

# Celebration

One of the many ways we keep our special memories alive is dressing up! It's how we celebrate and remember our stories, our lives and our communities. It's a serious business, and lots of fun too.



'Burrokeet', little donkey costume, Jamboulay

Jamboulay Carnival Arts have had space at the Old Fire Station for nearly 10 years and they have been in operation since 1995. They take part in Hackney and Notting Hill Carnivals with around 50 people involved most years. 'Jamboulay' means merriment and it's a play on words with 'Canboulay', from the Trinidad and Tobago Harvest Festival tradition, the roots of calypso music. The festival, for former indentured labourers and freed slaves, came to be a celebration of the end of slavery. Sharing this knowledge with younger generations that might not be aware of carnival history is a big part of Jamboulay's work. 'Dingolay', meaning remembering, was their theme for carnival 2024. Some of the young people Jamboulay have worked with went on to set up their own carnival groups.



'Fancy sailor', Jamboulay

Their carnival 'little donkey' costume, 'burrokeet', was matched at our Open Day in May 2024 with a pantomime horse – a reminder that the OFS used to stable horses. 'Fancy sailors' are another carnival archetype. Dressing up is part of our history, like these firemen from 1920 in drag on this 'glorious night' – some say this was marking the First World War armistice. Like traditional carnival characters, dressing up is part of yesteryear's music hall. Sailors play a part in this story too, as many firefighters came from the navy service.



'Reminiscence of a Glorious Night at the Stoke Newington Fire Station', 1920  
Image courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library

# ‘Our Community Centre’ Opening

The Old Fire Station opened its doors as a Community Centre and Nursery in 1982. The Fire Station opened in 1886, was decommissioned in the early 1970s but did not close its doors until 1977, when the Kingsland Road Fire Station opened. The building then sat unused until the London Borough of Hackney purchased and renovated it. After five years of campaigning and hard work, the newly formed Stoke Newington Community Association managed to reopen it. The OFS has been community-run ever since – and managed by the Old Fire Station Charitable Incorporated Organisation since 2013.



## New Community Centre for STOKE NEWINGTON

Rectory Ward in Stoke Newington has been described in a GLC planning report as “one of the most deprived in Inner London” when it was discussing facilities for community use.

Therefore it was with relief that people learnt both Fleetwood School and the Fire Station on the corner of Brooke Road and Leswin Road were both due to be closed as either of these could be converted for community use.

The GLC which owns both buildings has been considering what use to put them to, but

Hackney Council showed no interest in taking either of them over for community centres. Indeed when the GLC took the initiative and approached Hackney, the Council turned down the possibility of using the building.

This action infuriated those local people who heard about it and after two preliminary meetings, a large public meeting was held attended by over sixty local residents. This meeting set up a steering committee to fight for the use of the Fire Station as a community centre.

As they are now faced with a large group demanding the use of the centre Hackney Council now seem likely to approve the conversion and it is hoped that the centre will be open some time in the autumn.

The centre has got a large yard at the rear and a big area on the ground floor with what were recreation rooms and bedrooms above which will be able to provide a large number of rooms for a variety of purposes.

*Hackney People's Press, 26 September 1977*  
Research by Amir Dotan



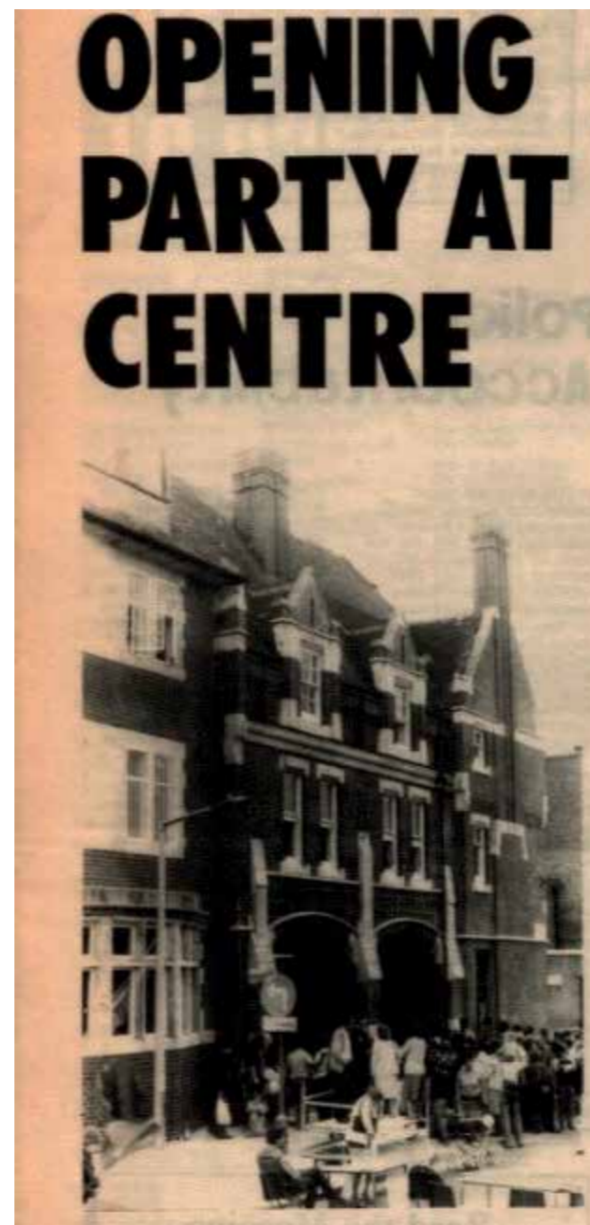
Protestors at Stop the Far Right rally, 2024

Early uses included a community nursery, an after-school club, a pensioners club, a welfare association for Black Youth, a Turkish women’s group and a steel band. Other activities and uses have included soft play, a girls’ youth club, self-defence classes, Hackney Caribbean Elderly Group, Residents Association meetings, drumming, Hackney Migrant Centre, Baby Bounce, Dance, Music and Movement, Hackney Claimants Union, Housebound Pensioners Group, Turkish Education group, martial arts, Latch Key Project, Woodcraft Folk, farmers’ market, yoga classes; the list goes on...

The OFS became ‘Our Community Centre’ and has been ever since: welcoming, changing, adapted by and for local people, with over 25,000 visits every year. The OFS is still a place of activism too; in 2002 fears about a possible building sale/redevelopment led to protest. Recently, people came together here for a ‘Stop the Far Right’ rally in Leswin Road organised by Stand up to Racism on 7 August 2024. The rumour was that a far-right demonstration had been planned, targeting Hackney Migrant Centre and the mosque on Leswin Road.

# Sounds, dancing & dominoes

Local singer-songwriter Jean Adebambo headlined the Old Fire Station's Grand Opening party in 1982. She was a big name in the Black British music scene back then and had a hit in the charts at the time. The party set the tone for future events here: lively and local, arts and community, music and dancing. Among the many, past and present were these classes, groups and tenants: African drumming, music and movement, capoeira, Music Studio, Jamboulay Carnival Arts, Boiler House Singers, Church of Mount Carmel, Prophetic Church, Arts Club, Swingtrain dance-cardio workout. After Adebambo's death in 2009, a memorial ceremony was held for her at Hackney Empire in Mare Street.



Opening Party, Hackney People's Press, August 1982  
Research by Amir Dotan



Welcome to the Fire Station, published by SNCA, 1988



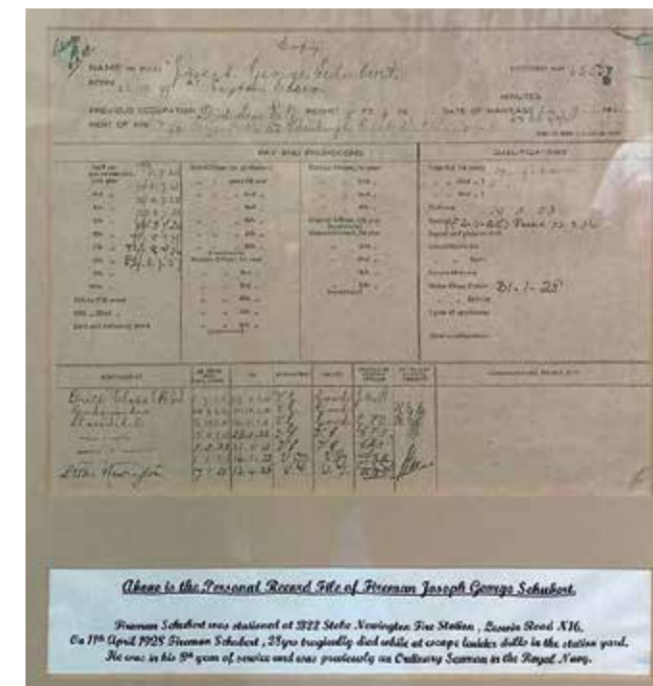
Paradise, 12" single by Jean Adebambo, Santic Records, 1981

Music ran through many of our activities. Every Friday in the early 1980s, Terence Boyd played music at 'social politics' parties as well as working as a driver for visiting Jamaican artists such as Earl Minor and Michael Prophet. There were regular dominoes sessions and parties too. George Stephenson ran the Paramount Domino Club from the OFS, and his son Dennis ran World International Records on Stoke Newington High Street from 1981–86. Further down Kingsland Road in Dalston was the fabulous Four Aces club founded in 1966 by Newton Dunbar. Four Aces was one of the first UK venues to play Black music and Desmond Dekker, Jimmy Cliff and Prince Buster were some of the many big names who played there.

# Upstairs, downstairs

The first fire stations were live-in and organised in a similar way to Navy ships: upper floors housed officers, their families and servants; middle floors were mess rooms and married quarters; and shared bunk rooms on lower floors. Each level had sculleries and kitchens and a laundry was in the basement. Until technological advances changed everything, the horses that pulled the fire carts were stabled on the ground floor. The 1901 census records 24 men, women and children living in the building; 11 of the men worked for the Metropolitan Fire Brigade.

**T**he Fire Station is an imposing 1865 gothic brick four-storey landmark, its design shouts: ‘You’re safe, we’ve got you’. It once had an octagonal, eight-storey lookout tower – but some say that was less about looking for fires than making a big noise in the neighbourhood as fire stations were still a new thing then. The tower would have been used for exercise drills and, it’s said, was a reminder of crows’ nests on ships. Early firefighters were often recruited from ex-Navy men because they would have been good at working at height, with ropes and in dangerous, disorienting situations. Joseph Schubert was one. Following time as an Ordinary Seaman in the navy he died in 1928 in a drill accident at the OFS, after eight years in the fire service.



Record file for Fireman Joseph George Schubert

Look-out or landmark, in 1905 the tower collapsed. In the 1939–45 war, it was reduced to five storeys. The tower was capped in the 1980s, its windows boarded up. The different versions are a major interest for many local people, keen to know more about this ‘lost element of architectural interest’ – and its possible replacement.



Possibilities for heritage recreation of tower, Pringle Richard Sharratt; Rodrigues Architects; Greenwood Projects, 2023



Postcard (no date) research by Amir Dotan

# Wartime and communities

Before, during and after the Second World War (1939–45), the OFS felt its effects, as a service and as a building. The Auxiliary Fire Service was established following the Air Raid Precaution Act 1937. Extra space was needed for living in and for training purposes for the 400–700 auxiliaries attached to the OFS. The London County Council rented 4A Brooke Road, N16 (next door to us) as accommodation for the auxiliaries and 49–51 Leswin Road, N16 as accommodation and for training purposes, for the duration of the war.



Commemorative plaque, Air Warden Barnett Lewis

**A**cross the road from us, on the wall on Cottage Walk, a plaque marks the time on 23 September 1940 when the air raid shelter on Brooke Road was hit and people were evacuated here for safety. The plaque, erected on 10 September 2023, gives thanks to Air Warden Barnett Lewis, a Jewish war hero, who was awarded a George Medal for his bravery in saving the lives of many civilians.

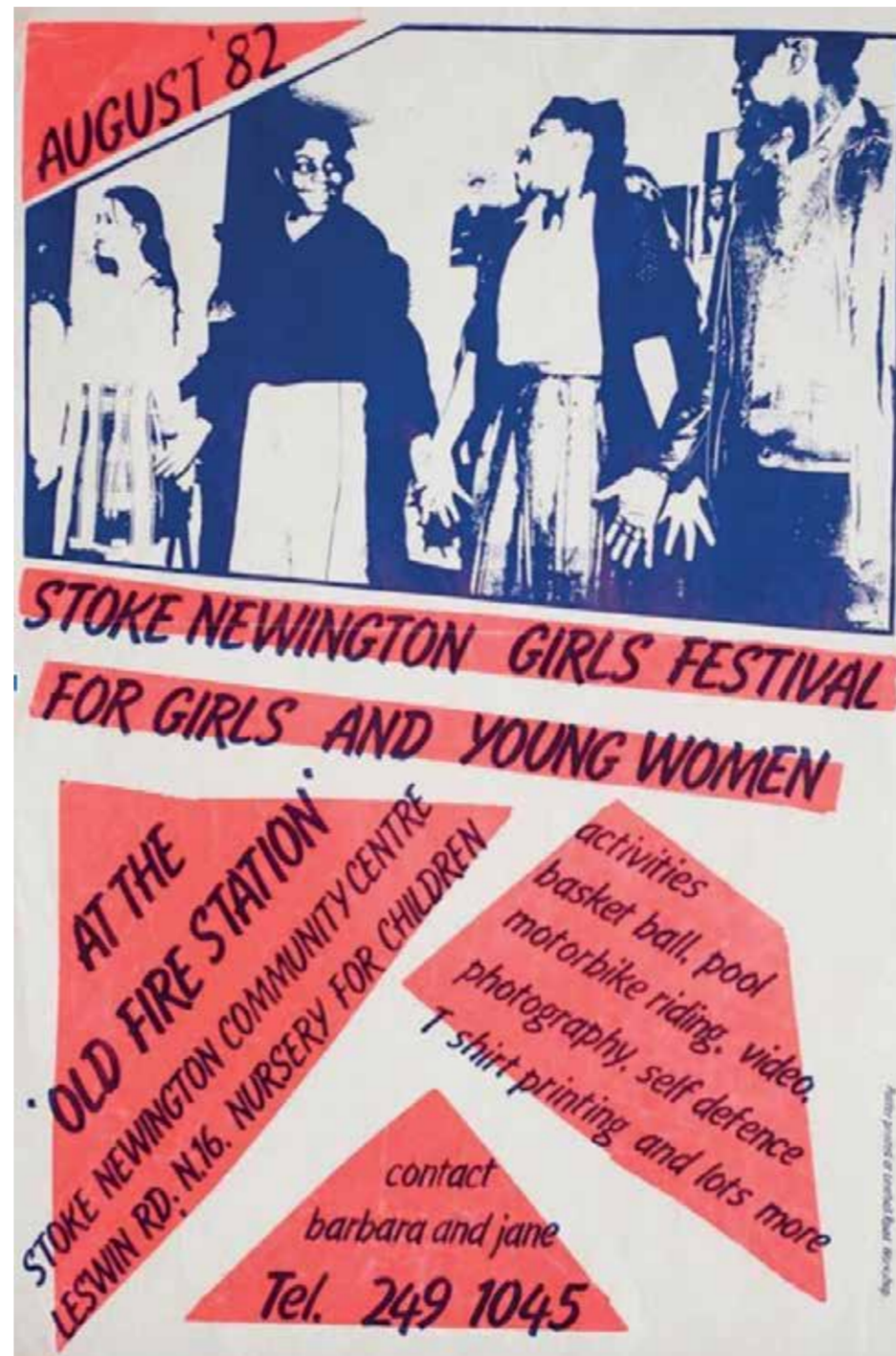
Many ex-soldiers and sailors went on to join the Fire Service after the war, as it was another national force in which they could serve their community. They brought some of their forces' patter with them, so in their lingo, Barnett Lewis had been 'up for a gong' or a medal for his heroism and the fire station's eating area was always known as the 'mess room'.



Edward Gahan, local AFS volunteer

# Taking action

The OFS has led and hosted many campaigning groups for and about women and girls, on activism, leisure, sexuality, childcare, work and roles in the community. The Stoke Newington Girls Festival in 1982, run by women for young women offered lots of sports and arts activities. The festival poster was designed and silk-screen printed at Lenthall Road Workshop, a feminist photographic print workshop based near Hackney's London Fields. Its members included painter Claudette Johnson and artist Ingrid Pollard, both recent Turner Prize nominees.



The Guardian, 12 June 2002



Sister Seven posters, with poetry by Mary Michaels, in Women in Revolt! exhibition, Tate Britain 2024

**A** Girls Youth Club ran in the summer holidays in the 1980s, run by women, focused on female empowerment. Self-defence sessions were on offer for girls to learn skills to protect themselves against male violence, described as 'amazing and empowering' by Heidi, one participant. Boys protesting that they wanted to join were made to leave. Classes in screen-printing and photography, motorbiking and basketball were also held in the all-female space.

Diane Abbott, whose office used to rent space here, has been MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington since 1987. She was the first black woman elected to parliament and is the longest-serving black MP. CND activist and local poet Mary Michaels, whose work featured in the 2024 Tate Britain show *Women in Revolt!* (along with Claudette Johnson), led Women's Empowerment classes here in the 1990s.

More recently, in 2002 pioneering female environmental campaigners and their children from social enterprise Growing Communities who moved into the OFS in 1999 spearheaded a campaign against its possible sale or redevelopment. Diane Abbott supported an alternative plan to renovate the building for community use.

# Children and childcare

Children and childcare have always been central at the OFS. From early days after the fire station ceased operation, there was massive local support for a nursery and a group set up with the plan to use the first floor of the building to start a new community nursery.

At their first meeting on 1 February 1978 to establish a Nursery Steering Committee, 25 people came and '14 local mothers' launched the committee – 60 children were already on their waiting list.



Latch Key OFS Nursery, part of Save Hackney Campaign 1983/4  
Image courtesy of Rio Tape/Slide Archive, research by Rosa Schling and Alan Denney

The Hackney Under Fives Coordinators reported in May 1978 that they had been supporting many groups, including the Fire Station, who had received funding to convert the building into a community centre. Stoke Newington Community Association became the organisation that managed the building and campaigned for the council to purchase it on their behalf. One of those groups was the Latch Key Project. Unique in Hackney at the time as the only wrap-around childcare provider in the borough, they used to collect and drop off children using their minibus, as well as organising outings and daytrips.



Latch Key minibus trip

The Old Fire Station Nursery ran from 1982 to 2013 and there was a nursery here right up until 2024 when the London Early Years Foundation, a social enterprise group of nurseries moved out. New people and groups are now using the first-floor space that once housed the nursery, bringing a whole new life to the building. Affordability is still prioritised as key to organisations setting up or meeting at the OFS.

# Keeping the home fires burning

Until the 1920s when the 'watch' system was introduced and firemen came in for their shift or 'watch' and bunked down for the night if need be, the Fire Station was a 'residential station' and in its time has been a home to many, in many different ways.



Many ex-Royal and Merchant Navy staff were recruited into the fire service. They had experienced working in dangerous locations and conditions, and they were used to living in quite ordinary accommodation. Living in shared dormitory spaces like at the OFS was more of the same for them. Residents had outside spaces to use as gardens, play areas for children, drying lines for washing and stabling and fodder stores for the horses.

The site continued to provide affordable housing in other ways, and we had live-in caretakers until very recently. The story goes that OFS may have been used as squats in the 1980s, a very common housing type in the road and the wider area then, such as Brighton Road and Rectory Road. In the 1980s and '90s we hosted the weekly Stoke Newington Housing Action meetings about squatting and housing rights. Affordable local accommodation is still scarce and many local residents who have worked here are part of the boating community.

The 1891 census tells us that residents worked as a stockbroker, teacher, bookbinder, scholar, while one 'lives on own means'. In firefighter-speak, these jobs might have been 'fiddles', the second jobs that most firemen had and probably had to have to make a decent income. Some had lodgers and servants. Most were from London or the home counties, and one from Totnes, while the 1901 census notes a paper-moulder and a purse- and pocketbook-maker among residents from Trinidad, Stoke Newington, Whitstable, Isle of Wight and Cornwall. A niece and a boarder are also mentioned.

Household No.	Name	Age	Sex	Occupation
1	John Smith	35	M	Fireman
1	Mary Smith	32	F	Wife
1	William Smith	10	M	Son
1	Elizabeth Smith	8	F	Daughter

Household No.	Name	Age	Sex	Occupation
1	John Smith	45	M	Fireman
1	Mary Smith	42	F	Wife
1	William Smith	20	M	Bookbinder
1	Elizabeth Smith	18	F	Teacher

Census records 1891 (top) and 1901 (bottom).