: any signs that exist point to “South Woodford” which is, of course, the other side of the “Berlin Wall” (not my term, but coined by a local resident). The only way to get to George Lane by vehicle is via Charlie Brown’s Roundabout; and when walking by going through an underpass of 100 metres where there have been muggings, flooding and graffiti, or up a concrete path and steps alongside the North Circular to the High Road.

**The Maybank Community Association**

The formation of MCA almost exactly forty years ago was a response to an existential crisis for this neighbourhood. Though shocked and angry, the local people decided to accept what could not be changed, and to work for a better future together with anyone who was willing to help to change what they could.

It is significant for tonight’s meeting that Redbridge Council was one of those groups. Providentially in 1977 Redbridge was working on its borough local plan, and so the Chief Executive, Geoff Price, and the Planning Officer Walter Patterson were very interested to learn that MCA was determined to work at a plan of its own for the local neighbourhood. MCA had a vision with three named elements which it called: social, environmental and welfare. There is a history, on the cusp of being published, that charts how it went about seeking to develop each of these. Because you will shortly be able to read the story at your leisure, I would like to mention three examples of social action or social experiments that could well be of relevance to many other communities in the years to come. One is about a footbridge, the second about a park, and the third about social care.

**The Footbridge**

We had to campaign over a long period, and to do so vigorously, to ensure that the one footbridge over the Central Line railway was retained, and then improved, to give access to those needing a ramp. If we had accepted what the authorities (London Transport and Redbridge) told us, it would no longer be there. Patrick Jenkin who was then the local MP told me he was shocked by the strident language the local people were using in pursuit of their cause. I told him that the footbridge was a life-line to the Maybank Community, and when life is threatened there is a reflex reaction triggered in self-defence. It’s now obvious to everyone that to remove it would have been a non-sense, not least to the two local schools, Churchfields and Woodbridge. But the local people understood the issue better than planners and outsiders. (As a matter of historical record, the old bridge was not wasted, but sits astride the old central line near Ongar, where steam trains now carry enthusiasts.)

**The Park**

Then there is the story of the local park, Elmhurst Gardens, a small facility with tennis courts, a bowling green, open space, a playground, set within trees, shrubs and flowers. During the early part of the forty years the Council saw its role in running the park in very traditional terms: it was a local authority park provided for local people. The Council owned and maintained it, the local people used it. Now all that has changed, not least because of financial constraints on the council. Through local action and engagement notably through the Friends of Elmhurst Gardens, the park has Green Flag status, and earlier this year saw a thrilling Easter Egg Hunt with hundreds of children and families enjoying shared or common space. The part-time local park-keeper is at the interface of a creative partnership between local authority and local people. It doesn’t take a genius to see that this is good news all round! It just took a long time, including what is sometimes called “austerity”, for the Council as a body to come around to see what local people, including local councillors had known for a generation. This is surely how the future will look in one form or another.

**Maycare**

Then there is the initiative MCA took called Maycare. The idea was a simple one: there was a 24/7 telephone service provided by a local resident, who was housebound due to a physical disability. She was given personal and professional support, as well as up to date information, so that anyone needing help could be connected to someone who was willing and able to help. As MCA put this plan into operation, its potential soon became clear. We contacted the Council Social Services Department to see how we could work better together to provide what is now called Social Care. There wasn’t much progress and the scheme has had to reduce its scope and services. But with digital communication and a clearly bounded area, it is ripe for implementation.

What if the area were to be reconfigured in the mind as containing a percentage of sheltered housing, with telephone or digital contact available 24/7 linked to Council resources, but run by local volunteers? Frail and elderly people could continue to live in their own homes, and what is more they would be in a neighbourhood made up of people all ages, so that they could see children playing, and hear their laughter. This is not just a dream, but a practical option waiting for its time to come.

**Summary of the features of MCA thus far:**

1. Always fully and solely funded by local community, never subsidised or sponsored by an outside body;
2. It always decides its own agenda rather being driven by initiatives and demands of others;
3. Never having its own premises, such as a village hall or community centre, so it needs little by way of funding to maintain its resources or property;
4. Its own newsletter; website and Facebook page;
5. Five research studies on the neighbourhood, using the best models and methodology;
6. A commitment to everyone: those who work in the area, as well as residents;
7. Non-political;
8. Focussed on the neighbourhood, but outward looking and willing to engage with and partner others;

**And Next?**

One of the keys to the future is the involvement of a new generation of people willing to roll up their sleeves on behalf of the neighbourhood. Another is a council willing to be creative in its strategy, methods and delivery. We are told that this is what Redbridge council now aspires to be. And it so happens that it is well-advanced with a local plan to cover the years 2015-2030! So here are some thoughts on ten future possibilities:

1. Linking up with all other local associations and such groups in the borough. Is this not one of the reasons for the existence of RCVS? Could it partner with the Council to do this? Is it too radical a suggestion, because of a perceived potential threat, I wonder? Would you like to come and look round, I wonder?
2. Another research study of the area done in partnership with LBR with in depth attention to glocal issues;
3. A name agreed and supported and sign-posted;
4. Now that there will finally be pedestrian crossing and lights at Charlie Brown’s roundabout, and we have planted trees and daffodils, could the carousel be retrieved as a focal point/talisman;
5. Energy generation with particular reference to one of the boundaries, the River Roding;
6. Schools involved in the allotments and litter prevention and collection;
7. The park developed as a model of partnership;
8. Radical experiment in sheltered housing along the lines suggested;
9. Environmental protection and care (including air pollution);
10. Working together on strategic planning: Area committees, area forums?

Keith J. White 12th November 2018