

HISTORY OF THE IRISH WELFARE BUREAU, HAMMERSMITH

"Unlike most ethnic groups, there has been a direct involvement between the Irish and British for a very substantial period.

Although Irish people have settled in Britain since pre-Roman times and were well established in London by the time of the Tudors, the first massive influx of Irish immigrants to this country took place in the last century. The cause of this mass emigration was the failure, for three consecutive years, of the potato crop. Following a long period of political agitation and six years of intermittent warfare, an Irish Free State came into being in 26 of its 32 counties, in Ireland in 1922. It was mainly from the 26 counties that the next great migration to Britain came in the 1950's. This was due to post-war reconstruction in Britain for which a massive influx of migrant labour was required, coupled with unfavourable economic conditions in Ireland."

(GLC Policy Report on the Irish Community)

Many of these immigrants who arrived in the 1950's settled in the Hammersmith/Fulham area. Historically, Irish people have always identified with Catholicism, and so it was to the Church that the new migrant, finding themselves in a strange environment, turned for help. In response, the Church in Ireland sent two personnel to cope with the influx of people looking for advice. They were given temporary office space at 55 Fulham Palace Road, but this was not sufficient or satisfactory. The Bureau needed its own separate building so work on a pre-cast building began at the end of October 1971 and was completed by February 1972. The Hammersmith Council contributed £300 towards the cost. This was the first sign of recognition by the local Borough Council of the efforts that were being made to answer certain needs in the area. A substantial grant was given by agencies in Ireland towards the cost of the present precast building. But from the very beginning, the Bureau relied heavily on voluntary fund raising, through jumble sales, dances and raffles. In such a way it tried to create an awareness within the local Community of its responsibilities to the less materially fortunate.

In its early years, the Bureau sought to concentrate on preventative work, encouraging as far as possible, a more thorough preparation for emigration - giving continuing help and support where needed on arrival in London - helping to find suitable employment and accommodation - directing to relevant community services.

In the 1970's, it became apparent that the work taken on needed to be on a more professional footing. By October 1970, a professional social worker was employed. The Bureau became registered as a charity on 4/10/74.

As time passed, the Bureau found itself dealing with new and varied problems:-

One of the major problems facing the Bureau was accommodation, especially for young boys arriving in London. After much negotiation, a hostel was opened in 1977 at 72, Hammersmith Grove. It welcomed Irish Youth who found themselves in West London, homeless, jobless and with no relatives to help. While the hostel was mainly concerned with young Irish men, it did not refuse admission to anyone. Austin House, is a home from home. This has been essential, as the majority of boys who use the hostel are school-leavers, away from home for the first time. Consequently, they are lonely and homesick. Austin House offers only temporary accommodation.

Another area of concern at the time, was that of 'aged Irish people living in isolation in the London area'. These were in two groups:

i) the single or widowed and childless person who never became fully integrated into the local community and ii) single homeless men, who, in their youth, had worked on building sites. Their work meant that they had to move from place to place, and so had no permanent home. Many of them live in hostels. They constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in Hammersmith.

Over the years, there has been a steady increase in the volume of callers to the Bureau. In its first year, the Bureau interviewed 511 people. In 1985 the number had increased to 6,560.

In the beginning, the workers at the bureau gave their services free of charge. But as time went on and the number of callers increased, a permanent staff was needed. Although funded by small grants from the local Borough, the Irish Government and money raised by the local community, the Bureau has never been in a position to pay staff a full salary. The office equipment is totally inadequate. For instance, the office has only one typewriter and this was bought second-hand eight years ago for £20.

It is no longer possible to provide an adequate service under such limiting circumstances.