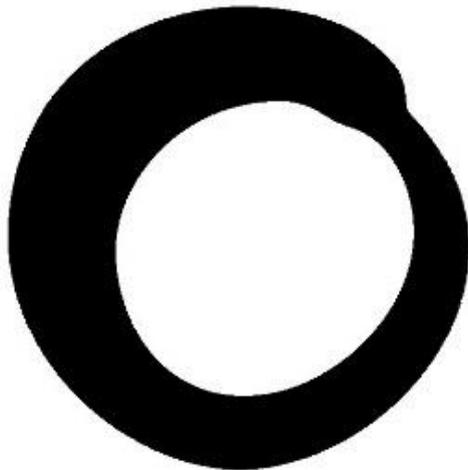


**Birmingham Friends of the Earth  
and the Warehouse  
Then and Now**

**ADMIN & GOVERNANCE**

**Researched and Compiled  
by Bernard Parry**



**LOTTERY FUNDED**

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## **Contact details**

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### **BFoE Heritage project**

Please contact us if you have any amendments to this booklet or want to get more involved in the heritage project – it will continue beyond the life of the HLF funding. In particular, we're looking for memories and/or memorabilia from the 1970s-1990s.

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## **Introduction**

The first Friends of the Earth group in Birmingham operated from private houses in the early 1970s. By the late seventies they ran a paper recycling project that rapidly outgrew a house in Passey Rd, Sparkhill. In 1977 the group took the momentous decision that, in addition to campaigning for a better world, they would demonstrate in practical ways a better way of living. A derelict building in Allison St., known as The Warehouse, was acquired as a base for this and for many more work projects and campaigns. The building itself soon was seen as a model to demonstrate what could be done with a more efficient use of an older building. All those in the building worked together to demonstrate that a more cooperative way of organising could be successful.

Birmingham Friends of the Earth (BFoE) has now been at the Warehouse for 40 years and as part of the Heritage Lottery Fund Project celebrating this achievement a group of volunteers have spent time in the Library of Birmingham going through the archived material of BFoE. This largely covers the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's. The archive mostly consists of newsletters from this period, but there are also photographs and minutes. Topics for research were allocated to each individual researcher covering: Campaigns, Projects, Admin & Governance, and Education & Publications.

The results of that work is shown in a series of pamphlets, of which this is one. Together they constitute a record of the early years of BFoE and the Warehouse. We are however aware that the archives don't record everything. If you see any omissions or errors, please let us know and we can amend. We see these as 'living' documents.

## **1. Summary**

Birmingham Friends of the Earth moved into the Warehouse on the 1st April 1977. The move was necessitated by the growth of a paper recycling business the establishment of which showed from its earliest days the new group's determination to campaign AND demonstrate practically what could be done. Almost ten years later in September 1986 the building was purchased. That purchase was made as a private transaction in the name of individual group members.

## **2. Early days before the Warehouse**

From the earliest days of the new organisation a Newsletter was published. The Newsletter charts mainly the campaigns conducted but also successive issues reveal challenges, conflicts and tensions that to some degree persist to the present day. They also, however, plot an evolution in the search for solutions and towards new ways of operating.

The earliest copies of the Newsletter are issued from a private house in Passey Rd, Moseley. That of June 1976 raises what would be a continuing issue noting that an asterisk on your Newsletter means that members subs. are due.(!)The issue of December 1976 notes "we haven't ever been very stringent about membership.....we have always felt that help is more valuable and some people don't have much money anyway. We also send a lot of Newsletters to people who don't actually 'belong' to us but if anyone would actually like to 'join' us that would be great! At present it's a pound per annum but that may get reorganised to cover two types of membership for active and less active members."

That same December Newsletter records the details of a momentous meeting held on the 24th of November: It was agreed that BFoE should become a company limited by guarantee: "...when the group wants to have its own premises - which is likely in the near future. (A retrospective Newsletter review in Jan/March 1980 notes that the recycling business had been growing rapidly 'one room in a members house was overflowing with paper ....new premises had to be found.')

Currently an 'Unincorporated Association' of members without a separate legal personality..... FoE Birmingham hasn't the capacity to hold property on its own. Trustees need to be appointed who would be personally liable to pay rent without incorporation." Memorandum and Articles of Association would have to be drawn up and accounts independently audited. The meeting agreed this move to turn an informal organisation into a legal entity that could hold property.

## **3. The move to the Warehouse**

The January 1977 Newsletter announces: "Good news here at last". The good news was that the office would be moving to the ground floor of the Arts Lab adjoining the Settlement. It also records however that the search was on for a warehouse in Digbeth to set up a recycling scheme. The search was also on for "someone with energy and stamina" to set it up.

By March 1977 it could be announced that: "last week's meeting decided to accept the offer of a warehouse in Digbeth and to begin work immediately... we have a meeting with a

building surveyor to advise us on what needs to be done and how to cost this. Community Industry will help with this work - immediate priority is to clean out ground floor and dry out the building. The finances are not sorted out but probable rates only £30 per week.... future vision - a bike and other workshops, a food warehouse for the midland whole food shops and eventually intermediate technology workshops making useful things and providing employment.” Incidentally it was still assumed in this issue that the office would be at the Birmingham Settlement.

[In a look at the history of the Warehouse to date in the May June 86 Newsletter it also give more details about the acquisition of the building stating that the ‘gay community’ had originally leased a block of buildings between Allison St. and Bordesley St. as a future community centre but had no use for the warehouse/cottage and were willing to sublet them for £4 per week.]

In the April 1977 issue the move to Allison Street on the 1st could be triumphantly confirmed. The office was also now at the Warehouse and insurance was almost sorted out(!) (The Rowntree foundation made a grant). The idea of asking for Standing Orders was floated - ‘what do you think’ is asked of readers. There would be a discussion about getting the right structure to fit changing roles and function.

The May/June Newsletter tells us that the move of the office to the Arts Lab did not take place as the building had been condemned!

#### **4. Early days at the Warehouse**

The first major challenge presented to the new tenants of the Warehouse, who knew very little about what they were really taking on, (it seems not to have been realised for example that the cottage was part of the lease!), was the state of the building and issues arising like insurance.

The second one facing these ‘pioneers’ was the acquiring of the skills needed to administer a building, to which was added the difficulty of reconciling an informal highly co-operative structure with legal requirements and eventually having to face the difficulty of dealing with landlord/tenant relationships within the same ethos.

In those early heady days at the Warehouse those challenges were but the first of many; making a success of the recycling and whole food dealing businesses brought in from BFoE’s beginnings in Moseley, raising the money for the eventual purchase of the Warehouse, fundraising for campaigns local and national and recruiting new members and volunteers.

The May 77 Newsletter reports regular Sunday work for repair and decoration and that the Warehouse was “dogged by problems with insurance, the lease and our constitution”. It also records confusion with membership of national FoE. As an autonomous group they would ask for £2.50 to cover Newsletter cost. By May 77 it can be stated that the Warehouse is being transformed and a request issued for donations of carpets, desks and filing cabinets!

People were coming from all over the country to work on cottage and roof renovation. On July 16/17 there would be a working weekend and Warehouse warming party. It was noted, however, that meetings were badly attended and that it was important that major policy decisions on the Warehouse and campaigns were fully discussed before being implemented.

In July 77 it was noted that folk were “getting confused between administration and policy.”

The August 77 issue notes that: “a system is slowly emerging” of regular fortnightly meetings with a rotating chairperson at which minutes should be taken (!); the first step to more formal structures of governance. It also notes that: “we are very nearly a Co-operative.” Though the Registrar thought the original proposed name was too close to that of national FoE, Friends of the Earth (Birmingham) Ltd was accepted and still is the legal position today though in common usage Birmingham Friends of the Earth [BFoE] eventually became the norm.

The November 77 issue laments that: “most of our energies have gone into structural things” at the cost of campaigning. It also welcomes the gas supply being installed, dolefully recording that workers were going out on the street to get warm and that water was running down the walls.(!)

By December 77 a major problem with finance was being noted. The cost of insurance and higher than expected capital expenditure led to a range of fund raising efforts; a craft fair, jumble sale, request for loans and requests to boost paper sales.

The issues of January and February 78 note the success of the new Wholefood Warehouse, also known as the Muesli base, which was “gradually emerging as a Veg. Co-op”. By the following month there was mention of member shops in “the collective” setting up a Co-operative with an ICOM structure.

The April 77 issue urges supporters to buy £1 shares as: we are..”currently effectively owned by about half a dozen people!”.

## **5. A new structure**

In January 1978 Limited Liability was obtained with final registration as an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS). (This had been prematurely announced in the March 1977 Newsletter, which stated “we are now a Co-operative for the Benefit of the Community”) This legal status has continued to the present day except for the formal change to being a Community Benefit Society under current legislation, BFoE still considers itself to be a Co-operative with cooperatively minded members!

In June 78 a new meeting structure is announced with quarterly general meetings for major policy decisions with weekly Monday meetings on logistics and collective Warehouse meetings for those who work at the Warehouse and informal and monthly campaign meetings.

September 78 records the first meeting of a Bicycle Group and announced that the Muesli Base would sell spare bicycle parts.

October 78 sees the roof still leaking, but mentions that IVS workers had restored more of the building. A general atmosphere of “ordered chaos” is noted.

In November 78 a major concern is expressed that the lease was coming up for renewal and that it was likely to see a major increase from £4 a week to potentially £50 - £80 which would mean leaving the Warehouse. Clearly this fate was avoided and in December 79 a new 5 year lease was announced.

In January 79 however, the Newsletter records the: “Great fire of Allison St.” 10 days before Christmas £10,000 worth of insured damage had been incurred. By February the damage had been largely restored. In August 40 people attended the AGM to discuss present structures and ideas for the future.

## **6. Charitable Status, and two fires**

By December 79 charitable status had been acquired for educational work and BEEP was born. It was also stated that: “Our structural basis is quite sound though it brings with it certain responsibilities and duties - accounts, VAT, taxman, decision making structures. We’ve learnt a lot about employing people - tax, NI etc. We’ve successfully raised money from government programmes and charitable bodies. We now pay four general workers with no government subsidy.”

It is also celebrated that BFoE had now occupied the Warehouse for 2 and a half years and had bought the last 5 years of a 99 year lease.

The April 1981 Newsletter reports application for grants to repair the roof and the August 1981 issue celebrates the work of volunteers in coping with the leaking roof. In the same issue it is recorded that on August 3rd the landlord will start rebuilding the burnt offices (the second great Fire of Allison Street occurred in the top office after a break-in one night and destroyed a huge amount of paperwork). The patching of the various elements of roof structure was to be a continuing theme! There were now four full time workers but a gulf was appearing between day-time and evening workers.

In the May/June 82 Newsletter it was announced that a new CND Regional Office was being set up in the Warehouse. Many members were already involved in the Birmingham Anti-Nuclear Group (BANG).

## **7. A new direction?**

In this issue alongside details of a campaign against non-recyclable bottles and the proposed Kings Heath by pass it was stressed that it was not enough to fight constantly AGAINST things but to show, in the building, a practical demonstration of what could work - this would

continue to be the philosophy of BFoE and provide a justification for work on the building itself as a model once the need for a business base had gone.

The November 82 issue asks if a new direction is needed for BFoE and the Warehouse. "Are we really a FoE group... should we change our name.... new ideas are wanted." It was reported that at a general meeting some full time workers felt there was a lack of general campaigns on FoE issues. We were getting "bogged down" in our own work on insulation, Push bikes, CND or "Whatever we are paid to do". Despite these doubts supporters and members remained concerned about the future of the Warehouse. There was a need to raise the money for the purchase of the Warehouse as well as fundraising for campaigns local and national, and recruiting new members and volunteers. Funds were raised from public bodies {the West Midlands County Council (Warehouse purchase grant) the Manpower Service Commission who funded many employees}, sales, membership, flag days, and as businesses were spun off and new tenants incorporated into the building - rents.

## **8. Cooperative structure**

The cooperative atmosphere in the early days of the Warehouse is well captured in a number of Newsletter quotes - Jan/Feb 81 records the preparing of communal meals "workers can be seen slaving over saucepans of lentils " and joint efforts to cope with the leaking roof "workers have been snorkelling between office and meeting room". But we can also begin to see some tensions, when a volunteer writes "a worm's eye view" in the issue of May 1981 recording that "nobody seems to know what is going on here .....there is no coordination" but thinks this is a price worth paying to "have no VIP in charge to kowtow to....not totalitarian" and that work does get done in the end in a collaborative fashion.

Everyone in the building was considered by all involved to be part of this informal collective even when, as in the case of CND, they were to be rent paying distinct organisations. This 'everybody mucking in' atmosphere which provided a practical model of a better way of living is remembered with great affection by many. The tensions arose from the difficulty of preserving the best of this friendly non-hierarchical cooperative working while ensuring efficiency and financial viability.

By 1984 the Newsletter had become the Birmingham Environmental News (BEN) and in the May/June issue was urging folk to buy one pound share certificates for life time membership but also to pay £7. 50 annually for joint membership of BFoE and a subscription to the Environmental News.

The July/August issue states that 500 people have share certificates and 50 organisations and 15 individuals receive the Environmental News.

The BEN of Sept./Oct. 84 notes that the front of the Warehouse was having a much needed facelift with painting and new design and boxes of flowers on windowsills. A survey had been commissioned to improve thermal efficiency and it was noted that BFoE would like the

Warehouse to become a demonstration centre for alternative technology but that the cost was “daunting”.

In Nov./Dec. 84 a new venture is recorded - A One Earth Shop selling food, recycled paper and bike parts.

## **9. Buying the Warehouse, and more discussions on direction**

July/August 85 sees the first mention of buying the Warehouse - “TO BUY OR NOT TO BUY” was the headline “20 members and friends have promised loans and we have applied for funding from public bodies.”

BEN in Oct/Nov 85 issue notes that the West Midland County Council had agreed to fund research into recycling and run a pilot scheme in inner city areas of Birmingham.

At the AGM of that year an income from all activities £300,000 is recorded “even for the first time making a very small profit. At the meeting there was a discussion about the future of BFoE - “should we move away from doing things in the Warehouse or administering them there or centre in the community? Or would it be too much of a shock to the system? We could offer training to Co-ops or small businesses to set up in inner city areas plus handling accounts, grants etc.” ICCP funding for home improvement work gave financial security but was “not trailblazing any more”.

In Jan/Feb.86 the question was asked “Was the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) the fairy godmother or the evil stepparent - should we continue, abandon or expand MSC projects?” BFoE had successfully run a number of MSC projects employing dozens of people. While undoubtedly giving many unemployed people useful training in a variety of skills, and in some cases a life changing experience leading to a commitment to environmental issues, there were tensions around how much energy went into this compared to campaigning. Some would argue that the projects themselves were ‘campaigning’ by exposing workers and those who benefited from the projects to FoE’s messages, others felt it detracted from more traditional campaigning.

March/April 86 sees a change in membership fees with £2.50 charged to receive the newsletter and £5 for “supporting members”

The BEN of May/June 1986 announced that the planned purchase of the Warehouse would go ahead with a £25000 grant from the Economic Development Unit of the soon to be deceased West Midlands County Council, supplemented by pledges of £10,000 in interest free loans for one or two years from supporters. The headline was “A HOME OF OUR OWN” and it was recorded that - “it’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good.” The Treasurer and Secretary had gone to County Hall to collect a cheque in the last week of the council’s existence. Approval having been given first by the Economic Development Committee and then by the full council.

It was further noted that: “We now need a proper legal structure to own and manage a building and provide a home for CND and other ‘green’ organisations that safeguard our ideals and objectives.”

In September 1986 it is recorded that the purchase was underway.

The BEN of September/October reminds subscribers that they need a one pound share to vote at AGM’s but as a true co-operative it was one vote per share. At this stage, however, they are still insisting on annual payments to secure this right.

## **10. Another new legal structure**

This purchase brought into sharp focus many issues that arose from previous informal ways of working. The News of May/June 1986 makes the following announcement - “This (the purchase of the Warehouse) will involve considerable work with our solicitor and financial adviser in setting up the proper legal structures to own and manage the building to provide a home for FoE, CND and other ‘green’ organisations in ways that safeguard our ideals and objectives.” Another quote from this issue gives a clear view of the existing enthusiastic positive and cooperative atmosphere that they wanted to see reflected in structures. “ there is much to do - the shop is busy most days, the waste paper collectors are out at the crack of dawn, the year’s account somehow got audited, there is a new CND office being built, more and more recycled products fill our marketing operation.”

The BFoE ‘pioneers’ clearly saw themselves as part of a community of like-minded organisations that would work together. You get a clear impression from Newsletters of the 1980’s of a particularly close relationship with CND. They did not want to be landlords in a landlord tenant relationship.

By the issue of July/August 86, however, we get this announcement: “Nothing is ever simple. After many discussions with our solicitor and financial adviser about the best form of ownership i.e. some kind of holding company in which in which BFoE has a majority of shares we are told we have to buy it as FoE Birmingham.”

From then on like it or not a landlord/tenant relationship would be in place and managerial structures had to reflect this. First the directly operated businesses and then the spun off businesses that succeeded them would move out and external tenants sought who reflected the ideals of BFoE. In the September/October issue we read this request ““there will be vacant office space and space in the front bays. Do you know of any organisations or small green businesses (wholefood cafe perhaps) who are looking for a cheap, centrally located home. Get them to come and talk to us.”

The current structure of firstly a Management Committee that oversaw the management of the building and struggled with limited finance to make it a green exemplar and secondly a first fortnightly and then weekly meeting of campaigners was soon established. The MC was

to ensure that the building provided a home, resources and support for campaigners as well as being an ethical employer and landlord.

By the June/July 91 issue, incidentally now called an 'Action Briefing', this was clearly spelled out. Attendees at the AGM were urged to put themselves forward for the MC and this statement is made: "The MC takes on overall responsibility for the running of our organisation; particularly in our capacity as property owners, landlords and employers of personnel. Due to the issues that the MC has to concern itself with there is little involvement with FoE campaigns.... the 'hands on' campaigning is pursued by members who generally meet on Monday evenings. The MC has a responsibility for utilising our financial material and human resources to achieve BFoE wider aims."

This could be a statement issued today. BUT it clearly didn't go unchallenged. In the February/March 92 issue we find that: "after hours of soul searching" the MC has agreed that the most important function is campaigning, other activities - information services and running the building must not get in the way. There was to be a new management structure with two separate committees, one to deal with the building and tenancies (with the building manager paid from rents) the other REAL BFoE to concentrate on strategy and campaign work. This way of working continued for some time and as modified is outlined again in an MBA thesis from 1995 on BFoE (Strategic Management at Birmingham Friends of the Earth - Review and Recommendations by Sau Kuen Kwok of Aston Business School) which reveals a structure in which under the MC there are virtually autonomous Campaign and Warehouse Groups giving the latter responsibility for membership and fundraising and both with separate sources of revenue and accounting structures.

## **11. Conclusions**

Through all these years Newsletters record a constant struggle to raise money to pay the salaries of employees and support campaigns. A constant struggle to establish the Warehouse as an exemplar of good environmental practice on limited finance. A constant worry that too much energy and effort was going into fund raising and not into the campaigning it was intended to finance. A nagging concern that campaigners were financially supporting the building and not vice versa as it should be.

Through all these years there have also been issues connected with the nature and responsibilities of membership, its cost and obligation. These matters are still debated today. (The Feb/March 94 Action Briefing records that 'Golden Supporters' who have been invited to pay extra by Direct Debit are currently raising £380 per month" - a figure that would delight today's Treasurer!

It is a tribute to the dedication to so many of the BFoE family then and now that the Warehouse is still here and looking forward to a new stage of development which is designed to address many of the problems that have bedeviled it since the original building purchase. Much has been achieved. The Warehouse has overcome many difficulties to set an example of relatively sound environmental practice in an older building. It does provide a cost

effective home for many progressive and worthy tenants and it has continuously hosted a successful campaigning group.

From its beginnings in Moseley and then at the Warehouse BFoE has sought to set an example of good environmental practice; from practical pioneering recycling and insulation schemes to work on the building itself. This is not to mention the role that the building has played over the years as a 'nursery' for what became independent businesses or campaigns. Amongst the UK's FoE network of groups BFoE is unique and has an enviable record of success.