

REPORT ON MY WEEK IN BRAZIERS

Avril Fox in her seniority is a very active searcher and explorer of new places and new ideas. She hoped to join the committed resident community at BP with the express purpose of building an eco-retirement dwelling and sent us this letter:

This has been cut down to a minimum, because I could write a book on my observations and conclusion, but I am aware that I write as an inexperienced visitor.

On arrival I tried to find some written material by Norman Glaister, but the place on the library shelves (301.15) was empty. I already have Wilfred Trotter's **Instincts of the Herd**, which has influenced me considerably. However, one quote from Glaister is in Hilda Salter's article:

Experiments in the Round, in which he describes Braziers as: 'A centre for residential adult education, for mutual learning and teaching, and for the study of the mechanisms of personal intercommunications which shape social life. Seen from within, we would claim to be trying to refashion an instrument of education in the science and art of living.'

But I do not find such a centre at Braziers today. To take 'mutual learning and teaching': in general there appear to be people who regard themselves as teachers but only as teachers. As to 'the study of the mechanisms of personal intercommunication', I will make no comment except that I did not see such mechanisms at work.

I then studied the pamphlets available, and reflected that Braziers was founded in 1950, when the great changes arising from the First World War were working themselves out; a time of turning within, and of self-examination by the nations who had been through that dreadful time. One fundamental transformation was a new relationship between the classes. For the first time, the son of the Earl was equally sharing the filth, blood and horrors with the son of the gardener and the son from the slums. New relationships sprang up and often lasted for life. There was criticism of the rigid pre-war Edwardian social structures, and the growth of new relationships as is natural. Trotter and his peers pioneered new concepts about social groups and their problems. However, so far I have not been able to discover Glaister's approach.

I feel that Braziers has become stuck in that introspective post-Edwardian phase, while the rest of the nation later moved on, turned outward, and became more aware of the international scene. I see no evidence that Braziers has moved further than the Flower Power movement of the sixties, when sandals and slight dishevelment were the fashion. Beyond that, nothing of the great reach of TV cameras revealing and agitating about the huge divide between rich and poor countries, nothing of the extraordinary and fast-growing power of the internet, no exploitation of the new 'global village' which it has created.

At Braziers, thought seems still to concentrate on 20th century social developments, and largely to ignore (apart from some New Age facets) later ones. For example, the dawning recognition of the power of the feminine, and changes in attitudes towards that concomitant subject: sex, have deeply transformed social relationships. I'm told that when Braziers was founded by a group of men, it was their wives who put in much of the practical supportive work which made it possible. Maybe today they would have been more to the fore; though of course Dorothy Glaister was an exception in this regard.

My stay here confirmed that this practical feminine input is still in evidence. The extraordinary efficiency of the place as a working machine: loos and bathrooms always clean; dining-room ever ready to supply a comforting drink; superb and enlightened food – in so far as I can see – is mostly due to the women. Yet, in the two meetings I sat through, an hour and a half passed (I timed it) and intelligent, thoughtful women sat silent while men argued a point.

I have attended countless committees, and not for half a century seen such an imbalance. One woman here said to me: 'Well, we just wait and let them get on with their games'. As a result the meetings here were not controlled and I think uncontrolled meetings are a terrible waste of time. Between the wars a leading British trade unionist produced a helpful book describing good chairmanship and yet, in Braziers there seems to be a total ignorance as to how, by careful preparation and timing, a meeting can be concise, efficient and productive. Chairing meetings efficiently was one of the great gifts Britain has given to the world, yet here in the heart of Britain it seems to have either been discarded or utterly ignored. What I saw at meetings here was reminiscent of situations I have only ever seen in Soviet countries – long discussions, no voting and ending with a man saying 'What we will do is this'. It is not undemocratic (I see that Hilda mentions democracy, so it cannot be banned) to prepare an agenda beforehand, to start with a discussion of the last meeting's decisions and the resulting outcomes; to end with 'Any Other Business', so that nothing is missed; or to vote on issues – voting doesn't seem even to be a part of life here. I think this democratic procedure is eminently suitable for Executive meetings, and here I can see the point of Glaister's separating executive from sensory meetings.

After further conversation with residents I think the explanation is probably the result of the fact that power is no longer in the hands of those who run the place, as I'm told it was in the beginning. Such a division is always unsatisfactory; those at the coal-face should play a major part in the decisions affecting that coal-face.

Regarding the Executive and Sensory meetings, insofar as I understand them, and I've read Hilda's article with great care, there should be a fundamental feeling that the two are parts of an indivisible whole. How either group, or group member, can in a place like Braziers, which prides itself on being enlightened, take a decision and consciously act on it without discussing the subject with the other group is, to me, inexplicable. That the house team, which is the beating healthy heart of Braziers, was not brought into discussion when a serious matter was first raised seems to indicate a flaw in 'personal intercommunications'.

As you know, I have been refused permission to settle here for the last active years of my life, and I am concerned lest Braziers crumbles away before I do. It is essential that those who hold the future of this precious place in their hands recognize reality: Braziers needs money! It needs to be the pride of Ipsden, showing the world how humanity can live in harmony with Nature and create a positive society. At last there is a rising wave of concern on the Green front; the only worry is that the wrong organizations place themselves on its crest where they will soon be highly profitable, while those of us who have been beavering away, fade out. I could make a number of suggestions but hesitate to do so, except for one. WWOOF reports 'a period of unprecedented expansion ... huge increases in numbers of members' and that it is 'exploring options for improvement'. In their recent **WWOOF UK NEWS** they praise Braziers, and I think maybe some solution might be found in collaboration with them.

But it would be better if Braziers moved forward, became daring, and joined the ranks of those who lead.

I was going to end there, but I was the ghastly type of child who would blurt out to a temperamental relative 'Mummy thinks your hat is awful'. As I grew up I learned that there are occasions when kindness is more important than truth. But recognizing that I am in a unique situation, coming from outside with no loyalties, and because I think it would be a tragic loss if things continue as they are at Braziers, I have decided to be brutally frank.

Braziers needs money, lots of money. It is impossible to run a listed house built in an extravagant architectural style and run it as a hotel-cum-educational establishment for people who are middle-aged or old, without a steady inflow of funds. While it was great luck to obtain this building and land relatively cheaply, a listed, starred, gothic pile needs to have money poured into it at regular intervals. In my opinion, Braziers needs an immediate boost of two million pounds and to make a steady income after that. If the aim of any organization is to usher in a saner, wiser future, working in a co-operative partnership with Nature instead of the present destructive system, it must make money and plough it back into new techniques which will save money on utility bills. This is the education needed in the new millennium; to fight this system of waste.

I believe that the School should adopt a new Constitution, one which recognizes that the world in which we now live is utterly different from the world into which Braziers was born. Decision-making should be transferred mostly to individuals who are resident on site, who should elect a Management Committee. I would guess, but I might be wrong, that this would turn out to be Cliff, Tim, Hilda (not resident, but has a wealth of knowledge about the School since its founding), Catherine, Simon, Cathi, Cath, and Nonny. The person who they felt would be best in the chair at meetings, and the other officers, would be elected by the committee, which would be both executive and sensory and meet as one. (It has been found that 15 is the maximum number for an efficient committee.) It would also be a good idea to adopt rules of procedure as in the Standing Orders of all contemporary democratic institutions.

Members should be given special privileges and expected to pay high fees, with exceptions for those with long and devoted service who would become Life Members and pay no fees at all. The Members would elect a representative to serve on the committee.

It is with some trepidation that I issue this document, but I have had much experience of organizations in various countries, and if I do not, I fear that I shall outlive this wonderful institution of which I would so much like to become a part, and maybe I am also the only observer outside the organization and therefore in a position to write it.

Avril Fox 12-16th March 2006.