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The 'Big Society' and the National Citizen Service: Young people, volunteering and engagement with charities in the twentieth century

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Introduction

In the run up to the General Election of 2010, the Conservative Party announced their plans to create a 'big society'. Although the 'big society' has yet to be clearly defined, certain elements of this 'programme' had crystallised before the election. One such element was the desire to involve young people more fully in volunteering projects and to encourage them to take up positions of leadership within their local communities, through the vehicle of 'National Citizen Service'. Unlike its postwar namesake, the fully operational NCS will not be compulsory, but rather offer a universal scheme for young people across the UK. Over this coming summer, twelve pilot schemes will roll out a seven-to-eight week programme of vigorous outdoor activities followed by action in the community to some 11,000 sixteen year olds in England.¹ In its first year, the scheme is predicted to cost £13million, rising to £37million in 2012.² With an increasing clamour by such major voluntary sector figures as Elisabeth Hoodless of CSV against public sector cuts because of their impact on the ability of charities to provide their services and opportunities for volunteering,³ the NCS appears ill-timed. The sums involved are dwarfed by the cuts to local government more generally, and in some locations the money for the NCS may neatly replace/displace funds for youth services. In others, it will cause a shortfall. For me, the

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case of Nicky Wishart, the young boy who tried to organise a picket of David Cameron's constituency office in protest against his youth club being shut down as part of the local government cuts, encapsulates the tensions inherent within the NCS project. For his pains in taking a lead on challenging cuts to a much-needed social service, Nicky was pulled out of class to be questioned by the anti-terrorism police.\textsuperscript{4} Youth work and youth clubs have long been used as a platform for first developing citizenly feelings and then encouraging social action among young people. That Nicky Wishart should try to mobilise his friends and acquaintances over the closure of their youth club is a testament to the powers of youth work in inspiring a sense of community.

What I want to do in the course of this paper is to look at the historical continuities and changes within the field of youth work, using the settlement movement and their club work as a case study, to argue that for all its harking back to a sense of 'National Service' in the 1950s, the NCS does not have any sound historical foundations. This paper will look at the reasons why working class teenagers used these clubs, the extent to which young people of different backgrounds mixed with each other, the encouragement of local youth volunteering within or beyond the club, and their success in the building of 'character'. The settlements chime with many elements of the Conservatives' policy around the 'Big Society', and certainly around ideas of building social cohesion through bringing young people of different backgrounds together. However, as this paper will demonstrate, much settlement youth work succeeded not because it necessarily brought people together, but because it appealed to a sense of locality and community, and created space for the young people to be themselves.

The settlement movement was the brain child of Samuel Barnett, a curate in the East End of

London. With his wife Henrietta, Barnett had taken up the living of St Jude’s in Whitechapel in 1873, one of the most deprived parishes in the capital at the time. They launched an ambitious welfare and educational programme in the parish, yet by the early 1880s Samuel Barnett was increasingly frustrated by its limitations. Barnett disliked the largely female volunteers who did their work and then went home to the more affluent areas of London without, he felt, truly understanding the lives and circumstances of the people they sought to help. Barnett developed a new vision of volunteering, based on the example of Arnold Toynbee, the Balliol economist, who had spent the vacations before his death in 1883 living in the East End and undertaking voluntary work. For Barnett, the only way that the middle and upper classes could truly engage with the poor was by living in areas like Whitechapel and devoting their [spare] time to work for the poor. Barnett went to Oxford University in December 1883 to present his idea for a 'settlement of university men' in the East End of London. The idea was received enthusiastically,

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6 Pimlott, Toynbee Hall: Fifty Years of Social Reform, 16.

and plans were soon underway to set up this 'university settlement', later known as Toynbee Hall in honour of Arnold Toynbee.\(^8\)

These settlement houses were popular with their target volunteer group of young university graduates because they offered a useful launch pad for volunteering in deprived areas, with the comforts of communal living to middle class standards. Settlements sprang up across London and other major British towns and cities, across the North Americas, Europe and Asia. Although the settlement houses came to see themselves as having a transnational shared purpose, each settlement was fundamentally shaped by the needs of its local community and the welfare world in which it operated.\(^9\) However, almost all settlements provided some form of service for children and young people. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, children and young people thronged the streets of towns and cities, as a means of escaping cramped housing. The young were seen as being both at risk of being hurt or corrupted on the streets and of being a nuisance or a danger.\(^10\) The settlements responded to this supposed problem in a number of ways, but the most popular and most public facing aspect of this work was the boys' or girls' club.

**Why did teenagers use these clubs?**\(^11\)

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What was the appeal of these clubs? It is perhaps easier to see why these clubs appealed to settlement leaders. For the young settlement residents who ran the clubs, the work was exciting, challenging, rewarding and possibly also frightening.\textsuperscript{12} For settlement managers, clubs were a cost-effective way of providing a social service. The fundamental need of a club was a room, which was easily found on the settlement premises. Through requiring the payment of subs, clubs had a regular, if small, income. Club work was highly photogenic in itself, whilst participation in sporting and cultural events generated newspaper coverage: they also spoke to ideals of the public school 'house' and sporting glories. Youth clubs were not profitable enterprises, but they could be relatively self-sustaining.

Yet these clubs needed the sustained attentions of the young people of the district. From the later nineteenth century onward, the club movement as a whole was generating a serious literature on the desirable qualities of a club, these publications being written by veteran club leaders based on their experience of getting and keeping young people in clubs. In these publications, written by club leaders for other club leaders, we gain little sense of how and why a young person might come to use a club, if the guidance on what would keep them there was clear.\textsuperscript{13} For example, an article in the Mansfield House University Settlement magazine of 1918 wrote of the impact of its boys' club in West Ham, Fairbairn House:

\begin{quote}
They [the former club members] have made an atmosphere, and in Fairbairn House the beginnings of gambling are soon checked, bullying is discouraged, a foul word is seldom
\end{quote}


heard, clear eyes look into clear eyes, and boys can grow up to be strong, healthy, clean-minded, helpful men. One can watch the progress. The newcomer is brought in by a pal; he is welcomed to the Club, and put in the friendly care of an older member; he is shown the glories of the place, the gym., the boxing room, the tennis court, the library.\textsuperscript{14}

The club leaders were obviously interested in improving the behaviour of the young men, but it is also clear that joining a club offered affordable access to a range of tempting leisure pursuits that were not easily come by in the home or on the streets. Formally and informally, the club worked to make the experience of joining as friendly as possible.

At the most basic level, clubs were an affordable and congenial place to go to meet one's friends and acquaintances, providing a space away from the home and workplace. However, clubs were more than just a space to go to. There were opportunities to demonstrate one's prowess in sports and cultural activities, and possibly to make one's way out of a working class district into boxing or show business as a result. In his memoir, the actor Terence Stamp recalled his initial enjoyment of life at Fairbairn House, from the anticipation of waiting for the clubhouse doors to open to the joys of discovering the theatre.\textsuperscript{15} Sports of all varieties were important at boys’ clubs, providing opportunities to compete with other clubs regionally and nationally. Fairbairn House clubs produced major sporting stars, including Jimmy Barrett, the West Ham and one-time England football player.\textsuperscript{16} Clubs were a place of discovery, through the array of workshops and classes that were provided to members. For both boys and girls, the year was topped off by the annual summer holiday to a camp on the English coast, a chance to enjoy the fresh air and try

\textsuperscript{14} Newham Local Studies and Archives (hereafter NLSA): 'The Need for Boys' Clubs', \textit{Mansfield House Magazine}, 1918 p. 160

\textsuperscript{15} Terence Stamp, \textit{Stamp Album} (London: Bloomsbury, 1987). pp.81-85. If these simple pleasures were marred by the unwanted attentions of the then settlement warden, Ian Horobin\textsuperscript{15} Davies, \textit{Leisure, Gender and Poverty, Working Class Culture in Manchester and Salford 1900-39}....

\textsuperscript{16} NLSA: Fairbairn microfilms, John Prebble, 'Boy from the East End, Denny Brebbington', n.d., Mansfield House Press Cuttings Book, No. 2 (1)
out different kinds of physical activities.¹⁷

Girls also were able to access aspirational and creative fare at their clubs. The girls who attended the Canning Town Women’s Settlement clubs were active in regional club competitions in the interwar period, often bringing home the silverware.¹⁸ Girls’ club fare often promoted the home and the body beautiful,¹⁹ yet members’ aspirations were encouraged in all directions. In 1937, Daisy Parsons, a former Canning Town club girl became the first female Mayor of West Ham. A former domestic servant turned suffragette and Labour councillor, Parsons returned that year to address the settlement on her work.²⁰ Parsons was not the only role model on offer to the girls of Canning Town, who were treated to a range of speakers, including the first female Cabinet member, Margaret Bondfield, in 1924.²¹ Whilst the Canning Town programme was fairly standard in some respects, the club leaders presented their girls with a universe that was both grounded yet aspirational.

Mixing with others

The settlement clubs were fairly territorial in their membership. As the Fairbairn House membership books reveal, groups of boys from the same or neighbouring streets would often join up at the same time; older male relatives were also a powerful force in encouraging boys to join.²² When settlement youth clubs worked, it was because the community felt ownership of them. At Bernhard Baron Settlement in Stepney, to become a member of the adult clubs, one had to have been a member of the youth clubs and to continue to play a role in the junior clubs by helping to manage them. The New Survey of London Life and Labour remarked favourably

¹⁸ NLSA: Canning Town Women’s Settlement Executive Committee (hereafter CTWS EC) 15 May 1918, EC 27 May 1921.
¹⁹ NLSA CTWS EC 17 October 1919, 22 October 1930, CANNING TOWN EC 23 February 1938
²⁰ NLSA CTWS EC 27 October 1937.
²¹ NLSA, CTWS EC 24 October and 19 December 1924
²² NLSA Aston-Mansfield Collection, Men’s and Boys’ Club address books 1906-10.
on how this helped to bond members of the local community together from an early age.\textsuperscript{23} Parental involvement continued into the 1950s and 1960s at Fairbairn House: one interviewee was surprised to find his father there one evening, collecting the subs on the door.\textsuperscript{24} One route to success for a club, therefore, was to explore the possibilities and potential of bonding capital, of operating horizontally through the main social group rather than creating bridges to other communities and social groups. Yet clubs were not without their functions in developing bridging capital - extending social links across different social groups. To a point, that there were middle and upper class volunteers and project workers attached to the clubs served as a means of broadening at least the young people's exposure to others from different backgrounds, if the settlement residents - often a little older than their charges, in any case - remained somewhat aloof and detached.

\textbf{Success in the building of character?}

Before the 1960s, clubs were typically segregated by sex. To a point, this reflected the sex segregation of the settlements themselves, but also ideas about the role of the club leader in acting as a mentor to their charges. Thus women’s settlements would provide clubs for younger boys, if men’s settlements brought in female leaders for any girls’ clubs they ran.\textsuperscript{25} Women running boys' clubs often had their hands full to begin with, as some boys thought that the women leaders would be pushovers, and it is here that we see clearly some of the processes of building character. Miss M. Child, of the Lady Margaret Hall Settlement in Lambeth, took to this challenge with aplomb, as she recalled in 1957:

\begin{quote}
I do not know whether a man would have thrown some of them out early on or put up
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{24} Interviewee LC, email correspondence with the author, 5 February 2004.
\footnotetext{25} See the example of the Girls’ Dinner Club at Toynbee Hall, which ran until the late 1930s. See Katharine Bradley, "Poverty and Philanthropy in East London 1918 -1959: The University Settlements and the Urban Working Classes" (Unpublished University of London PhD, 2006).
\end{footnotes}
with their pretty ways long enough for taming to set in as we did. They mostly turned out good enough boys after a bit. I reckoned on a real Rough House about once a year when the lights would suddenly go out & chairs fly through the air & tables be hurled over.26 In Miss Child's account, her success with the boys of Lambeth arose from her tenacity - not an uncommon theme in club workers' accounts of building trust with their young charges. This annual rough house was tolerated, even expected, as a form of safety valve.27 On the other hand, Canning Town had a period in the 1920s in which they found it difficult to keep leaders for their boys' clubs, as the women volunteers found the boys' behaviour too challenging.28 It is difficult to know much about these failures, as only brief comments noting the women's problems with the clubs and then their resignations were made. It did not follow, however, that men found it easier to establish order in the clubs. Basil Henriques, later Warden of the Bernhard Baron Settlement, recalled in his memoirs how he had to prove himself to the boys of a club in Bermondsey through showing prowess and leadership in sports in order to have their attentions.29

What comes out most clearly in these accounts of instilling discipline in club boys is the way in which the settlement residents felt that they succeeded in imposing their will upon the boys. What is more implicit is the way in which this experience changed the residents as young people themselves. For example, Henriques admitted that before attending the club his only experience with the working classes had been through having domestic servants; he was surprised that the boys' club members would speak to him as though he was their social equal.30 The settlement residents were young people used to a middle or even upper class world: encountering this working class environment required reflection, flexibility and adaptation. These settlement

27 Koven, "From Rough Lads to Hooligans: Boy Life, National Culture and Social Reform."
28 See NLSA, CTWS EC 26 March 1930
29 Henriques, The Indiscretions of a Warden, 26.
30 Henriques, The Indiscretions of a Warden, 25.
workers may have been young, but they still had considerable power to shut clubs down or to exclude members, not to mention the power exerted in their other roles as home visitors and the like. Yet it would be wrong to say that the working class users of the settlements were without power of their own, as if the club leader wanted an easier time, they had to alter their behaviour in order to be listened to. Whilst hard-up working class parents may have had greater difficulties in navigating welfare workers in times of trouble, their children certainly had the power to make the lives of inexperienced club leaders miserable.

An important precept, once order had been established in the club, was the creation of democratic principles of management. Fairbairn House had a standing committee drawn from its membership, whose role was to oversee the daily management of the clubs, supported by a member of settlement staff. The boys were keen to ensure that their fellow members participated as fully as possible, demanding to see members who were not felt to be as energetic as they could be in joining in with the full range of club activities. Membership of the standing committee was something taken on only by those who were sufficiently dedicated to the club and willing to police their friends and neighbours. Whilst settlement residents would often overlook certain behaviours as expediency in maintaining overall standards, the boys at Fairbairn had no such qualms, but unlike their leaders they were part of the community and evidently felt more comfortable in being stricter. Taking up the leadership of one’s club was a first step in becoming socially active. Some of the young women at Canning Town offered to take on the running of the senior club themselves, as another volunteered to take the Sunday afternoon Bible class. In 1930 some of the older girls took it upon themselves to run their own club for younger children. These cases were not radically innovative by any measure, but they were nonetheless

31 NLSA 27/2 Fairbairn House Standing Committee (FHSC) October 1943 to July 1945.
32 NLSA 27/2 FHSC Minutes 7 January 1946, Minutes 13 August 1945
33 NLSA CTWS EC 27 January 1922
34 NLSA CTWS EC 22 October 1930
examples of young people being empowered to take responsibility for the well-being of others, an opportunity that would likely not have been there without the settlement as a framework.

Despite the perils of overly punitive club members, the boys' club sometimes came to occupy a special place in the affections of its members. This was most clearly seen during the Second World War, when young men regularly wrote home to their club leaders to give them news about what was happening in their lives and to catch up with events at home. A common feature of many of the letters was the feeling that the experience of being in a boys' club in their youth had helped to prepare them for the trials of war:

The spirit of the Club has made each of us, I am sure, give that little extra bit over the next man. All those little extra bits add up to something, and the final amount is but part of the Club's total effort.\(^{35}\)

Crisis gave the members the opportunity to reflect upon what the clubs had offered them as boys and young men:

Over the impressionable ages of boyhood and youth, the Club convoyed me safely through the temptations that breed on the street corners of slums, where youth is like a high-speed ship without a rudder.\(^{36}\)

The former youth club members believed that the experience of the clubs had changed their lives. Some saw the experience as putting them on the right path, or of providing opportunities they may not otherwise have experienced. But for many, clubs provided opportunities to make new friends and to further develop their sense of identity and self. Writing back to the club also gave the young men a sense of stability in a world which was both boring and dangerous.

**Conclusion**

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Where settlement youth clubs were successful in creating vibrant cultures, it followed that they had, whether by accident or design, provided a club environment which provided a range of opportunities to suit a variety of tastes, whilst also fitting into the rhythms and networks of the neighbourhood. The club members felt an ownership over their clubs, and settlement residents, managers, club members and alumni worked hard to sustain the clubs over longer periods of time, literally bringing in different generations of club members. Clubs were not specifically about getting young people to volunteer. What they were concerned with was getting children and young people to act in collegiate ways with each other, and in several cases social action followed from that, on however small a scale. If club leaders were very clear that their agenda was to create good, all-round citizens, their methods on the ground were often more subtle: and they were far from immune from the process themselves. What is less tangible to the historian is the way in which this general sense of fellowship impacted on the community more generally, in the ways in which people behaved with each other beyond the club. In comparing the work of the settlement clubs with the present day some important caveats apply. First, clubs thrived in a world before individual bedrooms for children in a family, central heating, television and computer games; second, they also grew in an environment shaped by the public school ethos of team sports, houses and service. Yet youth clubs and organisations remain important for young people, as evidenced by the enduring popularity of the Scouts and Guides. Youth clubs are still going strong: London Youth alone has over 400 youth clubs working with 75,000 young people, or 5 percent of the London population aged 10-25 (2001 estimates). There are far more leisure opportunities for young people, but clubs remain popular, for the fellowship they offer and the broader field of opportunities. The NCS, with its short burst of volunteering, may

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well appeal to young people who otherwise remain outside current programmes, but given the range of youth work that already achieves the NCS’s aims – and the importance of building up relationships with the community over time – the NCS runs the risk of duplicating existing work and being something that has only a transitory impact on the young people who participate in it. The money would perhaps be better directed to those groups who are quietly working towards such objectives already.

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