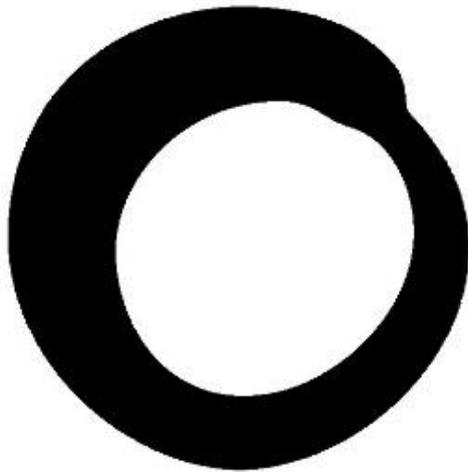


**Birmingham Friends of the Earth
and the Warehouse
Then and Now**

BFoE BEFORE THE WAREHOUSE

Written
by Richard Trengrouse in 1982



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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.
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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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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. 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, written in 1982 by Richard Trengrouse, who volunteered and worked for BFoE for many years. It documents the early days up to the move to the warehouse.

Written in 1982

1. Introduction

The Warehouse at 54 Allison Street opened on 1st April 1977, some five years ago. For those who have only known the building for a short time, it is difficult to visualize the transformation that has taken place during that period, from a leaking rotten hulk, to a relatively pleasant and bright set of offices and workshops, that are now the headquarters of a number of small voluntary groups. What follows is a short account of the history of Friends of the Earth Birmingham, up to the opening of the warehouse.

2. FOE Birmingham between 1972 and 1975.

Friends of the Earth started in Birmingham during 1972, in the wake of the Schweppes Non-Returnable Bottle Campaign. It grew significantly over the next couple of years, largely through its involvement with the opposition to the Moseley/Kings Heath bye pass plans. This large road scheme would have involved the demolition of most of Moseley Village and Kings Heath shopping centre; fortunately it was scrapped.

Between 1972 and 1975 the group had a number of co-ordinators, and its meeting place moved round a variety of flats, houses and bedsits in the Moseley/Edgbaston area, finally coming to rest in a small terraced house in deepest Moseley in 1973.

3. Friends of the Earth at Passey Road

By late 1975 we had decided that it was not enough to be a straight pressure group, constantly fighting against plans and proposals, but that we should try to providing practical demonstrations, that what we believe in could work, a policy we still try to keep to today.

To this end we set about collecting newspapers for recycling, and researching into recycled paper products we could sell ourselves. It was hoped that, by developing these two small enterprises, we could provide finance to improve our wildlife, transport and energy campaigns, and also start to do education work, as well as showing that community recycling could work.

The decision proved to be a success; and by early 1977 our co-ordinator, Lyn Roberts, was working full time; and the little house in Moseley had been transformed, the front room becoming a waste paper store, and the back room an office cum meeting room. The house was always full of people parcelling up envelope labels, our main stock in trade at the time, answering telephone messages and making tea. It was probably one of the most inspiring times in FoE Brum. History. We knew things were going to happen, and we had the ability to change the world. Times have changed.

4. Quest for a building

Soon it became quite obvious, that Passey Road was just too small for the size of operation FOE Brum had become, and that we needed larger premises, which we hoped to be able to finance by expanding our recycling operation. We looked at a variety of buildings, old chapels, car sales rooms, shops, etc.; and eventually decided upon the Old Arts Lab, that was owned by Birmingham Settlement, who said we could have it on a peppercorn rent.

It was ideal. It had ranges of offices, kitchens, potential for lecture halls, and a large storage space for newsprint on the ground floor. The building was of concrete construction, which meant it was just right for storing paper, as the risk of fire spreading would be low. It was not to be, however. To our dismay the building was found to be structurally unsound, and was condemned. Ironically it is still standing today. So we had to look for somewhere else.

When it came, we were not enthusiastic. Birmingham Gay Community had bought the last 5 years of a 99 yr. lease, on a block of buildings between Bordesley St. and Allison St. in Digbeth. It consisted of a block of shops with offices above; what they wanted to use as a community centre and a warehouse with storage space above, and an adjoining caretakers cottage fronting onto Allison St., which they had no use for, and had been trying unsuccessfully to sublet. This they offered to us.

5. 54/57 Allison St

At first we could not believe the contrast to the old Arts Lab. The warehouse was cold and damp; a number of the very many roofs leaked, and there was a sense of decay about the whole place. It was not really what we had been looking for; but the rent was low - £4.00 per week for 5000 square feet - and it was very close to the city centre. So in late February 1977, after much discussion, we agreed to take it.

6. The Move

We spent the whole of March cleaning and exploring the building. It was only after seeing a tramp emerge from a dark doorway, and going to explore, we discovered what is now the front office. It had been completely blocked off from the rest of the building, and had written on its door 'Champagne Store'. The date for the move had been set as 1st April; so the first priority was to set up an office, and to get an area of the downstairs warehousing clear, for storing paper.

The first office was upstairs, in what is now the Greensite/Insulation office. The walls were black, there were great holes in the floor, and cracks in the walls. To clear the area, we set up teams of two workers; who each spent a day or half a day a week painting, repairing floors, mending the dodgy electrics or scraping up the mixture of decaying lentils and oils, that covered the floor of the loading bays.

I could never work out if it was through good planning, or through luck, but by the 1st April all the files had been moved from Passey Rd, the telephone installed and our first office was ready for business.