## The Stepney Children's Fund

Jane and Peter Hills

OUR SON, DAVID, was killed in a motor accident in 1991 at the age of 27. He was a policeman and lived in Witney. When his estate was being wound up we did not know what to do with it. During a discussion of possible actions to take, David's best friend called in to see us and told Jane how David had been proud that his mum had taken disadvantaged children from Tower Hamlets and given them a holiday when they needed it, or when their mothers needed it! That defined what happened next.

We contacted Bob le Vaillant who some years earlier had created the Stepney Children's Fund (Toynbee) which operates from Toynbee Hall in London's East End. Just like all those Oxford University people who had created Toynbee Hall in the 1870s, Bob had a vision of what could be done to help the most deprived children in what should be our green and pleasant land. What is more, he has the skill and tenacity to act on his vision and to succeed. Some of you may have read about him or seen the BBC2 film of him leading a children's holiday camp at Lord Northbourne's estate in Kent. You may remember, too, how the film showed that he and his wife, Val, were married there and shared their reception with their delighted young charges.

As a result, the David Hills Trust was created and it feeds money for special projects to the Stepney Children's Fund when they most need it, at an average rate of about £3,000 per year.

Amongst the things financed have been three canoes at Gilwell Park (one named the David Hills), a computer and a great deal of their publications, necessary to instruct helpers who work with Bob and Val or to raise money from a variety of sources.

David's Trust has been lucky to have been supported by many friends in the Wychwoods and elsewhere and we thank them. We give especial thanks to Mark Jessey who regularly runs in the London Marathon and is sponsored each time by so many kind people in memory of his own late sister Ceri and of David.

The Stepney Children's Fund is not just about money. It has two very positive aims:

- To help children who grow up where, per head of population, arguably the occurrence of physical and sexual abuse is the highest in the UK, the incidence of AIDS is the highest, under-age pregnancies are most frequent, single parent families are most numerous, unemployment is the highest, and opportunity simply is thin on the ground.
- To help youngsters from more privileged backgrounds to learn about this other world and encourage them to take an active part in countering the misery of modern poverty.

Victoria Schofield writes in this edition of her experiences when she worked very hard as a helper at one of Stepney's holiday venues, at Gilwell Park, once the home of Lord Baden-Powell.

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She did not mention that her evenings were taken up attending lectures and presentations, which Bob le Vaillant sees as crucial to the real understanding of what needs to be done.

We thank young people like Victoria who are willing to have a go. . . and if any young Wychwood people would like to spend a gap year working at Toynbee Hall, we could probably find a way of helping them.

## GILWELL PARK

By Victoria Schofield

THERE IS A SECTION in my Gold Duke of Edinburgh's award that requires me to take part in a five-day residential activity entitled "Service to the Community". With the kind help of Jane and Peter Hills, and through the David Hills Trust, I did this at Gilwell Park.

Bob le Vaillant of the Stepney Children's Fund (linked to the Toynbee Hall charity in east London) runs an adventure workshop there for deprived children from Tower Hamlets over a period of two weeks.

I spent one week camping in the grounds of Gilwell Park, 20 minutes from the centre of London, with a group of other young people from schools and universities. Our task was to give the children the best day out we possibly could. Every day from 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. we were wrapped up in a magical world of fantasy and laughter.

Our instructions every morning, before the buses brought a new school of children, were never to stop smiling and to make sure that the children didn't either. Before I started I imagined the children would be quiet and a little solemn and I therefore thought my job to make them smile would be very difficult. The truth was that the children, who had waited for their one day at Gilwell Park with so much enthusiasm and excitement, were the ones making us laugh!

If you want to be a part of these two amazing weeks, whether for one day or the whole fortnight, you have to be prepared to get very wet and extremely exhausted! You take part in activities such as swimming (freezing!), archery, singing, the "Gilwell Trail", bouncy castle and canoeing, and the only catch is that you have to run everywhere, shouting at the top of your voice, and laugh continually.

This may seem easy enough, but believe me, at 3.30 p.m. I was fit to do nothing but lie down and sleep!

People have asked me if just one day at Gilwell Park benefits the children. Well, to watch them running around, smiles glued to their faces and problems left on the coach, and to hear Bob's stories of how so many of these children benefit I would have to ask, how could these Gilwell days fail to work?

Many go on to join the Scouts and Guides as a result of the fun and challenges at Gilwell. This helps them to stay out of trouble and to develop in a positive way.

I had a rewarding, if tiring, time and enjoyed every minute.

Whoever said laughter was infectious must have visited Gilwell Park for a Stepney Children's Fund event!!