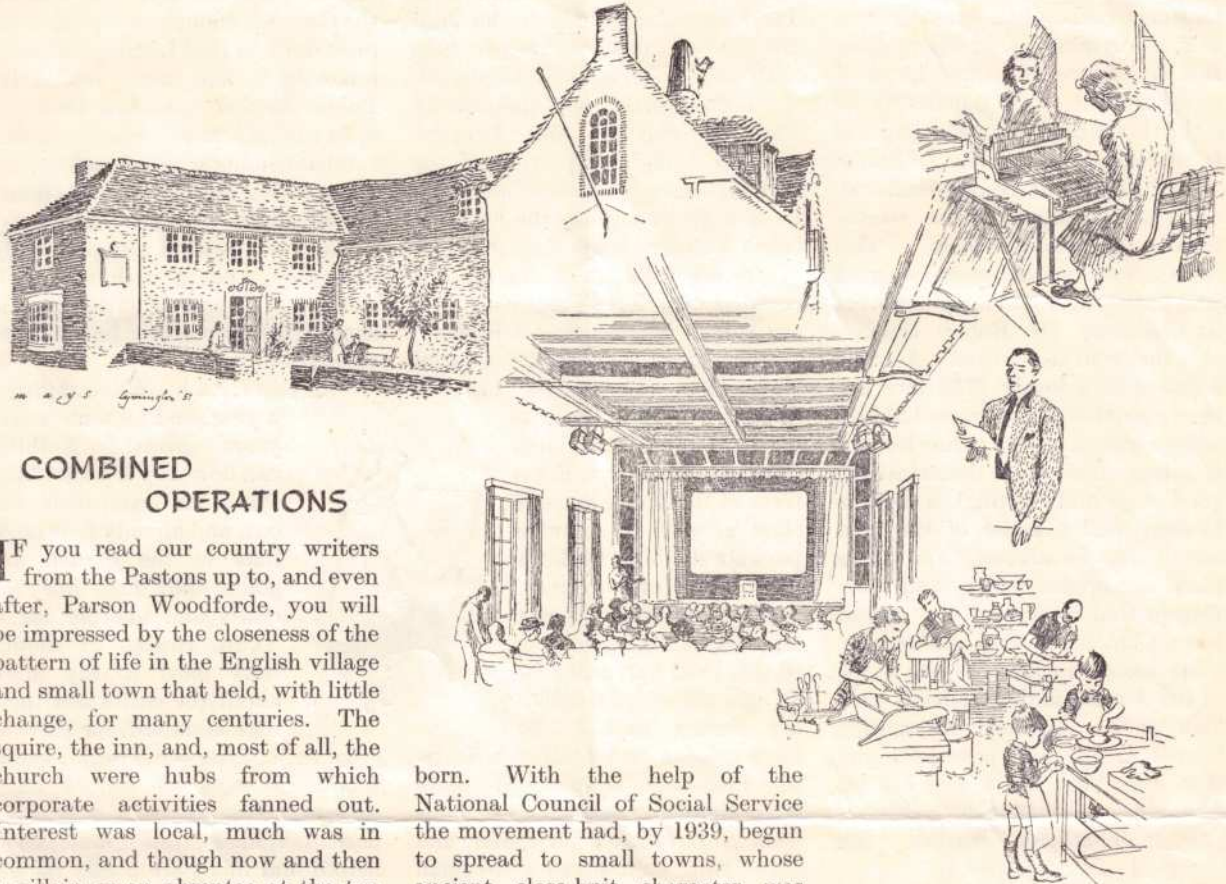


LYMINGTON COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

PUNCH, July 11 1951



COMBINED OPERATIONS

IF you read our country writers from the Pastons up to, and even after, Parson Woodforde, you will be impressed by the closeness of the pattern of life in the English village and small town that held, with little change, for many centuries. The squire, the inn, and, most of all, the church were hubs from which corporate activities fanned out. Interest was local, much was in common, and though now and then a villain or an absentee at the top wrecked the pattern, it worked, on the whole, pretty well.

It worked until the Industrial Revolution drew men to cities, which became large and hideous and in time scarred by slums. Not until after the First War was the conscience of Parliament awakened to urban conditions, when a great building drive resulted in housing estates outside the cities into which a part of the slums were decanted. That was excellent, but unfortunately too little thought was given to the minds of these refugees from squalor, who found bathrooms a poor exchange for the warm humanity of the East End. Churches, pubs, nursery schools and the rest had often been forgotten by the planners, and so, for purely practical reasons, the people themselves got together, unconsciously pioneering an important social experiment. In such a way were the first Community Associations



born. With the help of the National Council of Social Service the movement had, by 1939, begun to spread to small towns, whose ancient close-knit character was already much watered down by easier communications. Many men and women came back from the Second War and from Civil Defence determined that their comradeship should not be lost, and in the Community Centre idea found some guarantee that life would not congeal again into set grooves; also teachers who had been working with the Forces saw in these Centres a useful medium for continuing informal adult education. Impetus was given by the 1944 Education Act, which made grants available, and since the end of the war over four hundred Associations have either built or adapted premises. The bulk of these Centres are still makeshift, and only half are big enough to justify a full-time Warden, but the idea is growing steadily because it fits logically into the new shape of English life

The Community Association is the parent body of the Community Centre, though not all Associations have Centres (there are over twelve hundred of the former, grouped

to-day under a National Federation, to nearly five hundred of the latter). The Association is non-party, non-sectarian, classless, and represents all the interests of a town or estate; its aims are to bring people together, to act as a pressure-group for the improvement of local services, and to manage its Centre (if it has one). The Association is thus about the oldest thing in the world—folk with different interests, in discussion for the common good; only the form is fresh. To start one in a new housing estate, where everyone is eager for it, is comparatively simple, but a small town is heavier soil. Its institutions cut horizontally as well as vertically. The untried is met with suspicion, and in the innocent word "community" spaniel-nosed citizens detect a dangerous whiff of Moscow. Unless an exceptional leader is prepared to devote himself to a hard job starting steeply uphill, the Association may quickly decline into a social club that is socially unrepresentative.

The Association we visited, a

post-war development, is in a country town whose beautiful Georgian architecture suggests contentment rather than dynamic civic action—Lymington, in Hampshire. But the figure of twelve hundred members out of a population of eight thousand five hundred speaks for itself, and so does an affiliation list of fifty local bodies—cultural, religious, voluntary service, recreational and many others. This Association, which owes a great deal to the drive and imagination of its Chairman, Mr. Robert Hole, is also lucky in its Centre. A malt-house with a lovely 1750 face has been very skilfully converted to give a large common room, a fine hall for meetings, films and theatricals (a good stage and lighting), a modern kitchen, and a series of timbered attic rooms for classes. The whole place is bright, clean and gay. Except that at present you cannot learn Chinese or Free Ballooning, there seems no limit to the scope of the Association's activities. One look at the teeming information boards in the hall persuades you that something like a gale has hit Lymington: a social gale, a cultural gale, and a gale charged with practical common-sense.

To take the social side first, there is a Youth Club for those between fifteen and twenty-five, with a full programme of games, expeditions, theatricals, and admirable foreign exchanges; and there is an Older Members' Fellowship for the over-sixties, who meet for socials and travel-films and cards, and who cease, so some of them assured me, to be lonely. Inexpensive dances and parties take place frequently, but the most important thing is that

the Centre is open each week-day from ten to ten, and any member can drop in for a snack and a talk. The cheerful volunteers who staff the kitchen (ninety volunteers help with the Centre) are kept hard at it.

Then—horrid but inescapable word—the cultural. Since Lymington has a high proportion of the retired, classes start after lunch and most days go on into the evening. Some lecturers come from outside, others are local. For one week I counted over forty subjects. Here are a few: English Social History, Conversational French, Coastal Navigation (Lymington has an armada of sailing boats at its back door), Etching, Cookery, Weaving. For a term of three months, one class a week, a member pays six shillings! Children have their own courses, such as Painting, Speech and Drama, Dancing. And to this local university for all ages are added a debating Forum that boldly faces religion and politics, a Scientific Film Club, a weekly Women's Hour that provides talks and films while children are looked after, and stimulating exhibitions ("Georgian Lymington" is on at present)—and that is only a very short selection.

Finally, the sphere of common-sense. A Citizens' Advice Bureau (run at the Centre), a Sitters-in Scheme, and an Old People's Welfare Committee are typical of many services sponsored by the Association—services that have sprung up to meet agreed needs. As fresh needs appear other services will follow, for the Association represents a complete cross-section of

Lymington society, and in its carefully democratic organization everyone can have his say. One visit to the Centre is enough to convince the most dubious that Lymington really mixes in it, and mixes profitably. Public opinion is formed there, in open conference, in committee, over companionable cups of coffee; and if something needs doing, it is done. It is done quickly, moreover, because the experts are personally concerned, and in such an atmosphere of goodwill decision is simpler than it can ever be in formal committee.

All this for a basic five shillings a year, and all a mere six-years' growth! Nothing can now stop it expanding. Plans for extensions are out, and already four large huts in the garden are going into use, one for crafts and another for a Youth Hostel. I should have liked to say more about the crafts and their high standard, for there is great enthusiasm—and in this mass-production age we cannot have enough. Finance rears a head of normal ugliness, but grants have helped and funds are boldly raised. A full-time Warden—the busy diplomat and organizer essential to a Centre of this size—is maintained.

The Lymington Community Centre is a friendly pocket of concentrated civilization, where good citizenship is being translated daily from an empty phrase into action. It offers a flexible unit to bridge our latest social revolution, and the network of its sister Centres promises a new local stability in a changing Britain.

ERIC KEOWN

