

THE PECKHAM EXPERIMENT

SLG ORAL HISTORIES

REF. NO.	SLH/OH/002/001	
INTERVIEWEE'S NAME	Dorothy Batten	DATE OF BIRTH 6 September 1944
DATE(S) OF RECORDING	29 May 2018	
INTERVIEW LOCATION	South London Gallery	
INTERVIEWER NAME	Max Baraitser-Smith, Ivo Blackwood, Tommie Introna, Akhera W, Jordan Minga	
RECORDER	ZOOM H4N	
TOTAL DURATION	01:00:55	NUMBER OF TRACKS 1
ACCESS	No Restrictions.	

TRACK 01 [02:00] Dorothy Batten, [DB] a 'Guinea Pig' of the Peckham Experiment [PE] discusses Dr George Scott Williamson's presence at the Pioneer Health Centre [PHC]. **[02:50]** Dr Williamson [GSW] (known as 'Doc Willie') and Dr Innes Hope Pearse had very clear ideas about how things ought to be but would explain their ideas to the members. **[03:08]** DB was born before the National Health Service. When the PHC opened at an affordable cost to members, they were able to ask the doctors for health advice about minor concerns. **[04:04]** DB didn't eat meat as a child and her parents were able to ask the doctors' advice about this. GSW said it didn't matter if she ate meat or not. DB has been vegetarian all her life. **[05:20]** Members consulted GSW about matters other than health. e.g. rooms in DB's family house were requisitioned for other families after WWII. GSW spoke to the council on the family's behalf to get their house back. **[06:42]** Health wasn't just not being ill, it meant being in the right environment and being free. **[07:07]** DB remembers a swap shop for sharing clothes that she believes was organised by the PHC. **[08:50]** DB feels you don't get the sense of community anywhere else apart from the church. **[10:10]** After the PHC closed the community continued to visit the farm. DB's parents stayed friends with other members for their whole lives. **[11:05]** the members were mostly lower-middle class, blue-collar workers. DB's father was an exception because he was a junior accountant. **[12:49]** Relationship with other parents didn't make them feel less free. **[13:38]** DB's parents quite often had parties at their house for 'centre folk'. The sense of community stretched outside of the centre itself. Parties didn't seem to happen at the centre. DB doesn't remember there being alcohol at the centre. **[14:36]** Healthy eating: Mary Langman ran Oakley farm. The farm would supply the centre. The members were given the opportunity to taste organically grown food and it was through taste that DB was introduced to healthy eating. The food at the centre was fresher than what other people in Peckham would have been eating. **[16:30]** Demographics: Racially, the area was very white. There were some people of colour in Peckham but DB doesn't remember any at the PHC. Some people possibly wouldn't have been able to afford the cost of the PHC. DB thinks her parents were apprehensive about the PE to start with. She doesn't know anyone who left the centre once they started. **[18:40]** GSW's laissez faire approach influenced how

DB brought up her own family. [20:00] The centre also influenced DB to enjoying 'belonging'. At every stage in her life she has joined things to belong. [20:30] The sense of belonging came from being part of a 'big family', people she could relate to without having to do anything special. [22:00] DB went the centre after school and hung out. She and her brother enjoyed swimming. [23:00] DB never knew or felt like she was part of an experiment until she read about the PE in a nursing magazine approximately 40 years later. She didn't feel obviously investigated. [25:19] The doctors were integrated into the space. GSW was the drummer in the band. No sense of 'them and us'. [27:30] DB's earliest memory of the PHC is being thrown in to the pool by her brother. [30:25] The PHC felt safe and didn't feel separate from her home. [31:00] It was safe because there were always people around. DB was a teacher for a while where health and safety was enforced strictly; none of that happened in the PHC. The kids managed to synchronize by themselves. There was a lot of independence given to children. [34:50] The PE was right for the time but DB doesn't know if it could work now. [37:00] What made it flourish? Joining as a family maybe was key. [39:38] Ticketing system for activities. A way of controlling the use of equipment. [41:00] There were unwritten rules. The kids just behaved themselves. [42:45] The sense of ownership encouraged the members to look after the space. The centre appeared to be self-regulating. There were always staff around but only there if you needed them. [45:13] The glass architecture encouraged learning from each other. [46:00] DB recalls another experiment: how children respond to very large space with no visible limits and how they respond to space with visible boundaries. [47:36] DB didn't feel able to incorporate the ideas of the PE into her teaching. [49:00] You couldn't impose the culture of the PE it had to grow organically. [50:31] The centre didn't cater for the old. [53:00] the doctor didn't treat illness at the centre. They would refer the member to another doctor. [54:30] the mental health needs were met. You didn't get anyone with depression at the centre because of the community. [55:30] Farm activities were available. During summer and available at weekends. Fathers went off to work during the week from the farm. It wasn't the building it was the people that produced the sense of community. The doctors weren't there, Mary Langman was.

This Oral History was commissioned through the South London Gallery's Young People's Programme as part of *The Peckham Experiment: A Centre for Self-Organisation*, a Heritage Lottery funded project led by the Art Assassins, the SLG's young people's forum who are working with the Pioneer Health Foundation, the Wellcome Library and the Science Gallery at Kings College, Peckham Vision and the Wilderness Wood to investigate the heritage of The Peckham Experiment. For more information visit: www.southlondongallery.org



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