

A Brief History of the Work of Exeter Shilhay Community Ltd

Following the death of a male rough sleeper on the Cathedral Green in 1967, the Exeter Diocese decided that action must be taken to try to prevent such an occurrence from ever happening again. Thus began the process of planning for the provision of basic needs services for the city's homeless. Within these developments grew the roots of Exeter Shilhay Community.

The Exeter Diocese quickly enlisted the help of the Simon Community, an organisation originally founded in London but with a small division based in Exeter. With similar proficiency and peppercorn rent assistance from the city council the Exeter Simon Community set up basic night shelter accommodation for up to fourteen persons. Adjacent to this shelter they opened up an accommodation option, adding a further twelve beds.



The property was known as **Gabriel's Wharf**, situated in the old Shilhay district of Exeter (between the quay and Exe bridges).

The services were predominantly used by men, mainly of the 40+ age bracket. In general many of these men saw themselves as being rejected by, and excluded from, an uncaring society that had forced them into a rootless existence. Unable to see any route back into the mainstream of society, their feelings of frustration and hopelessness



(often fuelled by alcohol abuse) manifested in challenging and volatile behaviour. Most of these men had well established itinerant lifestyles and arrived in Exeter on account of its close proximity to all the region's major trunk roads. The city tended to be used as a staging post for their travels around Somerset, Devon and Cornwall.



In the shelter anyone was welcome regardless of frequent levels of inebriation. Basic material needs were provided for i.e. a bed, blanket and some food. Due to the demand for beds there was only ever a guarantee of a bed for three nights per week per person.

The residential section of the house aimed to provide a stable longer-term community. The residents (the majority of whom requested to move into the house from the shelter) participated in the running of the house in terms of cooking, cleaning and undertaking other domestic tasks. This set up of shelter and accommodation at Gabriel's Wharf continued through the 1970's until the end of the decade when change was on the horizon.



In 1971 Exeter Shilhay Community registered as an independent charity and become a limited company with a managerial committee consisting of local people with strong and active interests in the city's communities. By the late 1970's the ongoing application and dedication of this committee had paved the way for a re-location of the services. The Shilhay district had already been subjected to major changes following the decline of the local manufacturing industries situated around the riverside. Furthermore, planning and re-building in the area deemed Gabriel's Wharf increasingly unsuitable as a location for the city's travellers.



In 1979 the Palace Gate Hostel was opened, providing accommodation for up to thirty-six men in the form of six temporary mattresses on the floor of the communal room each night, a dormitory of eleven beds on the ground floor and nine beds on the 2nd floor, plus four shared bedrooms of between two to three men on the 3rd & 4th floors. Despite providing accommodation on a twenty-four hour basis with five paid staff the prevailing ethos was still one of "food and shelter only". The hostel was consequently often referred to as the 'doss house'.

In 1982 a terraced house was purchased in the Mount Pleasant area of the City to be used as a Five-bed "move-on" hostel for residents from the Palace Gate Hostel.



By the mid-eighties it was clear that the traditional itinerant group to some extent had been replaced by the distinctly different "new group" of homeless male. These new group members were victims in the main of an escalating unemployment problem. They were generally much younger and comparatively new to the challenges and harsh realities of street homelessness. This period also saw the emergence of mental ill-health as a significant issue more readily identified within homelessness. With the hostel starting to accommodate large numbers of men who would previously have found sanctuary in the rapidly diminishing supply of psychiatric hospital beds the challenges to staffing and managing the hostel environment further increased.

The nineties brought yet another change and a new set of problems: a rapidly growing number of younger men whose challenging behaviour worsened through the high level of illicit drug use. Effectively our service user group had completely changed in less than two decades. Alcohol abuse still played a part of the lifestyle of many but had rapidly been overtaken by this new problem to society.



1993 saw the opening of Howell Road Hostel, initially an eleven bed hostel of seven single bedrooms and two double rooms. Operated by Exeter Shilhay Community for ten years it provided life and social skills training to its resident men. These men had successfully moved on from the Palace Gate Hostel to this 2nd stage accommodation after demonstrating a period of stability in their lives. Over the years the hostel went through peaks and troughs in its accommodation history and only truly became a major force within the City's homelessness resettlement strategy in the final three years of its operations under Exeter Shilhay Community.



In December 1999 Gabriel House was opened in Smythen Street (near St George's Market) as a purpose-built replacement for the Palace Gate Hostel, which had been operating in its original set-up for a twenty year period. Gabriel House provided forty beds (ten in an "Assessment" dormitory and thirty in single rooms with shared facilities).

For the first time in Shilhay's history a new funding stream allowed delivery of a full range of resettlement options through an expanded dedicated staff team.

As we move through the "noughties" (2000 onwards!) Exeter Shilhay Community has consolidated its position within the City's homeless strategy by continuing to work with one of the most marginalised group of men in society. This "service user group" still reflects very much the multitudinous drug and alcohol issues increasingly prevalent through the recent decades. Associated presentations of mental health, family breakdowns, prison and care leavers, relationship and financial difficulties, ex-service personnel etc are all but a flavour of the very difficult issues and challenges that are very much associated with homelessness today.

Alongside our accommodation provision we were delighted to incorporate the Meaningful Occupation & Creative Resettlement Project ("MOP") in April 2002. MOP was a small independent training centre originally based at Old Tiverton Road who was seeking a larger charity to support their work. Progression followed for this scheme with Exeter City Council supporting a move to its current location of the ex-Learning centre in St David's Hill. The project remains focussed on the provision of meaningful activities, education, creation and vocational re-training; all within and part of the broadening of skills and opportunities for homeless people and those who are vulnerably housed.



In 2005 Exeter Shilhay Community purchased and set up a second five-bed terraced house alongside our existing project in the Mount Pleasant area to continue provision of low support housing for our more independent service users.

In addition to this a significant government grant enabled us in a joint venture with the owners of Gabriel House (Bournemouth Churches Housing Association) to upgrade and refurbish all the facilities within the building.



During this time (2006) the residents were relocated to a large house in Bartholomew Street (left) and a rented house in Northernhay Place (right).



The refurbished Gabriel House reopened in early 2007 as a Residential Resettlement Project, providing single rooms with en-suite facilities and provision for 5 homeless couples to be housed together under one roof. Dogs can also be accommodated.

Our capacity for housing increased to 55 people with wider opportunities for further in-house specialist support services.

Also in 2007 a third 7 bed move-on property was purchased also in Mount Pleasant. This brought our move on accommodation to 17 beds and our total capacity to 62.



In 2008 we rebranded with a new logo and name - Shilhay Community

Over the years just as our client group has changed, so too has Shilhay. Where once our organisation was as marginalised as the old itinerants, we now operate at the centre of Exeter's Homelessness Strategy for rough-sleepers.

We are the single largest voluntary sector accommodation-provider in the City. Our charity is accredited under the government-initiative "Supporting People" programme which funds the delivery of high quality support services to socially-excluded groups outside of the statutory network. Performance-monitoring and quality assessment similarly assist us in our ongoing targets in assessing needs, stabilising and motivating, and further empowering service users to move on into mainstream society and independent living.

Our Board of Trustees, all independent volunteers, ensures full compliance with Charity and Company Law.

We feel that Exeter and Devon can be proud of Shilhay's work for, and with, disadvantaged people. Ninety-five% of our service user group are local people. A high rate of successful outcomes is achieved thanks to the dedication of an excellent staff and volunteer team and a commitment to providing sustained support for each individual's needs and requirement.

Our vision is that all people should have access to good quality accommodation suitable for their needs, and opportunities to achieve their full potential.