



# PECKHAM'S CULTURAL EPICENTRE

by SANDRA LAWRENCE

Back in 1994, Jon Wilson read an article in the Financial Times. It recommended that anyone thinking of investing in London property should consider Mayfair, or Peckham.

Jon and his wife Lori had a little investment money. Mayfair's prices were already stratospheric but Peckham, which was local anyway, now that was possible.

It took a leap of faith to purchase some run-down warehouses, with his then business partner, in what was, at the time, one of London's least fashionable areas. It took an even bigger leap to continue purchasing buildings in the industrial zone as they became available. "He had a vision," says Tim Wilson, Jon's son, who now, with other family members, help run Copeland Park in the town centre. The site includes the striking Bussey Building, a late 19th Century cricket-bat factory; shabby, but much-loved by the community.

Slowly they acquired the entire estate that would, eventually, become a family business. "It was a long period of obstacles," admits Tim. The biggest of those obstacles would be the long-running campaign to prevent the last major industrial buildings in Peckham being compulsorily purchased and demolished for a tram depot. Peckham Vision community group was formed to fight the proposals, headed up by an extraordinary local resident, Eileen Conn. The campaign ended in victory in 2008 but the 'win' turned bittersweet when recession hit the same year.

Only in 2013 was Copeland Park finally ready to have its future rewritten.

"We sat down as a family and decided what we'd like to do with it," says Tim. Everyone had their own ideas - Tim himself had tried to start a skate park there when he was 13 "the mice ate everything" - but they all agreed that apartments were not right for this town-centre site. The project needed to involve local people and be open to all.

Peckham Vision, on the back of its first victory, had turned into a residential forum dedicated to integrating the whole town as a sustainable social and commercial centre. Copeland Park, the Bussey Building and other units, were to form the hub of the social wheel. Copeland Park created units of varying sizes and encouraged interesting small local businesses to take part. The project would grow organically, with an emphasis

on ensuring an eclectic mix that would include the surrounding area and its people.

"It was a useful year," says Tim, "I'd been travelling and said I'd help my dad. We'd been working on a smaller scale, with a nightclub, churches, studios and businesses, but it was not up to scratch." Empty floors, poor facilities and access issues all needed to be addressed. "There was a lot of filling skips and painting radiators. You get to know a building that way. They were good days; days you look back to." The adrenalin of creativity was pumping. "It became a little addiction," Tim confesses.

It was essential to keep the 'feel' of the place. The Bussey Building is a local landmark, at the heart of the community in every respect. Its brick-clad, reinforced



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concrete structure is easily visible from the railway - indeed, most of its decoration faces towards the tracks. George Bussey, Victorian owner of Bussey & Co, was not daft. He knew the best way to advertise his famous sporting goods business was by being part of the landscape. Bussey & Co is still remembered today, though workers and residents, who would have used the factory's basement as an air raid shelter in World War II, are fewer than those who collect the company's memorabilia. "I found this on eBay," says Tim, opening an original 1901 box containing a miniature croquet set.

The Bussey Building's high ceilings and untouched industrial features were in what Tim describes politely as 'a raw state.' It was ideal, however, for small businesses, creative arts, and inventive start-ups. "We said 'come and give it a go,' he says. Potential tenants were not too sure at first. "People assumed it wouldn't be too long until it all became houses," he says. "Once we committed to the project we didn't have to wait. Two fitness companies, Yogarise and The Yard Crossfit, started the ball rolling, then 2014-15 was a 'gold rush'. By 2015 we didn't have much space left."

Over sixty studio-sized spaces are now occupied by painters, carpenters, textile artists, ceramic workers, architects, graphic designers, photographers, tailors and African food shops. Larger, warehouse-style spaces are used as bars, restaurants, a cycle repair shop, galleries, West African churches, a mosque, recording and rehearsal studios and, of course, a meeting-area for Peckham Vision. Two semi-derelict terraced houses sit quietly at one end of the site. "We didn't want to knock them down," says Tim, "but didn't want to just turn them into houses, either." The 'safe-houses' are currently occupied by Maverick Projects, who use them for filming locations, art shows and theatre performances.

Today Copeland Park is officially full, though occasionally spaces become vacant. "People come to us now," says Tim. "We look at applications and internally discuss them together. We always did that, even from the start. We don't think of it as 'vetting', more 'curating', as you might an art exhibition. We don't want to make a wrong step. One group wanted to turn it all into studios but that would have made the site 'closed'." That doesn't mean enterprises have to be established. "Most businesses here are first businesses."

"We're getting there now. In many ways we had the easy bit at the start, I was running around, doing things. All of it was quite fun. I didn't sit down to work out 'is



this hard?' Now it's the unglamorous stuff. Sorting out leaks, larger scale renovations, that sort of thing."

It's not all maintenance at Copeland Park; there is still plenty of room for dreams. A consultation process to add a glass roof to the Bussey Building will see it usable year-round. The car park may be moved to make it easier to host festivals and events such as the hugely popular Peckham Festival, partly sponsored by Acorn.

"We started the festival in 2016," says

Tim. "Southwark Council wanted an Open Studios day, but we wanted it to be bigger, celebrating all that Peckham has to offer, encouraging more people to get involved. The event attracted 13,000 visitors. It rained, but that meant everyone went inside and saw the art!"

"It will be a year on year event. We want to spread it to become Peckham-wide but we'll do it slowly."

The company is keen to have as many different, interesting things happening at as many different times of the day



as possible. During the days there are meetings, exhibitions, shops and cafés. In the evenings many of the cafés turn into bars, nightclubs open their doors and, in the summer, Rooftop Cinema, one of the first groups Tim invited, show a broad programme of movies.

"We tried a market in 2015 - I went round market traders with a bunch of cards and said 'bring your stuff, I'll promote it and give you a table,'" says Tim. "It showed the potential of what the place can be used for in the future."

The future is always in mind. Plans for Copeland Park are constantly evolving, with ideas and suggestions from the



community welcomed. Further afield, the company is also currently involved with a project to regenerate the beautiful country house at Beckenham Place. Unloved for about fifty years, the Palladian mansion was used as a golf clubhouse until the club's closure. Lewisham Council are hoping regeneration similar to that at Copeland Park can revive its fortunes. "We have it at least until the end of 2018," says Tim, "we want to encourage smaller-scale artists' studios, yoga, fitness, textiles and a local sewing school, all curated to work with the surrounding nature. It's like a rural retreat."

Over twenty years since Jon Wilson

first took a punt on Peckham's Cinderella warehouses, Copeland Park is at last going to the ball. The work of people like Eileen Conn and Peckham Vision complement the ideas behind Copeland Park and locals can start to look further afield. Exciting developments at Peckham Rye Station's rediscovered Victorian waiting room and other forgotten local jewels can only strengthen Peckham's remarkable renaissance. One thing's for certain; Copeland Park and the Bussey Building will be at the centre of it all.