



A Right Royal Occasion: The Opening of Parsons Green, 1966

Dr Chris Spackman

Abbey House in Westminster had been the home of The Boys' Brigade since the union with The Boys' Life Brigade in 1927. Prior to this, the offices at Paternoster Row had been the headquarters of the BB but were soon too small for the newly amalgamated organisation.¹ Situated on the first floor of a former hotel on Victoria Street, and overlooking Westminster Abbey, Abbey House had been the headquarters of The Boys' Brigade during its Jubilee in 1933, throughout the Second World War, and at the time of great celebrations for the anniversary of the birth of the Founder in 1954. However, by the late 1950s it was evident that Abbey House could no longer meet the needs of a growing organisation. The Boys' Brigade had been tenants in Abbey House and the lease was set to expire in 1966 when the site would be due for major renovations.² This convinced the Brigade Executive that a permanent headquarters in London was needed and, in order to achieve this major financial commitment, Major General D.J. Wilson-Haffenden (Brigade Secretary) launched an Appeal Fund. The first meeting of the Appeal Committee was held in December 1959 with the aim to raise £100,000 from 1 March to 4 October, 1961.³ After years of long and diligent searches up and down London, where sites ranging from derelict churches, warehouses, and office blocks were considered, Parsons Green was discovered and became the happy and final choice.⁴ This final choice was officially opened by a member of the Royal Family in 1966, although the Royal who arrived on the day was not one many would have expected to see.

Parsons Green, located in a relatively quiet and secluded part of Fulham, was chosen as headquarters for both The Boys' Brigade and The Girls' Brigade. This was a momentous occasion for the kindred organisations with increased scope for closer connections in the sphere of youth work. The opening of such premises was worthy of a Royal visit and the opening of the new Headquarters could have wished for no greater an honour when Her Majesty The Queen agreed to officially declare the premises 'open'. For several months Brigade House was made fit for the visit of The Queen scheduled for 9 December, 1966. However, late on Thursday afternoon, 8 December, confirmation came through from Sir Edward Ford, Private Secretary to The Queen, that Her Majesty would be unable to fulfil any public engagements following advice to remain indoors to recover from catarrhal laryngitis.⁵ The announcement brought a sense of disappointment after unceasing efforts in the days and weeks leading up to the event. However, this disappointment was tempered with the announcement that Her Royal Highness Princess Alexandra would attend the opening ceremony instead.⁶

On a dry day, with occasional glimpses of sunshine, the Royal opening of Parsons Green went ahead performed by The Queen's proxy. Princess Alexandra was described in *The Stedfast Mag* as arriving with a "ready smile" and with "twinkling eyes" in an appearance that "transformed the event from one of extreme dignity, to one of great happiness, even of jollity".⁷ Spectators assembled outside Parsons Green in a reserved area, with a Guard of Honour composed of 36 representatives from The Boys' Brigade and Girls' Brigade assembled to welcome the Royal guest. Musical accompaniment was provided by augmented bands of the London District which included members of the 2nd Enfield, 133rd London, 5th Hendon, and 2nd Waltham Forest.⁸ From the moment Princess Alexandra stepped on to the pavement from her car, it was apparent that Her Royal Highness was deeply absorbed in, not only the ceremonial side of the occasion, but in taking a friendly interest in those who she met.⁹ The tour itself took in all floors of the building, starting on the 3rd floor – home of the London District – and ending on the ground floor where the training area had been transformed for the occasion.¹⁰

Planning for what had intended to be a visit by Her Majesty The Queen had been comprehensive, with the official programme timed at precisely 59 minutes.¹¹ However, Princess Alexandra took much longer to complete the tour, which lasted in the region of 90 minutes.¹² In taking so long to complete her tour of Parsons Green, the Princess demonstrated a genuine interest in what she saw, and in the conversations she had with members of staff throughout the site. Both the BB and GB were grateful to Her Royal Highness for all she did in making the day one to remember and made the visit worthy of the efforts to ensure the day would be a success.

The following Monday morning, Brigade Headquarters received a call from The Queen's Private Secretary with an enquiry on the success of the event and to inform that The Queen had largely recovered and was feeling much better.¹³ The Queen had promised to pay a visit to Parsons Green in person and fulfilled this commitment alongside His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh on 22 February, 1973 to mark the 90th Anniversary of The Boys' Brigade.¹⁴ From Brigade House Headquarters staff oversaw administration, finances, supplies, and training for the whole movement throughout the United Kingdom.¹⁵ The Boys' Brigade would remain at their headquarters in Fulham until the late 1980s before moving to Kings Terrace, 1 Galena Road, Hammersmith, where the opening of this premises would be undertaken by another member of the Royal Family, this time by the Queen's youngest son, Prince Edward.

References

¹ The Boys' Brigade Archive Press, Brigade Headquarters, London. (London: The Boys' Brigade, 1985), p.2.

² John Springhall, Brian Fraser, and Michael Hoare, Sure and Stedfast. A History of the Boys' Brigade, 1883 - 1983, (London: Collins, 1983), p.230.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p.213; Donald M. McFarlan, First For Boys. The Story of The Boys' Brigade 1883 – 1983, (London: Collins, 1982), pp. 90-91.

⁵ "A Right Royal Day", The Boys' Brigade Gazette, Vol. 75, No. 3, Feb/Mar 1967, pp. 47 – 53; p.47; "The Queen has Laryngitis", The Times, Friday, 9 December, 1966, p.1.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Opening of Brigade House", Stedfast Mag, No. 159, January 1967, pp. 1 – 4; p.1.

⁸ Ibid, p.3.

⁹ Ibid; "A Right Royal", p.50.

¹⁰ "A Right Royal", p.50.

¹¹ "Opening of Brigade", p.3.

¹² "A Right Royal", p.50.

¹³ Ibid, p.53.

¹⁴ "The Royal Visit to Brigade House", Stedfast Mag, no. 234, April 1973, pp. 4 -5; p.4.

¹⁵ Donald M. McFarlan, First For Boys, p.91.