

## Our History

2010 is the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the formation of The Cyrenians. Known as Tyneside Cyrenians for much of that time, it was in 1970 that a group of people concerned about the lack of facilities for people who were "sleeping rough" in Newcastle set up the charity.

Led by Canon Thomas Gaughan, Head of the Catholic Social Services, Brian Roycroft CBE, former Director of Newcastle Social Services, Frank Welsh and Frank Pollock, both members of the Society of St. Vincent De Paul and other SVP members of the "Mart Talbot" Conference this group started a soup run each evening in the City.

The name 'Cyrenians' was chosen after Simon of Cyrene, the bystander who, it was said, was press-ganged by the Roman army into helping Jesus carry his crucifix along the Via Dolorosa to his death. Simon – the Cyrenian - was not significant or powerful man but the group felt he provided an example to follow – that he showed that ordinary people have a part to play in sharing the burdens of others. And so the name 'Cyrenian' was adopted by the charity.

The soup run highlighted the plight of the homeless in Newcastle and in 1972 the first Cyrenians project opened. Based next to Leazes Arcade near the Haymarket, the project itself was very basic.

Manned seven nights each week by volunteers, it is perhaps shocking by today's standards to learn, there was a nightly draw for the 24 beds at 6pm. At that time, however, this was as near to cutting edge for homelessness in Newcastle as it got. This was innovation and pioneering, but of different age.

Admission was at 8pm for those fortunate enough to draw a place. Everyone was given an evening meal and a bed for the night with clean bedding.

The doors were re-opened between 5am and 9am for others to be admitted for a breakfast of porridge, soup, bread and tea.

The Memorandum and Articles of Association in 1970 described the aims of Tyneside Cyrenians to be:

*"The relief of poverty, sickness and old age in particular (but without in any way limiting the generality of the foregoing words) for the relief of the poverty of persons by reason of mental or physical infirmity are unable to fulfill their duties as citizens or their obligations to their employers".*

In 1973 and 1974 respectively the organisation became involved in two further projects, St. Edmund's House in Gateshead and Factory House in the Walker area of Newcastle.

Each project had nine residents and two staff. A report on Factory House in 1975 described the services and support which underpin our work nowadays and which were available at that time:

*"Help in obtaining proper medical care, providing a balanced diet, help and support in finding work, offering advice on suitable training courses, being involved in helping offenders back into society".*

At St Edmunds, the "Chairman" of the House at that time remarked that even with the total rent of £10 per week it was "hard to make ends meet"!

During the early 1970's, and for years to come, the organisation received great support from the brothers of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The brothers visited projects, befriending residents and arranging social occasions such as games nights.

The relationships with faith groups were crucial in sustaining the organisation at that time.

The late 1970's saw the relocation of the Leazes Arcade night shelter to Virginia House (so named following previous use as a tobacco factory), a building which has played a significant role over many decades.

The 1980's were tough years for Tyneside Cyrenians both financially and due to pressures on project locations. On many occasions closure seemed imminent. The construction of Newcastle's central motorway threatened a fifty bed dormitory night shelter in Rutherford Street. John Thompson, a long-standing Trustee recalled: "The outlook was very bleak. It really did look like the end - the grants were drying up and all staff had been given their redundancy notices."

The demolition of Rutherford Street was delayed and in the interim intensive lobbying led to the City Council to recognise the benefits of a shelter. An alternative property - Elliott House – was found in the West End.

Finding Elliott House was just the beginning. The sky – three floors up - was clearly visible through the holes in the roof and the only residents were pigeons. Grants were obtained and Elliott House was transformed back into the beautiful listed building that its architect John Dobson designed it to be. The refurbishment won a Civic Trust Award, the first ever by Tyneside Cyrenians.

Virginia House became a large dormitory style project providing up to 55 bed spaces. The Company's registered office was also housed here.

The project was an emergency access project and throughout the 1980's and early 1990's was regularly filled to capacity. Bed, breakfast and evening meal were provided and the project was staffed 24 hours per day.

In the early 1980s both Factory House and St. Edmund's House closed seriously affecting the services provided in the east end of the City. This in turn led to partnerships being created with Housing Associations. A replacement project at Gateshead was created; Gifford

House was named after Tom Gifford, the founder of the National Cyrenians movement.

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