

Wednesday 8 March 2006: Norman Ingram-Smith's Thanksgiving Service

Remembering Norman

The first time that I met Norman Ingram-Smith was when I applied for a position as "Welfare Officer" at the old Social Service Unit here at St Martins. The SSU had since its post-war foundation been known as 'The Welfare Department' and the change of name hinted at a change of emphasis for which Norman (with the support of John Pudney and Austen Williams) was directly responsible. At my interview in 1965 I realised that this man in horn-rimmed spectacles, immaculately be-suited and with a golden voice was asking the most profound and pertinent questions. I was not to know then that Norman saw considerable significance in my purple socks and employed me in spite of them, a fact which he referred to many times afterwards with his wonderful sense of the jocular. I was privileged to work for Norman for the next 20 years and learned to relish that warm, twinkling and occasionally quite wicked sense of humour. Bob Isles has spoken of a shared early morning Directorial coffee during which a highly mischievous even *pessimistic* light was thrown upon the coming day and the people, both clients and colleagues, that would feature in it.

Bob also recalls that Norman would finish the day *optimistically* with the question "And what have you done to increase the sum of human happiness today?" The polarities always connected for Norman through his strong, personal Christian faith. From his early work with delinquent boys in the SOS society, through his pioneering of residential care for alcoholics at St Luke's Hostel under Donald Soper to his vision of care for homeless people and their underlying problems at St Martin's under Austen Williams the key to his thinking was never ideological but always one of pragmatic faith.

In the Sixties and Seventies when all around were vigorously debating CND, Vietnam, the Moonies, the Children of God, the Jesus Army and the Hari Krishna sect Norman's prime concern was for the people caught up in and occasionally damaged by the various causes. Thus he employed two American 'war resisters' on the staff and personally helped with the rehabilitation of many folk who had been spirited away or brain-washed by the various cults. With Norman it was always the person and the relationship that mattered.

At the time there were buzzwords and jargon just as today. Norman not trusting stereotypes would gently mock the expression "meaningful and non-judgemental relationships" while at the same time expressing his total support for the underlying concept. His Christian faith and independent spirit left him free to try out new things and stop them once they had served their purpose, thus he invented the Open-line a 24 hour telephone service offering a listening ear' to people plagued by loneliness and isolation, he established a resettlement house in Balham with help from Austen Williams, he created a rent deposit scheme for folk moving on from the streets, he set up the day centre which is now as part of the Connection at St Martin's, the epicentre of social care for homeless people on this site. The previous services when they ceased to fulfil their purposes he closed without regret or compunction describing himself as a 'benevolent dictator'; his colleagues probably felt, like me, that he was infinitely more benevolent than dictatorial!

In his time at St Martin's Norman came to feel completely 'at home' even though he missed the gentler pace of life in his beloved Suffolk. He did though inhabit a larger world too sitting on countless advisory bodies and advising Prince Charles in the early days of the Prince's Trust. He spent many years sitting on the formidably named 'Home Office working party on

Drunken Offenders' producing a minority report in the 1970's that suggested care and persuasion rather than coercion and confinement ... nothing new there then!

Like many of you though what I shall remember about Norman for the rest of my life will be the enjoyable sparkling nature of his friendship and the sheer attentiveness of his listening. I visited Norman the day before he died, he greeted warmly the progress in rebuilding the site here and then with typical understatement he said that the pain had become tiresome. I was reminded of how he spoke freely about death and his curiosity about the next life and how he wanted to 'twitch the curtain and see just what happens beyond'. I have no doubt that in God's judgement Norman will be supremely rewarded for the love, care and listening he has shown to so many of us, clients and colleagues alike, over so many years and not least those of us here today.

For 20 years at St. Martin's ... often counselling and supporting folk till midnight ... for all that tea in fine china cups when we were all accustomed to polystyrene, for the comforting pipe smoke and for the battle involved in not smoking, for your delight in Glenmorangie fine whisky, for the exemplary hand-crafted sermons and addresses, for the handwritten letters ... for the immaculate second-hand suits, for your sense of fun and delight in human idiosyncrasy and allowing us all at some critical time to feel a close personal friend, Norman "thank you".