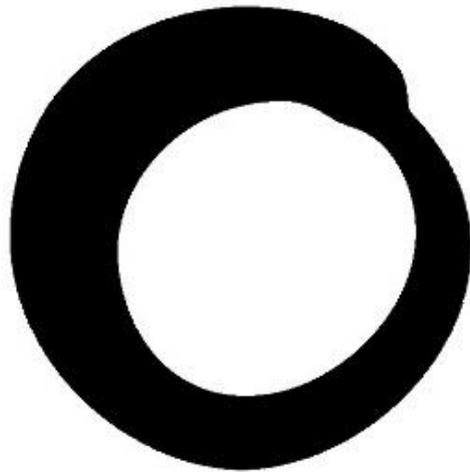


**Birmingham Friends of the Earth  
and the Warehouse  
Then and Now**

**MEMORIES OF BFoE**

**Written by Lyn Roberts, with input from Robin Austin, Pete  
Raine and Val Stevens**



**LOTTERY FUNDED**

## **Thanks**

To all past and present BFoE volunteers and workers who have contributed to this project.  
To the Wolfson Centre for Archival Research, Library of Birmingham.  
This project was supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

## **Contact details**

### **Birmingham FoE**

If you'd like to get involved with or keep up-to-date with BFoE's current activities, please get in touch.

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Facebook: [facebook.com/inthewarehouse](https://www.facebook.com/inthewarehouse)  
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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.

Email: [heritage@birminghamfoe.org.uk](mailto:heritage@birminghamfoe.org.uk)

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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.

This is a companion document. It is a blog written in January 2018 by Lyn Roberts, one of the early pioneers, describing her memories of BFoE both before the warehouse and after they moved in. The blog includes input from Robin Austin, Pete Raine and Val Stevens.

## 1. Introduction

I first joined FOE Birmingham in early 1974 when it met in a private house in Moseley and was co-ordinated by a New Zealander called – I think – John. There was a groundswell of environmental concern with many people from all walks of life wanting to affect policy and do something either on single issues or more broadly against rising consumerism and its effects.

A few months later via meetings in a pub John had decided to move back to his home country and it moved to my house in Passey Road.



*6 Passey Road – home to Birmingham FoE in mid 1970s*

Our group was very busy across the environmental spectrum from 1974 until we moved into the warehouse in April 1977 – when it became even busier! In many ways, the taking-on of the building was a natural expression of the proliferation of activities and the need for more space, a more central location and the opportunities for fundraising which that would enable.

There were certain characteristics of the group in the 74-77 period which laid excellent foundations for the expansion of activity into the warehouse:

### **Networking with very many different groups around particular topics.**

Although FOE could be seen as campaigning for single issues – recycling, wildlife, nuclear etc – FOE Brum linked up with many associated groups around these issues and somehow seemed to get on with them! For example: Conservation Groups for the built environment, numerous wildlife groups in relation to cetaceans, political organisations in relation to the Post Office Campaign.

### **An emphasis on positive side to campaigns – what you can do**

Campaigning can be negative but in the case of FOE Brum we naturally found ourselves

also focussing on what individuals and groups could do to bolster and demonstrate the positive side of a message – and this had the effect of empowerment, linkage, positiveness and fun – all essential ingredients for long term and positive growth.

### **Entrepreneurship**

The positive side of campaigns had the effect of making FOE Brum entrepreneurial originating new products and/or distributing and selling products from elsewhere very successfully thus spreading the message and raising funds which could then be used for more activity. Our giant raffle, created by Robin in, probably, 1975, had some 28 prizes which ranged across the length and breadth of sustainable living and so aptly illustrated how consumer choices could be different when seen through the prism of environmental concerns. The raffle was also very successful financially and so enabled us to plough receipts back into our projects.

It was during the 1974-77 years the FOE Brum became the most active and dynamic local FOE group in the country.

## **2. Campaigning**

There has always been a hard, campaigning edge to FOE and around certain topics FOE Brum in 74-77 was very active. Some were led by FOE nationally but others originated out of being in Birmingham.

### **Save the Whale (National)**

As well as numerous talks and lobbying, the group somehow created a 20 foot long papier mache whale which we drove to London in a huge Shirley U Drive van with 20 or so of us stuffed in the back surrounded by whale! (Before the days of Occ Health and Safety!) We demonstrated outside the US Embassy (with Spike Milligan) and attracted the local media when we carried the whale into the new Central Library up the main escalator for a big exhibition there!

### **Materials Re-use and Recycling (National)**

We were heavily involved in campaigning for better materials design and use and undertook all sorts of stunts to raise the need to use materials better and to facilitate recycling rather than simple mixed disposal. This included putting a large skip outside the Central Library into which members of the public put their empty glass bottles, when post consumer glass recycling was almost unheard of.

Lyn and Robin remember constructing a massive effigy affectionately called Willie Waste More out of cashew nut boxes and various bits of junk which the group paraded through Moseley for its Festival in 1975 – all a gimmick but it caught peoples' attention and interest.

### **Nuclear (National)**

FOE Brum gave many talks about energy in general, and nuclear in particular in the early days. This led to Robin writing our document “An Approach to a Total Energy Policy” to put nuclear into the context of overall energy policy.

We created a large exhibition which was featured at the National Exhibition Centre in early 1976 and this whole process began to lay the groundwork for ramped-up campaigning a) against nuclear and b) for energy conservation and insulation once we were a better-resourced group at the warehouse.

Lyn and Robin remember FOE Brum taking some 50 seats on a national FOE Demo to Windscale in 1976. As our train through the countryside Lyn remembers sitting on the floor of the goods wagon weighing our dates and sultanas on a set of kitchen scales while others from Brum created other snacks for hungry demonstrators. We then persuaded the British Rail catering guy to “lend” us his trolley so we could use it to purvey healthier goods to the train travellers!

Pete and Val remember FOE Brum chartering a whole train for two demos in 78-79 to London : an anti-Windscale one after Parker had reported and an anti-whaling demo. Lyn’s brain fails completely to recall either but that doesn’t mean they didn’t happen!  
BIRMINGHAM

### **Action against Car Racing in Birmingham**

In 1974 Birmingham City Council was eagerly pushing for road racing around inner Birmingham and environmental groups like FOE Brum were bitterly opposed to this honouring of the car, burning rubber and burning unnecessary fuel. We worked with local residents opposed to the racing and made the BBC’s national prime time evening TV news. Duckhams was a major supporter of this initiative and we were there adding ourselves to the rear of their cavalcade of racing cars with an old bus, numerous bikes and wearing T-shirts putting down “Muckhams”!

### **Birmingham Post Office Facade**

In 1975 there was a push to demolish the Victorian Post Office at the top of New Street and replace it with a tower block of flats and offices thus removing a significant Victorian landmark from the Birmingham cityscape.



*Victoria Square Post Office c.1980*

Here, much to our surprise, we found ourselves linking up with two groups of people with whom we had had little linkage until then – the Victorian Society with its emphasis on the preservation of the built environment and the building workers and trade union which was campaigning against the way large parts of cities were being demolished and re-built for what seemed purely money-making purposes. As that happened their skills were being replaced by mechanisation and cityscapes were losing their character.

As this campaign developed FOE Birmingham developed close links with trade unionists. This included Jack Munday, the union leader of the Australian Green Ban movement, who joined the campaign in person to save the Birmingham Post Office and demonstrated side by side with FOE Brum members. The Green Ban movement, brought unions and environmentalists together to save parts of the natural and built environment of Australia during the 1970s.

The concept of “Socially-Useful Work” rather than work with no consideration of its implications became a powerful rallying call and led into many of the projects which FOE Brum could develop once it had its central base at the warehouse.

### **Healthy Food & Positive Health (local)**

Taking care of the inner environment and seeing the complex relationships between food, health and agriculture was close to many in early FOE Brum days.

We attended conferences, helped with catering, linked with church groups concerned about poverty in countries where cash crops predominated.

In the process we laid the groundwork for several of the initiatives taken on once the warehouse was our base – Muesli Base, Wholefood School of Nutrition, Alternative Health talks etc

### **Recycling (local)**

As well as campaigning about materials issues in sync with other FOE groups to promote national objectives we also became quickly involved in amassing materials for recycling and becoming much more informed of the markets for paper, cardboard, glass and metals. There became a pressing physical need to relocate FOE Brum from Lyn’s house in suburban Sparkhill when it began to overflow with recycling materials left there by the many groups we had networked with!

Robin wrote his report “Proposals for a Community Recycling Scheme in Birmingham” in May 1976 and this became our calling card enabling us to talk with Birmingham City Council (Theresa Stewart was a prominent member and one of our supporters) and not-for-profit organisations such as The Settlement and Selly Oak Colleges.

After several possibilities came and went we eventually took out a lease (jointly with the Birmingham Gay Community Centre next door) from the Calthorpe Estate effective April 1977. As Pete remembers “Normally the landlord has to approve a new tenant, but for

some reason that clause was missing from the existing lease so we were able to take on the building even though we had almost no assets. I remember the warehouse was 6,500 square feet and had been used as a food store by the Indian cash and carry company Sandhar and Kang and smelt pleasantly of turmeric and garlic. Just after we moved in a white Rolls Royce stopped outside in Allison Street, and a splendidly bearded and turbaned Sikh got out, all dressed in white. I went over and asked who he was. "I am Kang!" he replied magnificently.")

Pete remembers that the first grant we got was £650 from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (helped by Tony Webb from FOE National) to buy a Bedford van for recycling collections as we had outgrown various domestic-size vehicles used at Passey Road. The van – UVT 797 – was beautifully decorated by Andrew Jones, and truly was a pig to start, and belched black clouds of diesel. Lyn's vivid memory is of Pete loathing to go off on a recycling round as it meant having to get the damned thing going!

### **3. Emphasis on Information**

A significant aspect of FOE Brum has always been that of Education – information underpinned our campaigns and informed our activities. It empowered members and it made our activities credible.

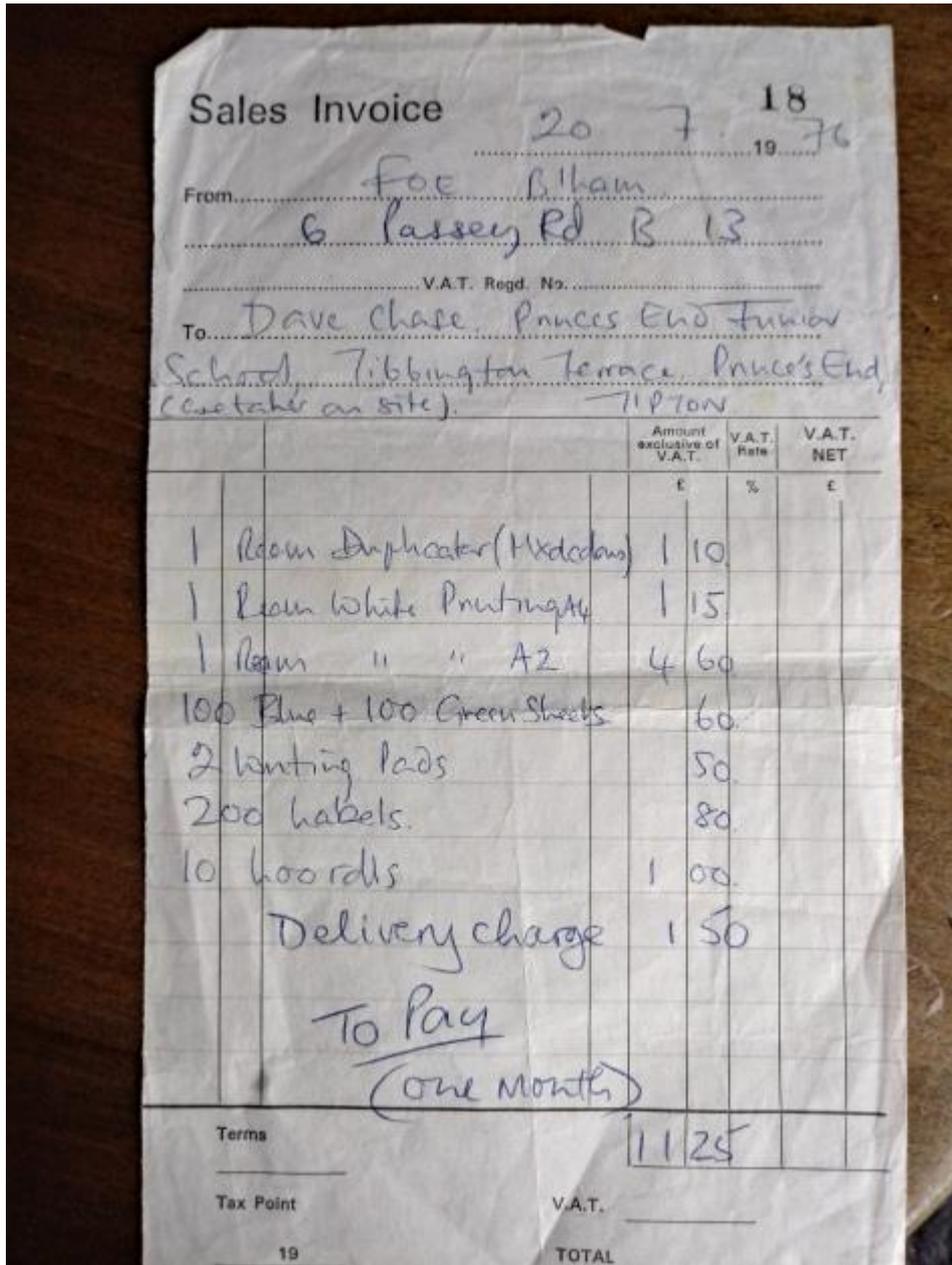
We created exhibitions, gave numerous talks to all manner of groups, supplied handouts for distribution and attended many schools to talk about environmental topics which were becoming increasingly in the public spotlight.

Education and Information eventually led seamlessly into the Information projects created by Brum FOE at the warehouse around materials, recycling, nature conservation etc. Importantly, though we didn't know at this stage, these were fundable under the Government's Job Creation Scheme affording us the opportunity to employ people rather than rely wholly on volunteers.

### **4. Innovation of Products**

Already in the mid-70s FOE Brum was designing and creating items to support its campaigns and to make much-needed funds.

Around 1974 we made simple sticky labels to enable envelope re-use and these were sold to other FOE groups around the country in a very low key way. Then, unbeknownst to the group a piece appeared in the Sunday Times picturing them – orders on the Tuesday totalled 30, Weds 50, Thursday 120....this became very big very quickly and whole evenings were taken up getting orders out. Our small local printer did very well out of our repeat orders. Pete Raine says "I first met Lyn when I signed a petition to save the Post Office at the top of Hill Street. Foolishly I said I was an accountant and could I help – and so my first visit to Passey Road was to help count the 'Save Paper Spare Trees' label money which was in jamjars all over the house".



1976 Invoice for recycled paper goods (Thanks to Dave Clare!)

FOE groups traditionally sold pin-button badges and we created several which were very successful – Food is for Sharing, Save the Whale being notable.

As we got to know the world of recycled paper it transpired that A4 Xerox duplicating paper and toilet rolls (dyed with beetroot juice!) were ripe for promoting and that we did in an increasingly big way! Indeed, Pete recalls Lyn meaning to order 100 boxes of toilet rolls (once we'd moved to the warehouse) and instead having ordered 1000 by mistake! Lyn's braincells don't recall this at all!

In addition, we designed and created T-shirts, sold some designed by other groups and all of this led naturally into a quite considerable merchandising activity at the warehouse.

## **5. Ways of Working**

FOE Brum was always a very inclusive and open group, trying to draw on people's skills and knowledge and doing all we could to make people feel welcome and involved at whatever level they wished.

There was an infectious and fun feeling in our activities which never felt like work, and people seemed to find a place to settle in and feel they were giving and receiving within the group.

This way of working coupled with our connections with left-leaning thinkers and activists would naturally lead towards a co-operative structure once it was necessary to become incorporated as activity mushroomed at the warehouse