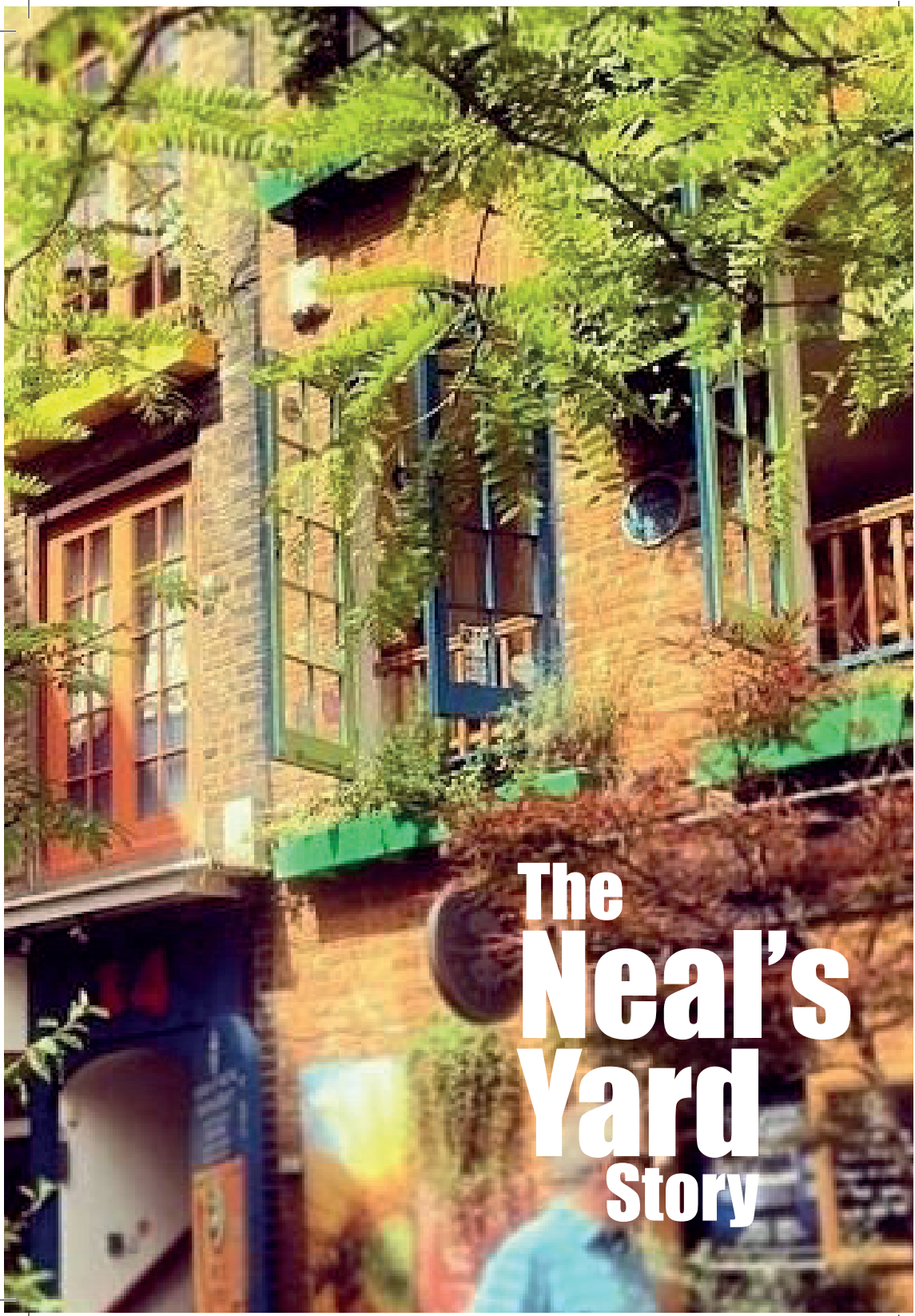

The
Neal's
Yard
Story

THE NEAL'S YARD STORY, foreword by Anja Saunders

It is 2016. I look out of my window and see blossom on the trees planted in the honey bins. A couple kiss on a bench beneath it. Two toddlers run after each other, squealing with laughter. People sit, eat, drink and talk at the various cafes and restaurants. Somebody comes out of the Therapy Rooms and an older man eats his sandwiches by the rowan tree. I can smell the fragrance of frankincense combined with the scents of cooking and baking. Voices mingle but traffic noises are muffled.

I am looking out over Neal's Yard in Covent Garden.

What is the story of this little yard in central London that has gained so much popularity in the last years?

While Neal's Yard owes its name to Thomas Neale, who received a piece of land in 1690 from King William III and created the Seven Dials area in which Neal's Yard is situated, it was Nicholas Saunders who put Neal's Yard on the map. Until the mid 1970s, Neal's Yard did not appear on the London A to Z. In 1976 Nicholas started the Wholefood Warehouse - the beginning of a new life for Neal's Yard. Up until then it had been a dark, rat infested, derelict place with a few warehouses that supported the Covent Garden fruit and veg market. Through Nicholas Saunders' entrepreneurial skills, Neal's Yard was transformed into the thriving, exciting, alternative place it is known as today.

Nine years after the opening of the Wholefood Warehouse, Nicholas Albery, a close friend of Nicholas Saunders and director of the Institute for Social Inventions, published a booklet, The Neal's Yard Story. He wrote:

"Neal's Yard is an extraordinary oasis of greenery in Covent Garden. Just as extraordinary is this behind-the-scenes story of the wholefood-related businesses which have, over the last ten years, rescued Neal's Yard from dereliction. It will make useful reading for small businesses elsewhere and for those working to regenerate our inner cities, besides answering the questions of all those who have ever visited Neal's Yard and felt inspired."

Now 40 years later, in response to many people asking about the history of Neal's Yard, Nicholas Albery's history has been reprinted as a limited edition printed booklet and is also available for download on Kindle books.

However, it is not just historical value that merits this revival of the Neal's Yard story. Many years have passed since the opening of that first wholefood shop and many stories have been woven into the original cloth. New stories have been told. Original businesses have flourished and become great successes

through the hard work of many people. New ideas, projects and businesses have found their seed bed in Neal's Yard.

Nicholas Saunders could be described as a social inventor and in this booklet you can read about his experimentation with social structures: how people might live and work in better ways and earn a good livelihood at the same time. Some experiments worked better than others, but looking back and listening to the people who were involved at the time, it seems we can still learn from the vision and trials that made up the beginning of the Neal's Yard story. The way people were involved in production and all aspects of the work, the value of risk taking versus apparent safety, shared responsibility, work credits, direct supplier lines, flexible work hours and profitability schemes were just a few of the new models that created vibrancy in Neal's Yard.

I hear the sceptics say: "but the world was quite different then, you could not do this now." Of course the world was different, the world always changes, but it was not necessarily easier. Each period of time offers its own unique opportunities and Nicholas's success came from seeing and
grabbing those opportunities.

In 1998 Nicholas died suddenly in a car accident. Just before he died he was opposing the gentrification of Covent Garden and, after he died, we had to defend Neal's Yard from being "cleaned up". We asked the public what Neal's Yard meant to them and invited them to write down what they
wanted the Neal's Yard story to be. We received hundreds of replies and summarized them in eight categories:

We like it as it is (mentioned 172 times) - "It has a good feeling and community spirit to it which keeps it separate from the rest of Covent Garden and makes it special."

It has unique qualities (71 people commented on this) - "Peaceful, exquisite, bohemian, unique, haven, unpretentious, special character, sanctuary, wonderful atmosphere, oasis, refuge, spiritual, lifeline."

Strong reactions to commercialisation (47 comments) - "I've been coming here since I was ten and it's always been a place to come and 'chill'. Don't turn it into a corporate hellhole."

Keep the trees, flowers, drums and colour (38 people spoke about this) "The trees in oil drums are part of what makes Neal's Yard special. Please keep them and retain that special quality."

Camden Council should support residents and workers of this area (36 entries) "It feels paramount to let the people (who live and work here) continue to shape it."

Keep Neal's Yard's communal area (33 comments) "I think that most people come to Neal's Yard because of its special atmosphere; the trees, plants and communal seating are part of that atmosphere so please don't disturb it."

Maintain Neal's Yard as a living monument (23 comments) "Neal's Yard is a piece of social/local history."

Importance of diversity as a feature of Neal's Yard (19 entries) "This is one of London's real gems, many of which have already disappeared or become needlessly sanitised."

We presented these comments to Camden Council as defining the unique character of Neal's Yard. The happy outcome was that the communal area was regulated, the plant pots stayed and the council sourced new street furniture in the form of green recycled plastic seating that fitted around the honey bins with the promise to keep it unique to Neal's Yard.

Around 2007 we looked anew at what Neal's Yard stood for and described the core qualities that have run through the story from the beginning.

A seedbed for ideas about living a fulfilled life.

It attracts people who want to exchange, develop and test ideas about sustainable living, social inventions, creative expression and expansion of consciousness. This can take the form of debate, meetings, events, manifestos, art and other - including virtual - platforms for communication of ideas and information.

A green and peaceful communal place in central London.

The yard is a human scale, natural breathing space in the middle of the city. It is traffic free and has a specific allocated area for communal seating surrounded by greenery. It is possible to sit, relax and meet people here without having to buy anything. Buildings are colourful and attractive and feature as much planting as practical. Noise is kept to a minimum to provide a peaceful atmosphere. Creative arts projects are encouraged.

A holistic people- and heart-centred ethos which nurtures health, playfulness and well-being.

Information sharing and education in personal development and spirituality are key activities associated with Neal's Yard. Different forms of consciousness-revealing techniques such as meditation, breath work, herbalism, yoga, journeying, ceremony etc are on offer. A variety of products and services promoting well-being are available such as wholesome foods, body care, coaching, psycho-physical and other complementary therapies.

A collection of independent businesses with ethical values

Customers should be able to expect:

- fair pricing
- efficient and knowledgeable service
- straightforward descriptions of products and services
- freely available information about products and suppliers

Staff should be able to expect:

- a pleasant and stimulating working atmosphere
- a fair share of responsibility
- good work division, with jobs being rotated as much as possible and outside contractors avoided whenever regular staff can do the work
- opportunities for career and personal development
- encouragement to spilt off and set up independently if the business grows to an unwieldy size
- transparency around the companies' policies and actions
- people working together as hours and needs differ

Diversity of use with a mixture of shops, cafes, offices, education, therapy and meeting places as well as residential areas to ensure diversity, vibrancy and communal spirit Residents should be able to expect;

- a pleasant and clean atmosphere to live in
- their privacy respected
- noise controlled in daytime and restricted to normal working sounds
- to be able to sleep quietly for a minimum of 8 hours at night
- to be included in decision making regarding activities in the yard

Now in 2016, 40 years after the opening of the Wholefood Warehouse, it is time to ask ourselves again: **"what is the Neal's Yard story now?"** What attracts us to this special place is what needs to be preserved now. We also need to ask: **"how do we want the Neal's Yard story to unfold?"** This will be the story of the future. Our visions and dreams will determine the life we will be living in times to come.

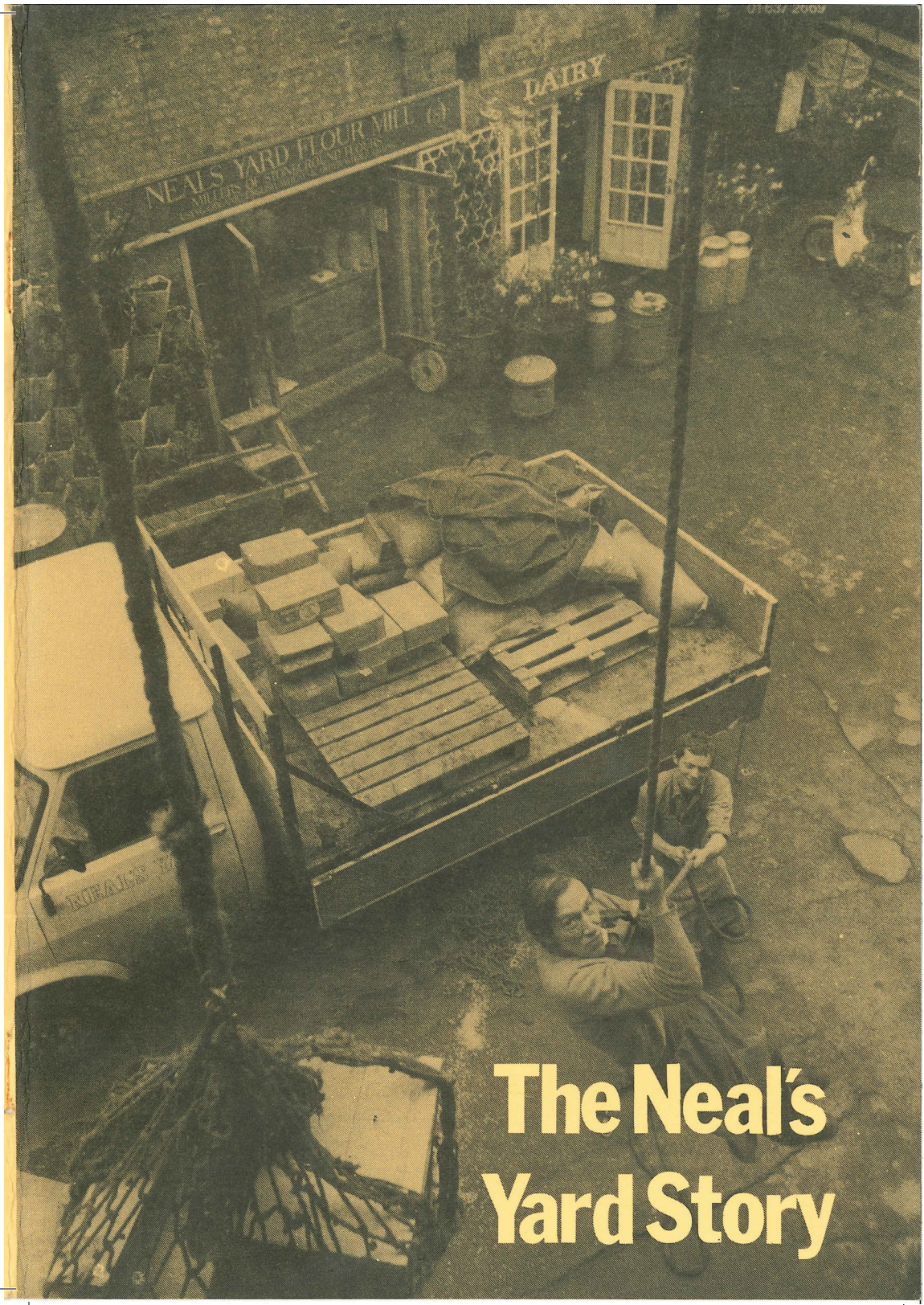
This booklet is not being republished out of nostalgia. It is so that we can get insight into what is important to us, what works for us, what is worth putting effort into so that at some point in the future people will look back at the Neal's Yard story of now and say once again "that was such a creative, inventive, health-conscious, eco-aware community building and happy time".

As a community of people who care about Neal's Yard and its values we have the power to co-create the story.

Sometimes we need to look at the stories we have believed in and rewrite them.
Sometimes we can look at old stories and take inspiration from them.
May the old Neal's Yard story inspire a beautiful future story for this unique place.

anja saunders 2016

You can add your part of the Neal's Yard story by visiting
www.nealsyardcommunity.uk



The Neal's Yard Story

THE NEAL'S YARD STORY

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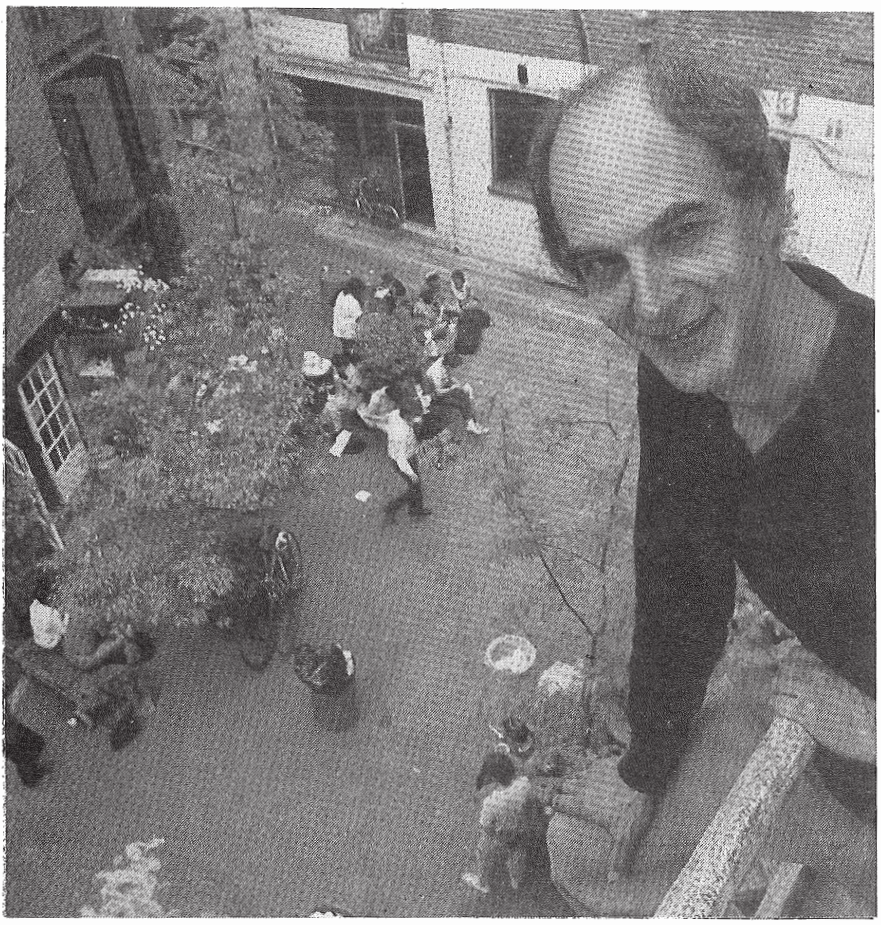
Nicholas Albery

Introduction

As recently as 1976, Neal's Yard consisted of a few derelict warehouses on the edge of the then less fashionable Covent Garden area. Today Neal's Yard is a thriving centre of wholefood businesses, alive with trees and flowers and bustle, and already becoming something of a tourist attraction. This booklet tells the tale of Neal's Yard's transformation.

For in 1976 Neal's Yard was a crazy hidden-away place to start setting up food shops. The entrepreneur responsible, Nicholas Saunders, previously an engineer, inventor and publisher, had no experience of running shops. But although there is normally a high failure rate for new businesses, all eight of the ventures Nicholas initiated in Neal's Yard have survived; in the process over a hundred jobs have been created, without government subsidy and despite council opposition in the early days.

This booklet aims to take the public behind the scenes, with the main protagonists describing the development of their businesses, and so, I hope, providing encouragement for other similar developments elsewhere. Given the urgent need to create worthwhile jobs and greener inner cities, could not other derelict off-high-street locations be used to develop more Neal's Yards - not according to some franchise master plan, but capturing at least something of the spirit of Neal's Yard? This booklet thus contains much potential magic. Be inspired.



Nicholas Saunders

Ten Years of Neal's Yard

I spent the early seventies producing alternative guidebooks, ending with Alternative England and Wales, which I researched by travelling around the country in a large van converted into an office/bed-sit. By the summer of 1975 the book was finished, and I spent most of the next year in

Christiania, a large community in Denmark. Every few weeks I would travel back to London with my living van, and take back to Christiania a load of nuts, beans and other wholefoods which were so much cheaper here that they paid for the trip. And that is how I got involved with selling wholefoods.

A few years before, I had been looking for somewhere to live in the run down parts of Soho and Covent Garden, and was amazed to find 2 Neal's Yard for sale at £7,000 - the snag being that it was let for next to nothing and the area was scheduled for redevelopment. But the lease was nearly finished, and I thought that, by living there, I could help save the area from demolition. In fact I was refused planning permission to live there, but later when I was in Christiania the tenants moved out and I had to find some use for the building.

I decided to start a wholefood shop which I would like myself - one that was cheap, efficient and would not make customers feel bad because they could not recognize a mung bean. At that time wholefood shops were mostly of the hippy style - folksy looking with open sacks and re-used paper bags; nice meeting places for the in-group, but hopelessly inefficient, expensive and tending to make ordinary people feel like intruders.

I went to the planning dept and outlined my idea. The officer's response was: 'I'm quite sure the committee would refuse permission, as they are against high profit businesses moving in'. I was amazed by the remark and thought she had misheard until I realised that this was her way of saying 'Get lost' - they had already prevented me living here, and now they wanted to keep me out altogether. That made me angry, and I consulted my solicitor who said that I could legally start the shop without planning permission, and if I got support from the neighbours, then I would stand a good chance of getting permission in the end.

Perhaps it was the challenge I needed, as everyone said it was a crazy place to start a food shop. At that time the buildings looked derelict with windows broken or boarded up. Neal's Yard was a filthy backyard overun by rats and used by tramps as a lavatory, it was hard to find and was not even on the A to Z.

My plan was just to get the shop started, then leave it to an old friend Judith to run, as my long term plan was to go off and set up a village community based on the lessons I had learned through living in Christiania. I started converting the building with amateur help, and after a hard day's work would come home tired to my flat in the World's End to find half a dozen people sitting around - unusual people and inspiring conversations maybe, but now I was in the mood for action and wanted to leave that world behind. So one day I took a mattress and announced I was not coming back till I had finished the shop. That very night the phone rang and Alan told me there was such a serious fire they'd had to abandon the flat, and by the time I got there my home was burned to the ground. I went over to where my friends were huddled. Ebba explained how she had been meditating in front of a candle and had knocked it over. I told her that the whole flat represented the life I wanted to leave behind and that it was the best thing she could have done for me. But my reaction was so unexpected that poor Ebba collapsed onto the pavement.

After 3 months work the shop was finished, and it opened on November 1st 1976. Although it was fitted out very cheaply in Christiania style using materials from demolition sites, it looked refreshingly original and simple - heavy shelves loaded with large clear plastic bags full of beans of various colours with the price written on by hand.

All the food was packed on the first floor, and was hoisted up on the human counterweight principle - one person would attach the load, a second would jump out of

Cramming in the honey jars.

the window holding the rope coming down from the pulley, while the third would haul in the load. It was hard work, but an exilarating exercise in trust and awareness. All sorts of things could go wrong, for instance if the load was too heavy you would be left suspended, or you could collide with the load in mid air. Yet there was only one accident in perhaps 10,000 jumps - when Taras was showing off to an admirer. The packing was done by hand by three people working together: the food was shovelled into bags, weighed, marked, and them sent down an indoor chute to the shop. I made a packing trough and other equipment, arranged so that three people could chat as they worked together, and positioned so as to give them an unobstructed view all around and out of the windows - 'like working on the bridge of a ship', one said.

I invented a pricing system which reflected the work we put in, instead of a percentage mark-up. I put on a charge for weight to reflect the cost of collecting and hauling upstairs, another for packing which increased with stickiness, and a constant selling charge. The result was that our prices were lower than anywhere else except in small sizes of sticky goods, and very much lower for large sizes of things like nuts which were expensive and easy to pack. So we filled a gap by offering by far the cheapest goods in the sizes between retail and wholesale - ideal for 'food co-ops' and informal groups of people who bought in bulk to save money.

After we opened I worked out a system for selling good cheap honey in 7lb jars. We collected the 660lb honey drums from Oxford on our truck, warmed them (in a special cupboard I had made under the stairs) until the honey was runny enough to pour and then we would mix in some crystalline honey to make it set in the jars. After the shop closed, we rolled the drums up onto the counter where we screwed on giant taps. We had to collect a pallet load of 320 7lb jars from Greenwich, and as there was no storage space, the operation required careful co-ordination. That was a success, and was soon followed by 7lb jars for tahini, vegetable oils, cider vinegar and peanut butter. I did a tour of old machinery dealers with a bag of roasted peanuts, and after trying all sorts of

machines (including a waste disposer) found that a grinder once used for making face cream produced the perfect peanut butter, a combination of crunchy chips and creamy texture.

I set a target that I would take a break when our turnover reached £1,000 a day, and that took less than four months. We were cheaper than everywhere else and incredibly busy - in fact, we not only undercut Sainsburys on comparable items but our turnover was double theirs per square foot, according to their own ads. There was no trick to our success, we were simply the best wholefood shop. We were cheap and reliably well stocked and there were samples for tasting. The descriptions were straightforward without claims, and all the prices per pound were worked out. There was always a printed list to take away. There were no come-ons or other enticements to buy. Service was efficient but not subservient - my directive was that staff should help shy customers but not to give way to the demands of rude or pushy people; in fact we used to be equally rude back, to their surprise.

However, we did not despise our customers. It was more that we regarded them as no better than ourselves, and we had more experience of wholefoods. The staff were all customers who had asked for a job, and a community feeling developed that included both us and them equally. This set the style of the place. We also allowed a little teasing, such as on the first of April we would put a plastic fly in every bag of muesli.

Now that I was satisfied with what we offered, I turned my attention towards the organisation. I was keen on doing things in ways which would provide a balance between low cost, efficiency and a high quality of life. My ideas were influenced by Gurdjieff - that fulfillment does not come from making work effortless, but by doing work which is demanding, so long as it gives opportunity for variety, learning and responsibility. I was in favour of physical work, and against labour saving methods that created mindless jobs, noise or isolation. Why operate a machine all day, then go home and do exercises, when you could be getting exercise doing the work yourself?

So jobs were rotated, from cleaning to dealing with the money, and I used to encourage responsibility by giving workers turns at managing the business, with authority to sign cheques - often without even knowing their surnames, which shocked the bank manager. The atmosphere was one of high energy, with no nonsense, and attracted an enthusiastic lot of workers. The business soon started to make a lot of money too, and after 9 months I divided up the profits among the workers and reduced the prices still further.

However, it was not all roses, and as the number of staff increased and the work became more routine, the attitude gradually changed - particularly when we got so busy we worked two shifts a day. The most adventurous people got bored and moved on - which I thought was a good thing: they had an unusual opportunity to learn how to run a successful small business and could go out and use what they had learned. But the new staff did not like being told to be aware what needed doing, they wanted to be told what to do as in a more conventional set-up. This put Judith in a difficult position as manager and when she left to become a carpet restorer, I began to feel more and more The Boss, which I hated. Yet, of course, I wanted to see my standards kept up.

The work-credit system

I thought up various structures that would solve the problem, and eventually thought that I had come up with a solution not only for us, but one that was fundamentally so good it could revolutionise the business world. It was a self-adjusting system based on work credits, incorporating feedback from both workers and customers. It would be intrinsically fair, as the value of each person's contribution would be, in effect, auctioned against other people able to offer the same contribution - whether the input be work, responsibility or risking capital - without any external authority making assessments.

The first stage was to award credit points to each job according to its worth as judged by the workers. This was

:o be done by allowing workers to chose their jobs, then giving more credits to the last jobs chosen until eventually a balance was reached. The result, I hoped, would be that everyone could work at their own pace and be fairly paid for what they achieved. And the type who rushed around getting exhausted but got very little done would have to learn how to be more productive, or they would simply find they did not earn enough and leave - all without the boss

having to be bossy. I would feel more at ease and could concentrate on quality control as I used to.

So much for the theory. In practice, the workers rejected the scheme outright as seeming too much like piecework and because they felt it would go against the group spirit. However, that stimulated ideas, and I adopted a system developed from a suggestion by one of the workers, Michael Loftus: the workers were divided into two shifts working three days each, with a 'duty manager' working for two weeks to provide continuity. The effect was that each person had to get a lot more work done, sometimes working 12 hours a day, but earned as much in three days as they used to in a week. And, although the scheme fell short of my ambitious aims, it did make for teamwork and provided me with a reliable basis for costing, as the total wages were a strict proportion of the takings.

The Community Association

One day folksy posters appeared in the yard: 'We are building homes on Neals Yard', the Covent Garden Community Association announced, and invited local people to come and hear the good news at a meeting. I went along with Fred, an old man who rented one of the buildings to keep his fruit barrow in and who had been in the yard every day for the past 40 years. It turned out his building was going to be demolished as part of the scheme, and the CGCA did not even know that he - or 5 other barrow men - existed. Poor Fred was very upset, (and with good reason, as he was eventually evicted without the CGCA doing anything to help: in fact it was I who paid for his solicitors' fees and we allowed him to put his barrow in the shop at night after being evicted). I was outraged, and accused the CGCA of not representing the local community, which was certainly true around Neal's Yard. In fact the organisation was set up and run by some politically motivated trendy lefties from outside the area. But from that time on the CGCA made trouble for me at every opportunity.

The first was over planning permission for the shop. The planners' argument was that the building was categorized as 'light industrial', and we were retail, even though we were packing food, started work at 8am and wore overalls - while the surrounding new businesses got away with being 'light industrial' although they looked exactly like offices, with carpeted floors and smart receptionists working switchboards. I was supported by all the older local businesses, and everyone else who used the yard - however, the Covent Garden Community Association objected, and got the council to refuse permission and to order the shop to close. It was so obviously ridiculous that I had no difficulty winning on appeal, but the harassment continued in every conceivable way from the council issuing me with a compulsory purchase order to the CGCA publishing a map on which it says 'Neal's Yard - wholefood mecca started by Sanders on the fortunes he made on Alternative London, an expensive book on how to live cheaply'. In fact the book cost 35p when I published it.

The Bakery

In January 1977 I managed to buy No 6 Neal's Yard. There was a New Zealander, Clare Taylor, who had worked in the shop and I offered to set her up in business as a wholefood bakery. We worked on the building together with a group of her friends, and by spring had it finished and fitted out with second hand equipment. In fact she decided from the outset that she would make it a workers co-op, but ran it for the first two years herself until she got a group of people whom she trusted. I paid for the work and for starting up, which Clare repaid in a year or so after which she paid rent to me. Eventually I sold the building to the co-op for about half its value.

By this time I had ideas of starting more shops. I was not convinced that workers co-ops or any other set-up was ideal, but wanted to lay down some principles. Clare helped me draft these:

Neal's Yard trading principles

1. All food must be prepared or at least packed on the premises.
2. The ingredients must be 'wholefood' ie pure, without additives such as flavourings, colourings or preservatives. Highly refined ingredients must be avoided.
3. Prices must be reasonable.
4. Descriptions (both verbal and written) must be straightforward, down to earth and objective. Persuasive, enticing or glamourising descriptions must not be used.
5. The size and style of notices must be simple - not attention seeking, enticing, image building or making use of any advertising or merchandising techniques.
6. 'Point of sale aids' must not be used.
7. Information about recipes, ingredients, quality and suppliers must be freely available.
8. The neighbours must be given consideration and co-operation.

9. All staff must be free to see accounts and attend meetings where they may freely express their views.
10. Jobs should be rotated as far as possible, and in particular noone should be left with the unpopular jobs.
11. Outside contractors should be avoided if the work can be done by the regular staff.
12. In the event of the business growing, it should not expand or set up branches, but instead assist and encourage some of its staff to split off and start another independent business.

What was behind these principles was my belief in direct feedback between the customer and the person producing the goods. Instead of separate experts doing each part of the process of manufacturing, packing, transporting and selling, the same people could do all those jobs with more satisfaction - for simple but important reasons such as feeling the customers' appreciation. And although productivity was bound to be lower through not specialising, this could be made up for by savings in packaging, transport and in far lower overheads, as administration often accounts for half the cost of production. Additionally, there were often advantages in being able to sell fresher products - and this is particularly relevant for wholefoods where no preservatives are used.

I was against businesses expanding beyond about a dozen workers or setting up branches, because a small scale allows direct communication between people, without need for internal memos or a personnel department. In a small business people also feel more contact with the boss - it tends to be fairer whatever the business structure.

The coffee house

That autumn, a friend pointed out that the price of coffee in the commodity lists was a quarter the price charged in the shops. After a morning on the phone I had bought a ton of Kenyan coffee and ordered it to be roasted; and with our normal pricing sold it at a saving of more than £1 per

pound compared to other shops. We were quickly inundated with bargain seekers, and the relatively civilized atmosphere changed to something like an Oxford Street sale, so I stopped it. But customers still poured in, and one said indignantly: 'So you stopped selling coffee because you were too sucessful. How British. How disgustingly British!'.

I could not help agreeing with him and I suggested to Anita, who was working in a shop around the corner, that she should start a coffee shop. Eventually we agreed to form a partnership: I would get the building work done and deal with the mechanical side, but she would run it entirely on her own. The coffee roaster had to go in the basement, but to make it more pleasant for the person working there, I raised the floor at the back of the shop so that the person roasting could see into the shop and to the outside world - and customers could see the coffee being roasted. We managed to visit the last surviving London Coffee House ('The London' in Islington), and copied the seating layout using posts from a Victorian staircase. Later, I re-equipped it with an elaborate system of vacuum transport of my own design, powered by an industrial vacuum cleaner. The pricing system and policy of large bags of good quality coffee simply packed, was based on the wholefood shop, and still survives. I resigned from the partnership in 1982.

The mill

Next year, the building opposite was renovated and I managed to rent the space now occupied by the Mill and Dairy. I had brought a stone flour mill back from Christiania for the Bakery, but they had not got room for it. According to the simple calculation of the amount of flour we sold per year multiplied by the price difference between flour and wheat, there was enough profit to run the Mill as a seperate business. I financed Billy, a keen 19 year old, to do this on the basis that he would repay me. However, that never happened, and eventually the Bakery took it over.

The dairy

Straight afterwards I started on The Dairy. It was a new and fascinating subject, dealing with the live bacteria which transform milk into cheese and yogurt. The 'good' bacteria have to be nurtured so they reproduce in their thousands, but unseen 'bad' bacteria are liable to invade, kill off the 'goodies' and the first thing you know about it is that the yogurt has not set. It was a more ambitious and less viable project than the others, but I enjoyed the challenge. I intended to manufacture soft cheese and yogurt on the premises, and I had two trump cards up my sleeve - Brie, which can be made in only 10 days and uses half as much milk as cheddar; and Greek yogurt, which was not imported at that time.

Experts all said it was not possible to manufacture yogurt and cheese in the same space, but I felt sure it must be, and tried hard to unravel the real necessities from the traditional methods. I designed the manufacturing space and worked on it for several months, fitting it out with some second hand catering equipment which I adapted. Trish, who used to work at the Bakery and was studying nutrition, got interested and I sent her on a week's course so she could formulate our recipes - which had to be free of sugar and animal products. The recipe for Greek yogurt remained a mystery, but provided a good excuse for a trip to Greece. Eventually the dairy opened, and after working there for the first few weeks, I handed it over to Randolph, a friend of Trish who had come to help. Even though the Dairy and Mill lost money I had no regrets, they were both well worthwhile additions to the Yard and to my own experience.

The vertical garden

That seemed to be the end of my scope, as there were no more empty buildings. I also wanted to do other things, and

spent some time designing some plant pots for the Yard which I made in a friend's workshop in Wales. They are like interlocking hollow bricks which stack up to form a self-supporting wall, leaving an air space between them and the building behind, to avoid spreading damp. They only project a foot, so provide a kind of vertical garden without wasting ground space.

The holiday

I decided that I would leave with a bang. I invited everyone from the yard to the Canary Islands for a winter holiday in Lanzarote - 55 people in all, including some from Food for Thought, who were our best customers, and from Community, our best suppliers. I gave everyone a sort of 'treasure island' kit consisting of a map, a torch, a toy sunshade, a few sweets and a wallet containing real Spanish money. We took with us on the plane a marquee big enough for everyone to sleep in, and we camped on the beach for a week.

Combined co-op idea

For the previous year I had left the wholefood shop in the hands of Michael Loftus, an amazingly energetic and capable worker, while I was doing other things including researching a new form of co-op in Canada. However, I now had to decide what to do with the business. Although technically mine, it was more like a co-op in some ways, and many of the workers had put much more energy into it than if it had been a normal commercial business. I felt that it was not morally mine to sell - besides, I did not need the money for myself and seemed to be able to make money easily enough. Michael said he wanted to buy it, but I wanted to explore alternatives.

The most exciting idea was to set up a new kind of co-op, owned by the customers but run jointly by them and the workers. Although the traditional co-op movement was moribund (the London Co-op was then closing a branch every week), the system I had seen in Canada was highly successful. This worked by the member-owners paying a high enough subscription to cover the running costs, so that they could buy goods at wholesale price. The essence was that the co-op became a service for its members rather than trying to sell them things. To illustrate the point, they might put a notice on the

detergent shelf saying that Daz was on special offer, and cheaper, at Safeways that week. However, the Canadian co-op did not involve their staff, and I wanted to combine their system with a workers' co-op. The workers would have complete control of the running of the shop, but the policy would be decided by a joint committee on which members would predominate. When I put the idea to the staff, there was strong opposition because they were afraid the customers would boss them around, so I dropped the whole idea.

Instead I decided to give the business to a charity. I gave it to Dartington Trust, as I liked many of their projects, and a friend had introduced me to one of the trustees who said I could have some influence over how they spent the money - which was potentially a great deal since, by the time they acquired it, the business had stock and assets worth £80,000 and a turnover approaching a million a year. Eventually the sale was agreed: after I had given the business to Dartington, they would sell it to Michael Loftus for £120,000 paid over five years, with an informal agreement that he would carry on running it 'in a socially beneficial way'. In the event, Michael moved the business to its present bigger premises and simultaneously changed the method of working. I had become very attached to the business, and it was a traumatic experience to see my ideas discarded - though on looking back, I think that most of my pain was due to possessiveness.

The apothecary and salad bar

Michael decided to move the shop to bigger premises around the corner, which meant I had my old building free once more. So instead of leaving the Yard, I decided to do a major job on my building, making a proper flat for myself on a new top floor. I offered half the ground floor to Brenda from the Bakery to start her own business as a wholefood takeaway, and the other half to Robin, who had been the most committed worker in the wholefood shop, to

start a herbal pharmacy in partnership with a friend Romy who was knowledgeable (and believed in) a wide range of alternative medicines. My idea was that they should manufacture cosmetics in the back of the shop, but I gave them a free hand. The financial arrangement with both businesses was that I would provide a bank guarantee so they could borrow money to get going, when they would pay me a low rent going up to a commercial rent after three years.

The therapy rooms

I made the second floor of 2 Neal's Yard into a clinic for alternative medicine, putting much care into the design to provide a practical but pleasing environment by using curves and colour. This was to be my new business, and I had strong ideas about how it was to be run to give the public a good deal and protect them from bad therapists - for instance, the therapists paid less if they charged low fees, and patients were to be asked if they were satisfied with the treatment. But my attempts only resulted in alienating myself from the therapists, and after a few months I offered the clinic to the therapists at cost if they could form a co-op, but that never happened. Eventually, I gave the business to the receptionist Margot, on the basis that she ran it according to my formula and paid me 25% of what the therapists paid her.

On the first floor I had permission to make a restaurant, but for reasons in my personal life I decided to get right away and spent the next year in Denmark. While I was away, the person looking after the Therapy Rooms (who paid no rent) also used the restaurant space, and had the planning permission changed to 'community room' without even asking me. When I came back, I tried to recover the permission for a restaurant, but Camden planning department refused - supported by the Community Association who objected 'in the interests of the residents above' - and that was only myself!

Conclusion

The Yard has developed into a social scene. Even though the businesses are each independent, everyone who works in them, and many of the regular customers, identify with the place. In fact most of the workers are customers who had asked for a job. My old idea of a village community has manifested in the form of a community of small businesses, each one individual and free to go its own way. It is rather like a family, with me as father and the businesses as my grown-up children. They generally get on well and help one another, but there have also been bitter disputes. Nearly every one has rebelled against me, or my laid down principles, at some stage, just like adolescents - and it has been a painful experience. Yet they have mainly kept to the spirit of my ideas, and provide really good jobs which are well paid and involve responsibility. The Yard has also become the meeting place of a social group based on the sort of people who work there. Many friendships have formed with several leading to marriage - the most dramatic being when Anita of the Coffee House married Randolph of the Dairy. They held a sit down feast for everyone in the Yard - and symbolized their union by serving coffee ice-cream.

Simon Cunliffe

The Wholefood Warehouse

In 1979 I was broke. I was also a new boy in town. I had travelled 12,000 miles, maybe a lot more in the last two years. London hit me like a brick wall. Hell, you try it. Two years on the road, each day new places, new faces, a home on your back and two or three quid to see you right. Then Pow! London, two or three quid does not even buy you a breath of fresh air; then you gotta eat, you gotta sleep, you gotta decide what you are going to do with your life, maybe. Everyone else seems to know. They are all disappearing down holes in the ground; they are commuting, or working. Or spending.

You are treading water on the fringes of a whirlpool, peering terrified into the vortex. Who knows what is down there? I do not mind admitting London had me confused. Yep! London hit me like a brick wall. It spread me over its anonymous grey facades like ether.

I needed, as they say in certain circles, 'to get centred'. I needed a job. I needed, as I told the manager of Neal's Yard Dairy, to make cheese. It was a long shot. Then I told him I knew the difference between a Strepsil and a Streptococcus. On the strength of that he took me on; and so it was that, knee-deep in whey, my association - somewhat tenuous at this stage - with Neal's Yard Wholefood Warehouse began.

In the cold early mornings I would watch as the manager went to work on uncooperative car owners who insisted on parking in the Yard. He was a professional, at first wagging his yard broom like a friendly guard dog wags his tail; then baring his teeth a little and finally, if not placated, biting the victim's head off. Many were the slanging matches that echoed around the Yard providing spectacle and entertainment for all.

I would watch in envy as the heroic Warehouse workers -

Muesli mixing.

offering themselves as ballast for the pulley system geared to raise beans, rice and other weighty wholefoods to the packing floor level - threw themselves selflessly, fearlessly, out of an upper window. Attached only to a slender lead they would jerk about in mid-air like marionettes attached to the fingers of a drunken puppeteer. Sometimes their combined weight would be sufficient only to lift the load a few feet off the tarmac, and curious, rotund tourists would be invited to join the circus. As often as not a passing busker would break into song eulogising this glorious and happy Luddite vision.

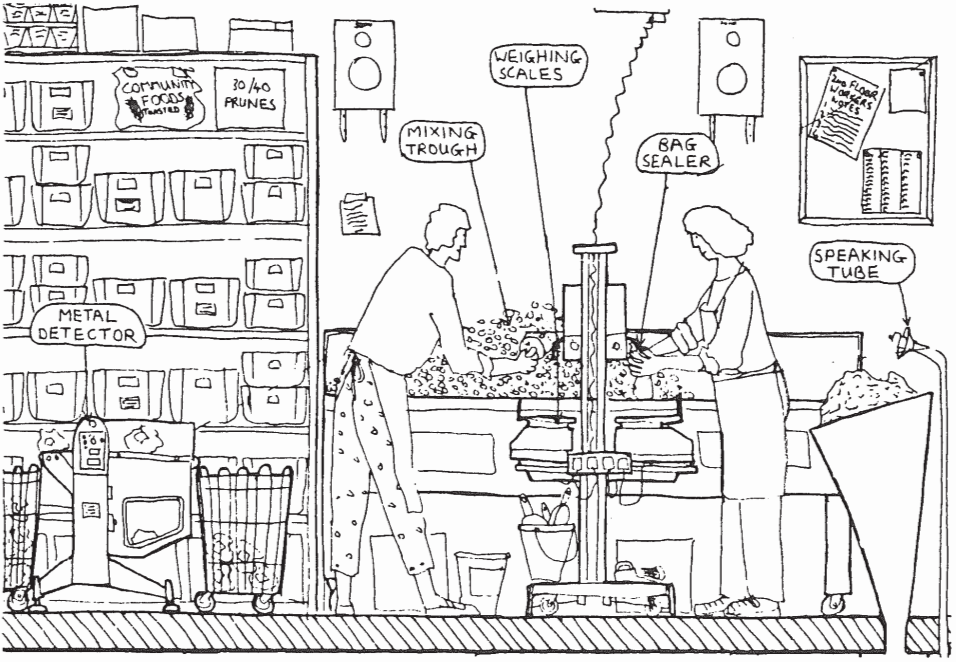
Meanwhile, cheese and me were not proving the best of bed-fellows. Cheese, insisted one of the Warehouse friends I had carefully cultivated, was getting up my nose. To put it bluntly, it was giving me snot. My nose was always full of it. I was a freak, a mucoid. Perhaps, suggested the friend, I ought to try out on muesli packing to see if things improved. So, when Number Two Neal's Yard became 21-23 Shorts Gardens in 1981, I applied for a position.

Where I first went to school, Doggy Paddle was as much part of the curriculum as reading and writing. For the uninitiated it is, of course, a primitive swimming stroke which imitates the desperate attempts of a dog in water to stay afloat. Ever seen a hound doing the Australian crawl? No? Well then you will probably know what I mean. Now as it happens, I was to discover that the favoured method of muesli mixing at Neal's Yard resembled the action so closely that the name had been adopted. So it was that on my trial days - for employment was subject to suitably productive performance - I dressed up in a sterile white dust-proof diving suit and took to the mixing trough like a dog, never mind a duck, takes to water. Under the tutelage of the Managing Director who measured all performance against his own considerable skill and expertise in this domain, I became a muesli dynamo, a human screwworm spending my working days half buried by cereal flakes

and dates and raisins and apricots and hazel nuts and little broken pieces of cashew nut. Sometimes when I went home at nights I would find that my dust-tight uniform had failed me; that somehow a determined sunflower seed had penetrated deep within my defences and lodged itself cosily and contentedly amidst the fluff that habitually nests in my belly-button.

Such events were a minor inconvenience. Having bought a few of the staff votes and impressed others with my enthusiasm, if not my rather wayward mixing action, I was elected into the company. I secretly embellished and enobled my new job title of muesli mixer with another, Bowel Police. We, an elite few, were after all keeping large numbers of the general public 'regular'. We deserved some credit.

At Neal's Yard I joined an assembly of part-timers gallantly financing, through their labours there, a selection of illustrious higher pursuits. The peanut butter maker was really an artist; the shop manager an opera singer; the till operator a rock star between hit songs; one worker was a compiler of crossword puzzles, another an ex-army officer now training as an acupuncturist. There were theatre set designers, massage therapists, osteopaths, disco operators, trainee lawyers and revolutionaries saving their hard-earned bucks to buy a flight out to Nicaragua. There were Russian speakers and ex-sailors, archeologists and martial arts experts, landscape gardeners and single mums, housewives and graphic designers, teachers and horticulturalists. There were vegetarians. There were saxophonists, bongo players and macrobiotics. There were Calypsonians. And there was me. 'What do you do?' someone demanded one day. It was more an accusation than a question. I froze, as I often do in such circumstances and desperately tried to think of a suitably worthy and bohemian calling. 'Well?' persisted my interrogator. Foolishly I said the first lame thing that entered my head. 'I'm a writer,' I stammered.



It would be a gross distortion to portray the place as an untroubled well-oiled and harmonious capitalist haven. There were rumbles. I for my part tired of mixing muesli and graduated to packing it. Sitting at the bottom of a vibrating trough, operating a chute with a foot-pedal release button, I soon perfected the techniques involved. One of these was a kind of manual vacuum folding method by which air was removed from the top of a bag before sealing. This was accompanied by a rude passing of wind and a cloud of dust shooting upwards directly into the nasal passages. Muesli dust, I soon discovered, did about as much for my sinuses as did cheese. Every telephone conversation I had was prefixed by several minutes of condolences over my current cold. Sympathy can get to be as irritating as snot, so when the company maintenance man departed to become a full time father and Tai Chi instructor, he left me holding the baby, so to speak. 'You're the only one who appears to know anything about this sort of thing', he encouraged. 'Yea', I muttered, 'like I know the difference between a screw and a nail'. Still it was a

way out of the production line. I duly became jack of all trades - carpentry, plumbing, electrical, engineering - and predictably enough, master of none.

Over the years Covent Garden got trendy. So did wholefoods. So trendy in fact that most of the supermarket chains joined the bandwagon. In the suburbs small specialist wholefood stores sprang up. In Covent Garden the streets became narrowed by the assembled ranks of Suzuki 4-wheel drive jeeps - an indispensable accessory, along with the black rubber briefcase, for the young advertising executive. Parking was scarce, rates high, times hard. The typical customer appeared to change. Dedicated Wholefoodies no longer came to their former Mecca. Personal assistants and secretaries popped in at lunch time for a bag of Trail Mix. Besuited media types and lawyers popped by for pistachios. Neal's Yard Wholefood Warehouse has its own face-lifts and refittings. The look and feel was lighter. the bag sizes tended to be smaller, the range of food increased. The emphasis was increasingly on quality rather than the traditional bulk. The internal workings of the business changed. The image evolved to become more in keeping with the surrounds. In 1977 the business had begun by selling beans. In 1987, as the large two page advertisement in the colour supplement of the Observer shows, it is flogging sleek and sporty Volkswagen cars. Who knows what the future holds?

The warehouse is now ten years old. It rather frightens me to think that I have been around, in one capacity or another, for eight of them. Those years contain a lot of memorable experiences. They have also seen a lot of faces come and go, and given rise to numerous precious friendships. For all its failings - and opinions as to the extent and nature of these will vary considerably - Neal's Yard Wholefood Warehouse has always been an unusual place of employment - unusual in the sense of different, and interesting. Mostly the people I have worked with have made it so. For that I am grateful.

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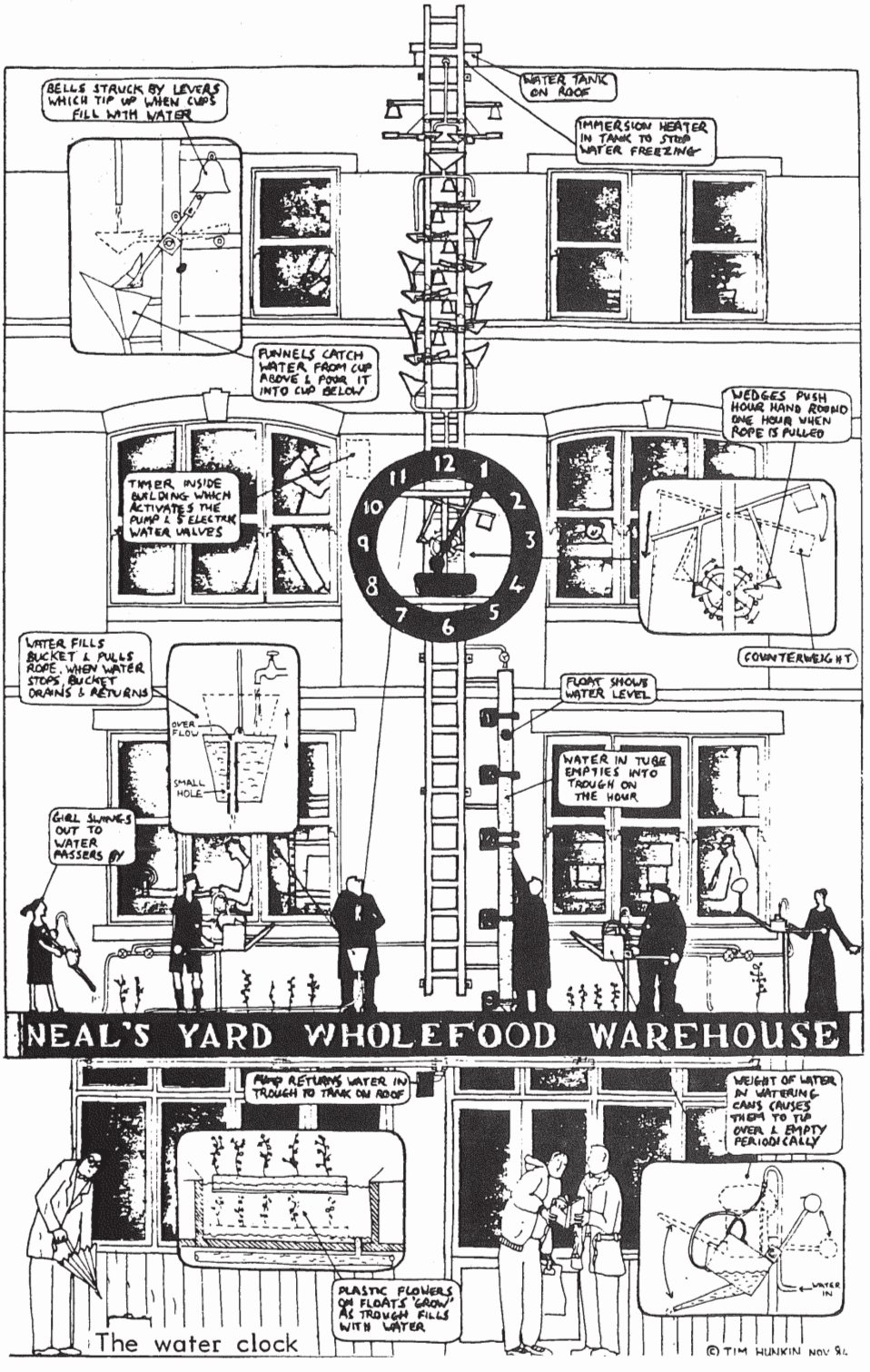
BELLS STRUCK BY LEVERS WHICH TIP UP WHEN CUPS FILL WITH WATER
WATER TANK ON ROOF
IMMERSION HEATER IN TANK TO STOP WATER FREEZING
FUNNELS CATCH WATER FROM CUP ABOVE & POUR IT INTO CUP BELOW
WEDGES PUSH HOUR HAND ROUND ONE HOUR WHEN ROPE IS PULLED
TIMER INSIDE BUILDING WHICH ACTIVATES THE PUMP & 5 ELECTRIC WATER VALVES
COUNTERWEIGHT
WATER FILLS BUCKET & PULLS ROPE. WHEN WATER STOPS, BUCKET DRAINS & RETURNS
OVER FLOW
SMALL HOLE
FLOAT SHOWS WATER LEVEL
WATER IN TUBE EMPTIES INTO TROUGH ON THE HOUR
GIRL SUMMONS OUT TO WATER PASSERS BY
NEAL'S YARD WHOLEFOOD WAREHOUSE
PUMP RETURNS WATER IN TROUGH TO TANK ON ROOF
WEIGHT OF WATER IN WATERING CANS CAUSES THEM TO TIP OVER & EMPTY PERIODICALLY
WATER IN
PLASTIC FLOWERS ON FLOATS 'GROW' AS TROUGH FILLS WITH WATER
The water clock
© TIM HUNKIN NOV 91

Clare Taylor

Starting up the Bakery

When I first started work at Food for Thought, Nicholas used to poke his tongue out at me when we passed in the street. 'Traitor,' he'd sneer, because I had forsaken the warehouse packing room for the sweaty little galley kitchen round the corner. A little later he changed his tack - he stopped me on my bicycle in Neal Street and gave me a bunch of onion flowers. They did not have the look or fragrance of romance but my heart still missed a beat - could this be the beginning of a beautiful

relationship? Well, the proposition came a little later, but it had nothing to do with sex or romance.

It would be trite to say that it now seems remarkable that we ever made it to opening day: hassles are a natural part of this and every other Neal's Yard story and the <u>really</u> remarkable thing about working with Nick was that anything could happen and it usually did.

Those first few months of getting started had an underlying feeling of excitement and triumph, but were nevertheless strewn with problems. Nick and I did the basic design work, not that we knew anything about designing bakeries, and Stoneleigh Street did most of the construction work, not that they knew much about building in those days.

It was Stoneleigh Street's first Neal's Yard job: their inexperience and Nicholas', shall we say, exactitude, resulted in a fair amount of two-way bellyaching which I, caught in the middle, found so demoralising I sometimes burst into tears. The other bits which I hated were lugging sacks full of rubble out to the street and sanding, ad nauseum, the secondhand wood. However, we all survived, and those early days proved to be the beginning of my permanent devotion to Nicholas and the first of several Stoneleigh Street/Neal's Yard collaborations.

From the outset, Nick was tireless, inventive, inspirational and generous. Apart from master-minding and funding the whole thing, he plumbed and wired the building, waged continuous guerrilla warfare with the authorities over building and planning regulations, donated major items of kitchen equipment, drove back and forth from Wales with truckloads of tiles and mixers and generally got me through. I do not want to sound too syrupy but he really was tremendous - always there when I needed him and keeping out of my hair when I did not. Whatever differences arose between us, he never let on if he doubted me and never interfered or imposed

himself, which was pretty miraculous considering how autocratic and nosey the bugger can be.

Nicholas can be wrong. His most serious misconception as far as I was concerned was his view that because I had worked in restaurant kitchens I knew about bakeries and how to cook. Neither was the case, and all was revealed by our first efforts - insipid crumbly loaves, rock-hard scones and cheese cakes that oozed out of their pastry shells.

In the first three or four months the future of the Bakery felt very uncertain. I was struggling against the more laid back approach of my two co-workers who understandably did not really share my obsession with the place. They worked hard but I do not think they felt that the Bakery was the centre of the universe and the sum total of life. My feeling was that to get the place started one had to work twelve hours a day, six or seven days a week, sleeping there if too tired to go home. They did not quite see it that way (especially since we were paying ourselves 50p an hour) and for a few months the place seemed to need more than we could give it. Enter Hedley and Trish, two fantastic cooks and dear friends whose hard work and expertise got the Bakery off its knees. The failure rate fell and the queues grew.

In those days I suspect I was tedious and earnest about vegetarianism and this was reflected in my use of the wholefood colour spectrum - tasteful mud shades - when painting the Bakery. Nick, being a vegetarian voyeur, took great pleasure in aggravating me and corrupting the wholesome purity of the place by painting the mixers brilliant primary colours.

The decision to run the Bakery as a co-op was another of my foibles that Nick could not take seriously, but no amount of teasing from him about the hassles of working collectively and the missed opportunity to wield unfettered power could deter me (and it was too late to change my mind anyway). Trying to make the business work

well as a co-op was always the hardest part of the job, but despite my tyrannical tendencies it was always the main reason and reward for being there.

The next two years are impossible to summarise. Endless bloody work, daily crises, the occasional catastrophe. A lot of wonderful people came into the Bakery and their dedication and contributions to the place were fantastic. Diana, Brenda, Shari, Ian, Joachim and later Rachel were pillars of the place then. Pat was a delight, Dave was sweet exasperation. Helmut was so energetic he was almost terrifying. Ernst was mad but lovely, Lloyd was quiet but steadfast.

Personality clashes and politicking were unavoidable but never got out of hand, except when Nicholas either fell in love with or took an instant dislike to one of our people, and within two years we had developed a strong, common identity and had a lot of amazing times on the way. The other businesses appeared. Nicholas tended his passion vines and flower boxes and the Yard overflowed. Corny though it may sound, I always felt privileged to be part of the place and I think a lot of other people

who worked in Neal's Yard knew that they belonged to a unique work environment.

Being an impressionable young colonial, I probably let the whole experience of knowing Nick and working in Neal's Yard go to my head, but whatever my excuse is, the fact is that it did. If I had not, as Nick so delicately put it, got a real bun in my oven, I would probably still be there.

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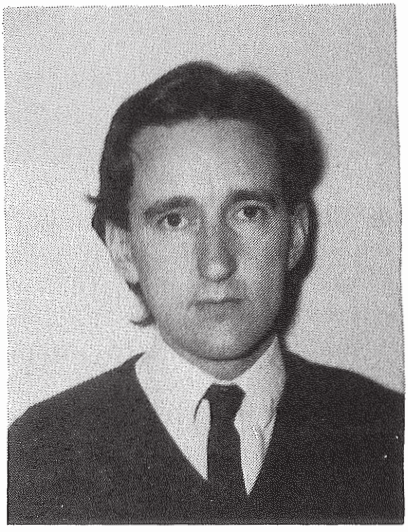


Lloyd Mitchell

The Bakery as a co-op

Soon after I joined the Bakery in early 1979, one of the London listings magazines ran a review in which they described the place (if I remember the words correctly) as 'falling over backwards with its own flower-power'.

Apart from the fact that such descriptions are not used much these days, things have changed since then. In fact, I am not sure that it was ever true, except, possibly in external appearances, which did lead to a number of hopefuls who described themselves as seeking a 'relaxed, peaceful atmosphere', invariably suffering a major shock at being confronted with the reality of a pastry shift at six in the morning. Despite the fact that a visitor returning after eight years away would still find the authentic early seventies ambience of natural wood surfaces, 'Midwinter' crockery and near primary colour schemes; in other ways the place has changed, along with Covent Garden's move from being something of a backwater with an uncertain future to, well, what it is today - the hairstyles elaborately short and the Filofax count amongst our customers completely surpassing the incidence of paisley shirts, mirrored skirts and afghan hats.

As a 'second generation' member of the business, joining when all the originals were still here, I came when the food was still served on wooden plates, the packaging for the pizza involved complicated folding of paper bags, messages were conveyed from upstairs regarding the amount of seating available by means of a 'bridge to the engine room' speaking tube arrangement and, of course, the Platform still existed.

The wooden plates have been replaced by expanding the 'Midwinter' crockery range, and proper takeaway packaging was introduced to make the whole process of taking-away more pleasant and practical for all concerned, with the range of takeaway foods being greatly increased. Messages are now shouted down the stairs and the Plattorm is no more. People even now return after a long absence and express shock at this last moditication. Many of our long-term customers will remember many happy hours spent on the cushions surrounded by postcard writers, transcendental meditators or people simply sleeping the afternoon away in the sun. Where are they now: the gentleman who always

had such interesting views on the racial question, the woman who reclined all of most lunchtimes with a single cup of tea, (generating various debates on the appropriateness of asking people to leave), the person who paid close attention to other customers' handbags or the Keemun lady?

Talk of upstairs will remind everyone of the means of getting there, another constant feature: the Queue. In fact, the actual waiting time is only about six to seven minutes (for those who will now get their stop-watches out, that is taken from the active end of the 'Spitting Machine'), but the struggle to prevent its build up, to keep movement along the counter, (especially on Saturdays when every second person seems to be on their first visit), and still retain reasonable politeness, remain major ones. The two queue system was intended to help all this and we are looking into further modifications. (Queuers have been asked some strange questions by the end of lunchtime as the mind starts to jumble up the routine questions: 'Would you come in please?', 'Eat here or takeaway?', 'How many are you?', 'How much room upstairs?'; particularly as this has to be interspersed with explanations of the intricacies of the British VAT system and the slightly simpler complexities of the queue arrangement.)

Apart from the decor being a genuine example of a bygone age, and there being many familiar elements in the appearance and image of our products, most things behind the scenes have changed since 1979. Neal's Yard Bakery Cooperative Ltd was formally constituted in 1980 and is the body which took over ownership and running of the Bakery from Clare. Cooperatives are known to most people these days, but the essential idea is that only people who work in the business can be members of the cooperative and only members make decisions about the business. All decisions, that is, apart from those which are made by market forces, customers, the first very cold days, the first very hot days, a downpour at lunchtime and all the other factors which also determine

the course of a business. How you organise yourself after this is entirely up to interpretations and personal preference; in our case, the basic idea remains, but daily practice and our scale have changed greatly.

During 1981 we lost our storage and office space in the Yard and, due to this pressure and various other needs to expand, we opened our wholefood shop in Portobello Road, Notting Hill, called, for fairly obvious reasons, Portobello Wholefoods. (Apart from being in Portobello Road, it is also under the Westway flyover, but the name 'Motorway Wholefoods' did not have many supporters.) This provided a completely different kind of business for us, being straight retailing rather than retail-production combined. Our storage problems were solved and we were given a whole new mix of customers, needing a different type of approach, with more time to talk and ask about the food. The result has been that the two main parts of the business complement each other quite well.

At the Bakery there was always also a need to discuss the food and frequent requests for our recipes and

information about the ingredients. This was normally satisfied by quick discussion, trying not to hold up the queue too much, or by inquirers writing about vegan bars (always vegan bars) on grease-proof bags in the tearoom. The problem was finally solved during 1986 when one of our members was given the time to prepare 'Neal's Yard Bakery Cookbook' which was published in colour by Dorling-Kindersley (and which seems to have been well received - available from all leading bookshops, etc end of advertisement.)

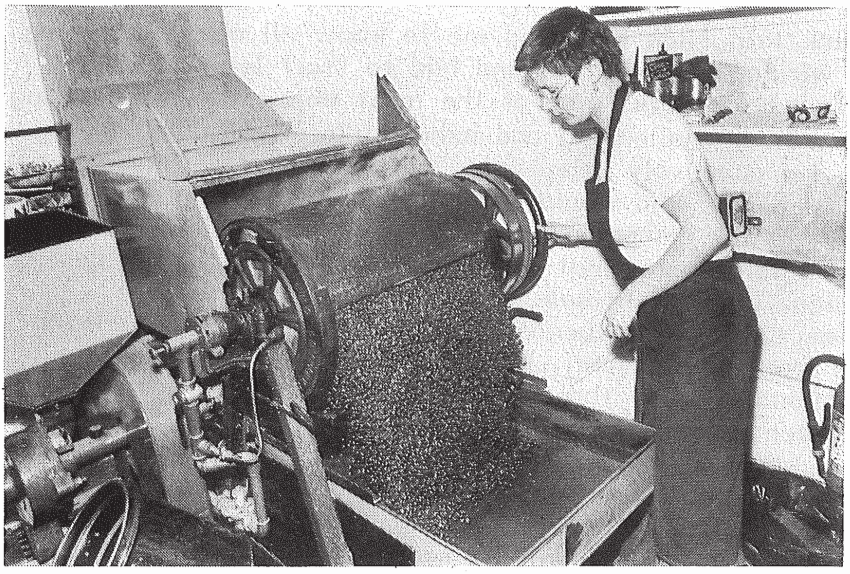
Our latest step has been to take space at the London Ecology Centre, just around the corner, to operate the small restaurant and to provide much of the catering for functions there. (As far as future plans and where we go from here - well, that is another story ...).

* * *

Anita LeRoy

The Coffee House

I met Nick in 1976 when he started working on the old banana warehouse in Neal's Yard, converting it into a shop. I was working in a shop on the corner of Neal Street and Shorts Gardens and watched with admiration. The Wholefood Warehouse was a great success and then in 1977 I remember Nick came to talk to me one day and said, 'Want to start a business?' At that time I was feeling a bit restless and anxious to try doing something on my own, so I said 'Yes.' Much to my relief we decided to start the coffee as a partnership - after my initial burst of bravado I had begun to have grave doubts about my ability to start and run a business on my own! While we were hunting for premises, Nick decided that ideally we should import the coffee as directly as



The coffee roaster.

possible from the country of origin and roast it ourselves - a great idea but we did not realise what a closed shop the coffee world was and how difficult it would be for newcomers with no experience to break into it.

While we were hunting for premises we heard of an old coffee roasting machine in one of the last French grocery shops in Old Compton Street. Mr Kennedy was closing down and selling all the equipment. We dismantled the roaster, carefully numbering and labelling bolts, brackets, ducts, pipes and drive shafts and Nick installed it in the basement of 27 Monmounth Street.

Number 27 had been built in the 1690's and had had a shop front put on around 1750 - the place felt as if nothing had been done to it since then! We intrepidly set the opening date for Halloween 1978, giving ourselves exactly three months to rewire, plumb, plaster and install equipment, ductwork and shop fittings.

I think that Nick expected me to know all about plumbing and wiring but I did not and had to start learning fast. Those weeks were some of the most enjoyable and exciting I have had, challenging and exhausting. While doing all this, I was naively telephoning coffee brokers trying to find someone who would sell us a shipment of green beans. Every company I contacted turned me down abruptly when I told them what we wanted to do - buy high quality arabicas and sell in bulk at low prices. Traditionally coffee roasters buy beans from a wholesaler who in turn buys from an importer. What we wanted to do was buy shipments directly through a broker or shipper and this was seen as breaking an unwritten code.

Our deadline was getting uncomfortably close and we still had not bought any beans let alone started to learn how to roast them. We were beginning to despair when we had a call from a broker I had contacted weeks before. He said that he would be prepared to do business with us but wanted all our transactions to be done anonymously as he was afraid that he would lose his existing clients should they discover he was dealing with us.

And so, with our first sacks of coffee safely in the

basement all we had to do was learn to roast it! Mr Kennedy, who had sold us the roaster, came round and showed us the basics and then left us to experiment with much shaking of his head and telling us we were mad, that apart from getting the levels of heat and timing right, there is only a few seconds between a dark roast and a fire! Nick was in his element, roasting batch after batch, taking some out just in time, and in the end we mastered it with only one bad fire.

We opened on time with lots of encouragement and quite a lot of pessimism from some - it couldn't possibly work they said, people won't change their coffee buying habits and buy large bags of unblended beans in clear plastic bags, instead of a quarter pound of ground coffee in a greaseproof lined paper packet. Well, it was obvious from the first few weeks that there were a great many people who did change their habits; and there were also masses of people who had previously been put off buying coffee by the slightly intimidating atmosphere of the traditional merchants, who started buying their first real coffee from us.

By December 1978 we were selling over one tonne a week and had reached our break-even point a few weeks after opening. The money that Nick had put up for setting up costs was paid back within two years and apart from minor changes the basic principles of the Coffee House have not changed at all. The major change though was that in 1983 Nick decided to leave the partnership which I found difficult to accept at first, imagining that all contact with him would be lost. But we still meet often and I still discuss the running of the business with him whenever possible, as I value his judgement and his ability to approach problems from a completely different and fresh angle. Before Nick left the partnership he installed a new second-hand roaster with double the capacity of our old one and put in a vacuum system for moving the coffe beans around from storage silo to roaster to packing trough instead of carryign it all in sacks and buckets as we used to do. So I suppose we can

say that we are thoroughly modernised in the basement, leaving the shop and sampling room with the same rather Dickensian feel (all timber from demolition yards) as it had when we installed it.

* * *

Amanda Boston

The Mill

I was both excited and apprehensive when Billy rang me in October 1978, asking if would I come to London to help him run a flour mill in Neal's Yard. My knowledge of the Yard stemmed from a few years back when I had helped Billy do a few finishing touches to the first 'Warehouse' in the Yard. The Yard intrigued me then but I never imagined it would become the thriving centre that it is today. After much thought I phoned Billy and agreed to help with the project.

Walking into the Yard for the first time in years I was struck by the simple attractiveness of it: window boxes and planters filled with plants, flowers in the windows

and a dove-cot to top it off. I soon felt part of it because of the friendliness of people in the various shops. The Bakery and Warehouse were well established by this time, which helped make the Yard ripe for further development.

Billy and Alain had carried out the bulk of the building work, which left the running-around jobs to do. Contacts needed to be made with wheat suppliers, plastic bag makers, mill spare parts suppliers etc. Then, only four days after my arrival, a big blow came. The insurance was going to be sky high, far too much for such a small place. We were being assessed as a large commercial venture. At this point Alain and I seemed to be out of a job. We managed to support ourselves by working in other parts of the Yard, like doing the honey pack for the Warehouse. Then Nick and Billy somehow sorted things out and we were in business.

I helped seal the lovely interior wood work in the mill in readiness for the first wheat delivery. After a fair amount of experimenting ourselves we set off to visit Gillygate, a highly successful mill/bakery business in York. It was great to see a mill in operation and very helpful to pick up various hints and ideas, which proved better than any book. In fact we never did find a suitable handbook for a small place like ours.

Back in London we furiously milled wheat, barley, corn etc in readiness for the official opening day. On December 14th 1978, flowers and champagne flowed, followed by more wine, but very few customers. Trade picked up slowly although we soon got our regulars. The bakery became our best outlet as they wanted lots of sacks per week. I nearly did my back in by lifting the 70lb sacks to customers' cars, a practice I soon gave up, using instead the yard trolley. The wheat deliveries were quite a problem as the sacks were even heavier than the flour. So when filling the wheat hopper I had to decant the grain into buckets and to use a step ladder to reach it.

One small crisis always seemed to follow another, like the day the wheat supply arrived contaminated with mouse droppings and, to make it worse, a dead mouse. No more milling that day! When life got too quiet in the mill, it was always nice to pop into the Warehouse for a cup of tea or to help the two people jumping out of the packing room door to haul up their supplies. The Yard was always full of the sounds of somebody's birthday, with champagne, flowers and general festivities.

The mill began to tick over fairly well, although we found it hard to pay the bills, wages and the rent. In fact we did not manage. I was feeling confident with the mill until one day something got jammed and I stuck my fingers up inside, after switching off the power. Luckily I did not lose my finger but still had to be carried, in a faint, up to Nick's flat. I spent the rest of the afternoon at the Country Western Cafe across the road.

After working at the mill for nearly a year I got itchy feet to move on, but felt I had to move for my health as well. The flour dust seemed to have settled on my lungs

making me short of breath easily, a definite sign that it was time to leave. In fact I chose something very healthy, and became a gardener in Kensington Gardens. It was a very sad day for me when I left the Yard, but it had been a wonderful experience and exciting to help in a new venture.

After a period of time the Bakery took on the mill, which seems to be working well. The workers take turns in the mill which helps cut down on the tedium and health problems that working in the mill creates.

* * *

Randolph Hodgson

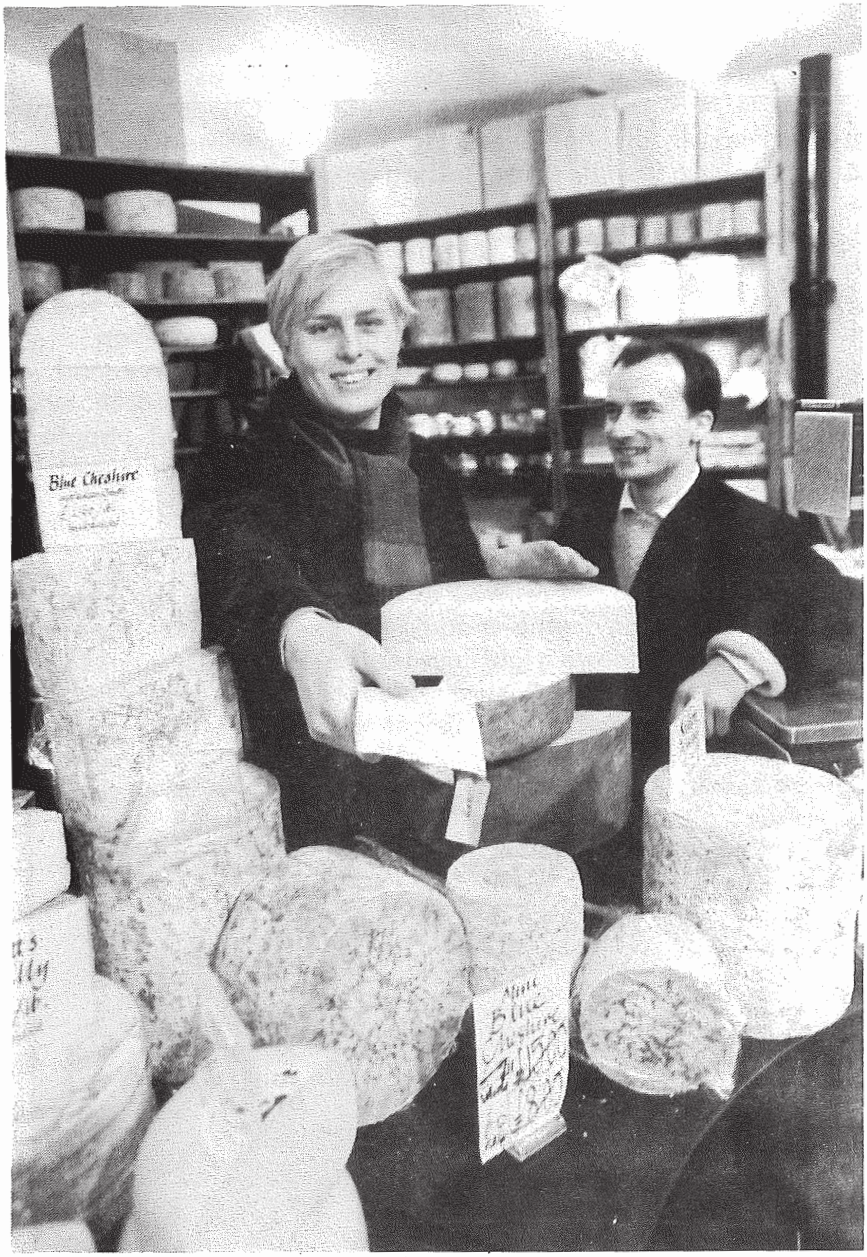
The Dairy

The dairy opened on 5 July 1979 with very little to sell. We had only had a few weeks in which to learn to make yoghurts, cheeses, ice cream, frozen yoghurt and buttermilk. If the rest of us had had our way we would not have opened for several more months but of course Nicholas was in a hurry and wanted to catch the summer trade. In retrospect I do not think we would have survived the first winter if we had waited until we were ready to open. I do not think we would have been really ready even after a few more months; it took us a couple of years before we began to understand what we were doing. Nick is great at debunking the mystique associated with specialist jobs such as cheesemaking, coffee roasting, baking, and peanut butter manufacture, which is why the dairy came to be. Only now do I believe that there is a lot more to these jobs than we knew in the beginning.

For the first year we only sold produce which we had manufactured behind the shop. This was fine in summer when our ice cream and Greek style yoghurt were popular but the winter was very bad for trade. A few months after we opened, Nick sold me the business for £17,000, the approximate cost of setting it up. He stood to make no profit. It was the first job I had ever had and Nick had serious misgivings when I started work because of my lack of experience. He did not think my recently acquired degree in food science was worth anything, and frankly neither did I. The brains and energy behind the production side was Trish Murphy who had helped Nick with the Bakery and was a good cook and organiser. The cheesemaking course Trish had been on was our source of knowledge on the subject. Unfortunately the course was designed rather more towards large scale manufacture and so we incorporated techniques that were not appropriate for us and which we have since dropped.

Trish's insistence on thorough and painstaking production methods did not agree with Nick's ideas so he kept clear of this side of things, except for the ice cream which he was very keen on. Nick made one of the first batches but was not prepared to heat it for the right amount of time to pasteurise it. Trish insisted that he do it again and so, thoroughly disgruntled, he poured the whole lot into a milk churn, took it up to his flat and put it on the gas ring while he had a bath. He must have forgotten about it and the milk boiled over. Nevertheless we made ice cream from it which I still think is some of the best we ever made.

After the first winter it seemed clear to us that we had to sell something else which people wanted when it was colder. It also seemed that I would not be able to pay Nick back for a long time. I went to tell Nick the problems and he said that he never thought that the Dairy would be a great money maker and that I need not pay him back. I was not very surprised at this as it seemed fair, and it was much later in the light of business dealings with many other people that I realised how unusual this was.


Blue Cheshire

The second winter we decided to buy in some hard cheese to sell. We bought from a wholesaler who dropped the cheese off once a week. He could not tell us where it was from or anything about it. We took Cheddar, Cheshire and Stilton. It did not seem right selling something we knew so little about after selling products we made ourselves and so when we were sent a sample by a cheesemaker in Devon we decided to go and visit. We wanted to buy direct from the producers not so much to get better prices (it was not worth the trouble for the small saving) but more out of interest. We had soon contacted cheesemakers all over the West Country and were making regular trips. As well as finding people who had made Cheddar for generations we also found people who had recently started making a cheese of their own design.

Next was to discover the cheeses of the North. This was more difficult and there was a lot of knocking at farm doors. One old lady, who made one cheese a day from the milk of her two cows right up in the Pennines, chased me out of her house when I first tried to buy from her, but later produced some of the finest cheese we have had.

Eventually we found that shop space was too restricted although we had enough room for production, and milk prices in central London were very high. The obvious solution was to move the production out onto a dairy farm, and this we did. The production is now looked after by Beatrice Garoche and Perry James who had worked for several years with us. As a result the shop is bigger and we can take more care of the cheeses we sell. Apart from travelling around and selecting cheeses, a lot of effort goes into maturing them in the shop.

* * *

Romy Fraser

The Apothecary

I had the idea to open an apothecary over ten years ago after I had been to France on holiday. I had noticed that in many pharmacies there they sold a wide range of natural medicines. I was studying homeopathy at the time and was surprised at how available the remedies were compared with the UK.

Where could we buy an ounce of coltsfoot, Byronia 6x or hyssop oil? Although these are all very common remedies within the field of alternative therapy, they were not available unless you were involved and knew what to buy and where to buy it. There were specialist suppliers if you knew about them, but they were only interested in their area of natural medicine - whether herbs or homeopathic remedies.

Five years later, in 1981, Nicholas Saunders gave me the opportunity to open the shop in Neal's Yard, already well known in a corner of Covent Garden as a place where

quality natural foods were produced and sold with minimal packaging. I felt that a shop selling natural medicines would complement what was already in the Yard, and cater to the growing interest and demand for an alternative to a mass-produced, time dictated, pressurised way of living, where food and medicines were seen as purely functional rather than being important in themselves as contributing to the quality of living.

I wanted to create a place where people could come and find out about the whole range of natural medicines available, combining herbs, homeopathy, essential oils and Bach Flower Remedies in one shop. Also a place where people could have access to reference books, come and look up their complaints, look up appropriate remedies and make their own choices. So it was very important to have accurate guidance and help from the staff behind

the counter. When the shop opened, we had a homeopath and a herbalist working together to assist customers to familiarise themselves with the remedies, supplements, books and other sources of information that are available.

Obviously, customers vary enormously, and so do their problems. We try to convince them that their state of health belongs to them and needs to be treated as a whole, rather than as a couple of symptoms that must be got rid of by someone else quickly. Often they have been through the orthodox system for years, subjected to constant re-diagnosis and varied attempts at cures with no success. The expectations of good health have gradually diminished. Agonising frustration drives many of our customers to seek us out and to try other remedies as the last resort, but it still surprises me that a few will come in and demand instant diagnosis and cures even though they have had no success elsewhere for years.

Some areas seem to be more predominant than others; the chronic problems being eczema, arthritis, rheumatism and bronchitis. For more acute illnesses we suggest a variety of remedies so that customers can make their own choices. Colds, coughs, constipation, sleeplessness, headaches, tension, sprains and bruises are some of the most common problems.

Even if the person behind the counter is a qualified practitioner, the job is not to diagnose or prescribe but to direct. We put customers in touch with appropriate therapists for chronic illnesses, and for more simple and acute problems, guide the customers towards the range of remedies available so that they can make their own choice and create their own natural first-aid kits. We do feel that much ill-health is fundamentally a question of imbalance, the physical level being the most obvious expression. Good health must really be up to the individual, and we see our job as helping to develop this, and to get away from the attitude where we automatically give away reponsibility for ourselves.

In addition to our range of natural medicines, we offer natural cosmetics, and until last year these were packaged in the back of the shop. Now we have moved the production of all the skin care products to south London, into converted old stables. The majority of our herbs are grown for us, organically produced and dried in this country, and as we now have more space we are able to expand the cosmetic side of the buisness and make our own tinctures and infusions from the herbs we sell that form the basis of the cosmetics. We are involved in creating new products and expanding our range. Our success with the cosmetics is beginning to allow us to consider expanding the business as a whole.

* * *

Brenda Wakefield

The Soup and Salad Bar

The Soup and Salad Bar in the centre of Neal's Yard, is a wholefood-vegetarian take-away cafe, though there is the facility for customers to also eat on the premises.

I opened the Soup and Salad Bar in March 1982, following an invitation from Nicholas Saunders to develop an appropriate and complementary business, which would add to those already trading in Neal's Yard at that time.

Having learned of wholefood through voluntary work at many of London's small wholefood shops and cafes, and a valuable training at 'Cranks', I found myself drawn to Neal's Yard by the small, friendly group of people at the Bakery, who, like Trish Murphy and Headley Freake, brought such energy and lively experimentation to food, that it was a real pleasure to be there.

Over the years the Bakery became a cooperative and as a founder-member I was able to learn a lot from my experiences.

I realised that what was needed and was really lacking from what the Yard had to offer was much lighter and more colourful food: freshly prepared and attractive salads, fresh squeezed-juices, soups and nutritious hot savoury bakes and casseroles that dropped the 'snack on the hoof' concept and provided a meal made up from various courses, from vegetables and fruits in season, but still conveniently packaged in containers. Jacket potatoes with various dips and fillings have been added

to this range, as well as a small selection of pudddings.

The menu is designed to give customers a range of dishes to choose from without having to spend so long in making that choice that they delay other customers in the lunch-time queue.

One of the delights of running the Soup and Salad Bar is not using artificial flavourings or additives, sugar, fats or refined foods or ingredients. The kitchen and the counter area are open plan, which enables customers to see the whole process of production. Customers often ask questions about the food and how they might prepare it at home. It is great that they show an interest in this way and although a recipe book is not available yet, the ingredients and methods of cooking are shared and explained to anyone who asks.

Many customers are delighted that microwave ovens are not used as in most well-known vegetarian restaurants for although microwaves have been readily adopted by the public, there are those who do not see that food is necessarily enhanced by this method of cooking.

Other customers with specific allergies to certain foods, such as to wheat, nuts or corn, but still wanting to eat out, have remarked that the Soup and Salad Bar is invaluable to them as they can make special menu requests and be certain of avoiding those particular ingredients. There is always a vegetarian cheese and vegetable dish, at least one, usually two vegan dishes as well as soup without dairy products. Also in the day's menu further response to customers' requests is made by offering a garlic-free dish and a tomato-free dish as well as low-fat foods, so that those following particular eating patterns have a choice.

In the main, Soup and Salad Bar customers are regulars, many of them are local office and business people, art and dance students from the nearby colleges and studios

and other people who find Neal's Yard usually through friend's recommendation, although visitors and tourists also make up the crowds that gather in the Yard in the summer months.

Healthy eating is much more widely accepted now, compared to ten years ago, and one noticeable development in that time is that simple and nutritious food has ceased to be a diet for 'special' people but is now expected and demanded by many.

* * *

Margot McCarthy

The Therapy Rooms

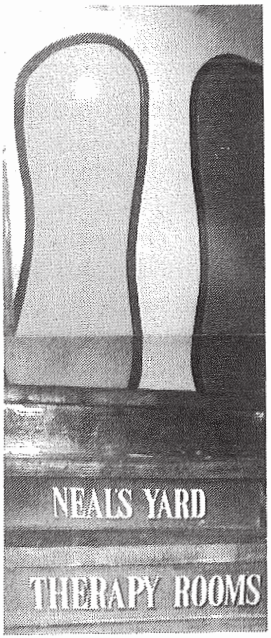
The Therapy Rooms were the idea of Nicholas Saunders. He carried out the conversion work in the upstairs of Number 2 and set up six individual therapy rooms with a reception area. On the first floor he also utilised the

space that had been the packing room for the Warehouse when that was on the ground floor. This room is used for groups and classes, but has retained the name of the Packing Room. On this first floor is a small kitchen area, a shower cubicle and a small office. Nicholas has a remarkable ability to utilise the tiniest space, creating things where others would have said it was impossible. Anyone who has been to Neal's Yard will understand exactly what I mean. The approximate floor space per floor is only 450 square feet.

Each therapy room has a hydraulic treatment couch, a small desk, two chairs and a hand basin. The rooms are individually colour coded and furnished and fitted in red, green, brown, blue, yellow or orange. A cupboard houses the washing machine and tumble dryer and all the linen. All the cotton or towelling sheets used by the therapists are washed on site in the machine that fits so snugly in its own space that we sometimes have the idea that it is trying to break out.

The Therapy Rooms were originally opened in the summer of 1982 by Nicholas Saunders. He started off with a small number of therapists and receptionists whom he had chosen. The main therapies of homeopathy, osteopathy, acupuncture, herbalism and massage were represented. After a few months Nicholas wanted to hand over the running and management of the rooms to the therapists, but they were unable to agree terms. One of the homeopaths took over the management of the rooms, but he wanted to carry on practising. At this point, the beginning of March, 1983 I became involved; employed as a receptionist/administrator. I had trained as an SRN and had also done administrative work in an NHS maternity hospital. This experience, combined with my increasing interest in alternative forms of treatment and study of homeopathy attracted me to the job. It was always said during those early days that it was a time of learning for all of us, and in retrospect I had not realised how true that was to be.

As the clinic became more widely known, more by word of mouth than by advertising, therapists applied to practise and approached me for details. All prospective therapists have to meet certain laid down standards before being offered space. Also, a balance of the sorts of therapies offered has to be maintained.



The rooms are let out in blocks of hours, (4,6,8 or 12, or combinations of these). Most of our therapists practise once or twice a week, and have other practices in other centres or work from home. Being in Covent Garden we are fortunate in having a large working population all around, and many people visit during lunchtime after work.

In December 1983, Nicholas offered me the opportunity to take over the Therapy Rooms and manage them myself. At this time we were expanding in all directions so that we started at 9 am and finished at 9.30 pm every day. Teaching clinics were established by the College of Homeopathy (on Thursdays) and the College of Osteopaths (on Saturdays). They charge reduced fees to their clients, because there are students sitting in on the sessions, although clients are seen by qualified practitioners.

I am now in my fourth year of running the clinic. Never has time passed so quickly, nor my attitude to 'work' changed so much. Going to work has become a whole social experience. I see therapists and clients who have become more than acquaintances and I learn more every day. Currently we have nearly forty therapists and an annual rate of client visits of about 11,500, excluding the

colleges. Keeping tabs on all the clients and therapists is quite demanding.

Four receptionists, Sally, Gisela, Drusilla and Elizabeth, work with me. We have a good system of communication which is vital to keep track of events, changes, and messages from the therapists. The main task of the receptionist is making appointments. Some therapists take longer for an initial consultation than for subsequent sessions, and their fees for these also vary. Massage sessions are generally one hour, whilst first consultations with homeopaths are generally one and a half hours, with subsequent sessions 45 minutes. With these different appointment sessions and fees and six therapists on duty per shift, one has to have a clear head. Telephone queries and appointments also have to be handled. But I never have to advertise for staff, they tend to come at appropriate times from personal recommendation. Quite often they are students at various colleges and all have knowledge of alternative therapies.

In fact we do hardly any advertising, perhaps one or two adverts in a yearly edition. People ring or visit us to find out more information about specific therapies, or wanting to know what we do, with very little idea of which therapy may suit them. Some queries can be very difficult to deal with, especially if the client floods you with information on a variety of symptoms they may be presenting. My training as an SRN has been extremely useful in those sorts of circumstances. One has to ascertain the nature of the problem and not be biased to one way of thinking.

Some clients come to us having been told by orthodox practitioners that they have a condition that they have to put up with, or have been given drugs to calm them down or make them sleep. There is a growing awareness amongst the public that one's health is one's own responsibility, and patients are more inclined now to query decisions that at one time they would have accepted without a second thought.

Seeing clients over a period of time can be very rewarding. Changes, sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle can be seen. These are not necessarily confined to physical complaints or manifestations, but occur on a deeper level, often with changes in their ways of relating to other clients, therapists and receptionists. Clients who come at regular times on regular days usually see the same receptionist which helps them to feel more comfortable in their surroundings and ultimately assists in the healing process.

We provide information not only about the therapies we have available at Neal's Yard but also about other centres. I have collected information on anything I think may be relevant, and we get asked anything from addresses for organic butchers to homeopathic chiropodists.

The other businesses in the Yard serve to complement ours, the Apothecary in particular. People often make enquiries at the Apothecary about how to treat certain problems which sometimes go beyond first aid advice and may require more prolonged treatment, and so we benefit from their referrals. Similarly our clients can obtain their homeopathic remedies and herbs from the Apothecary and may at the same time be tempted by the rest of their lovely stock.

Covent Garden is such a lively place and Neal's Yard is frequently likened to an oasis. People come to Neal's Yard for a variety of reasons, but the one overriding factor has to be that it is a nice place to be. I am very fortunate to be in that 'nice place' every day.

* * *

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It will make useful reading for small businesses elsewhere and for those working to regenerate our inner cities, besides answering the questions of all those who have ever visited Neal's Yard and felt inspired.

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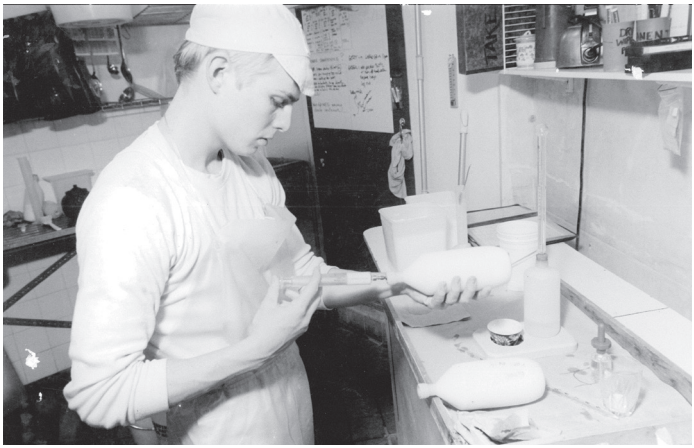
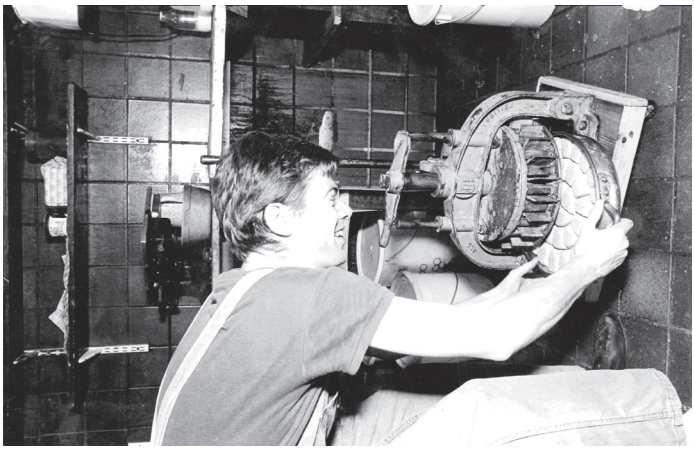
The Neal's Yard Story

The Neal's Yard Story





Afterword by Judith Rowley

Neal's Yard, to my mind, was an attempt (a very successful attempt) in the mid-70s, to introduce a sense of a village within a city.

Harking back to the 18th-century nursery rhyme, "the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker", Nicholas Saunders updated the rhyme by creating "the wholefood warehouse, the baker, the cheese maker" and adding in the essential apothecary and coffee shop. They were separate small shops, yet united by his design and vision, and were based, to some extent, on EF Schumacher's iconic book Small Is Beautiful.

I was one of the first people to run the Neal's Yard Wholefood Warehouse when Nicholas opened it. The shops sold, and where possible produced, the basic foodstuffs that formed the diet of the vegetarians and community lifestylers that had mushroomed at the end of the 60s and into the 70s.

It was a place of cellular cohesion within, yet separate from, the massive sprawl of its greater environs. The Yard grew a definite personality as the shops, Nick's wall garden, trees and doves bloomed. The Yard could not help but charm the unexpected visitor who stumbled through the passageway out of the commercial grind into an oasis of greenery and friendly faces.

In this respect he helped soften attitudes from those then known as "the straights" towards the "idealistic muesli-munchers" who were, at that time, not the most favoured of beings.

Nicholas reversed the trend that saw profit in the city as purely making money. He saw that sharing a vision and having a share in your workplace, whatever your position, meant people grew together and enjoyed their whole lives, not divided into work and play. To see the growth and fruition of friendships, unions, and offspring as the Yard grew with each new venture was a far greater profit, and actually helped the shops to prosper!

Automation and loss of jobs was eschewed; if a job could be done by hand, that meant work and engagement for another human being. It was a forerunner of a sense of village that has appeared all over London. Take the rise of artisan bakeries - surely Neal's Yard was one of the first. And cafes that grind their own coffee (or sell Monmouth Street coffee) continue to buck the trend of global brands and corporate business take-over strategies.

Looking forward

At the time of Nicholas's experiment, Covent Garden's future was in doubt. The fruit and veg market had moved across the river leaving derelict buildings, and there was talk of pulling down the old warehouses for a massive redevelopment. Property was therefore very cheap as it represented a gamble. Nick took that gamble.

Given the astronomical prices property commands in this area now, economic profit has to take precedence. Neal's Yard served as a model and the ideas behind it are, to a certain extent, in evidence - but in areas where prices can allow a gamble or a vision. However, Neal's Yard could continue its history as a shared communal space. A sense of community can still be engendered through joint ventures or events sponsored by each business and a coming together for an annual festive yard event.

Neal's Yard is a small but significant piece of history that was born out of the alternative culture of the 60s and that has now been adopted as an ordinary lifestyle by the young of today. One could liken it to the coffee house culture that started in London in the 18th century - the meeting place for the likes of Boswell and Johnson and the wits of that period. Nicholas's design of Monmouth Street Coffee House is a replica of such a place; small intimate cubicles where political intrigue and daily affairs could be discussed – they were smaller people in those days!

So a recognition of this little Yard by action rather than just lip service would do modern history a service.

May you all thrive and prosper and friendships grow between you all.

Equal in honour – if not in economic profit!

Judith Rowley 2016

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Original photos by Mark Edwards. Cover photo by Bianca London.

All proceeds from sales of this booklet will go to the Natural Death Centre, an organisation set up by Nicholas Albery 25 years ago.