

Winter 2014

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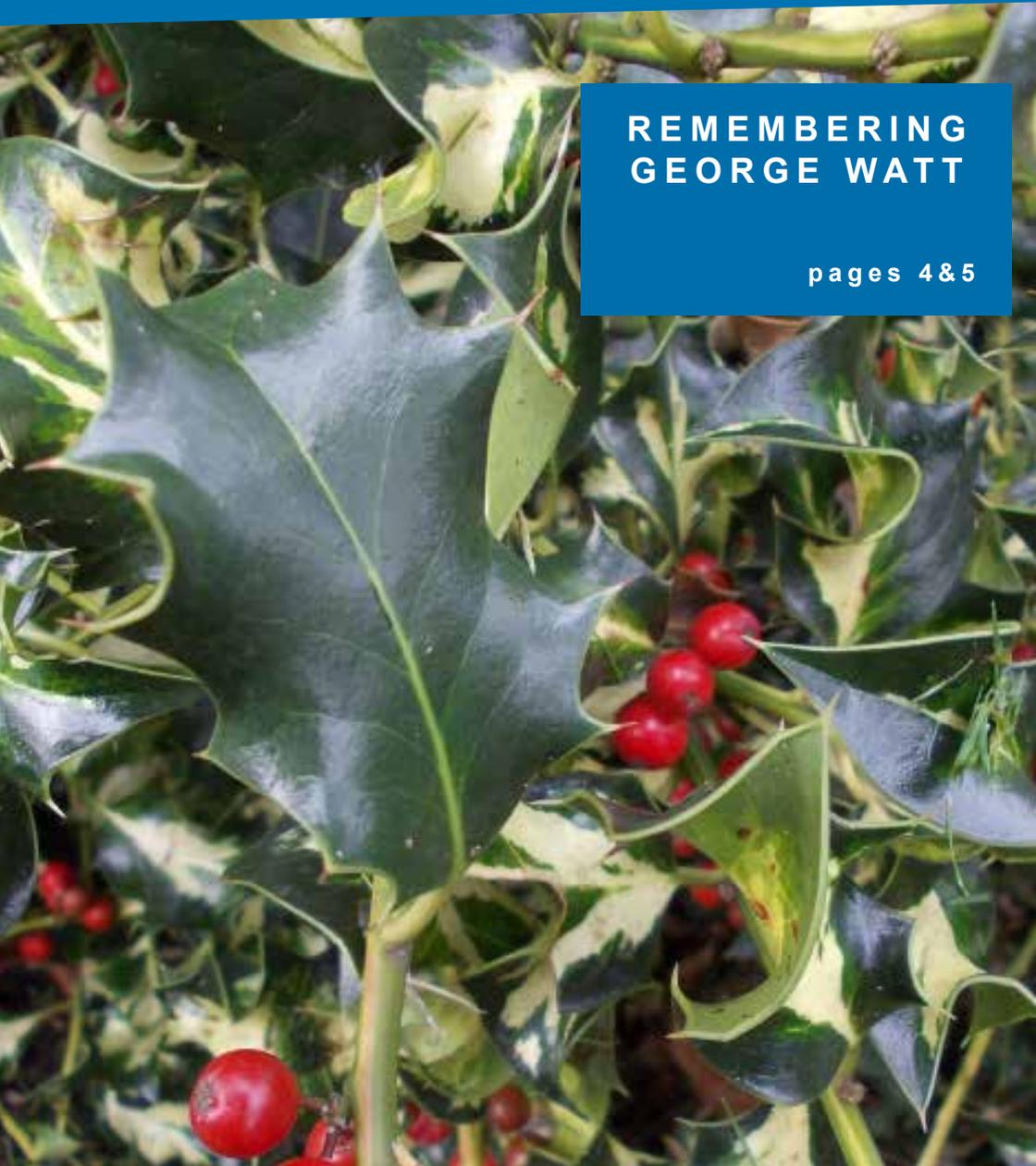
THE
Simon
STAR



www.simoncommunity.org.uk

REMEMBERING
GEORGE WATT

pages 4 & 5





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THANK YOU

Pret a Manger
Euphorium Bakery
Gail's Bakery
St Giles In The Fields
Robert McAlpine
Angela
Outside Indian from Queen's
Crescent Market
Dylan's Bakery
Michelle and Roisin from FCJ
The London Tea Company

All our individual donors and supporters



Thank you for reading this winter edition of Simon Star and for supporting the Community. We use this newsletter to let you know what is going on here and invite you to share your stories.

A huge thank you to Dermot from Kingdom Catering for donating the food for our homeless guest's Christmas Dinner.

Every year Dermot donates all the food needed to give over 100 of our friends a slap up Christmas dinner and a lovely afternoon.

Thank you for your generosity and commitment Dermot.

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WELCOME TO THE SIMON STAR

Welcome to the winter edition of the Simon Star. We hope that this newsletter finds you well.

Autumn seems to have passed in a bit of a flurry here in the Community, as always we have been busy collecting our Harvest Festival Donations (more on page 8) and preparing for the winter.

Every year winter seems to come round quicker, and while it can be comforting getting out our big jumpers and switching on the heating, the situations our guests find themselves in is far from cosy.

When we are out on services or just coming and going, it is hard not to think of the people that won't be going home tonight because they don't have one.

We consider ourselves lucky in the Community. Lucky that we have somewhere warm and safe to stay, and lucky that we are in a position to help those who don't.

All our work is only possible through the support and generosity of our donors, supporters, volunteers and friends. Thank you for taking the time to read this newsletter.



Autumn Trip to Kew Gardens

REMEMBERING GEORGE WATT

George Watt, a founding member of the Simon Community, died on September 19th 2014 aged eighty, an age he was amazed, amused and grateful to have reached.

He was born in Galashiels on October 6th 1933. He loved the area, landscape, poetry of Robert Burns and Scottish food. MT remembers George knocking on the door of a project in Edinburgh in 1967 saying 'Anton sent me from London'.

George spent many years in and out of the Community. He would take charge of the kitchen, work hard and get angry trying to work in a house overflowing with people, many of whom would want to make tea! He would flare up, storm off then return (maybe weeks later).

Outside 'Simon' George did casual kitchen work. He could give a 'behind the scenes' account of many top London hotels, though mostly not to their credit! He seemed to have worked everywhere, but as he said it was "only a day or a week, then I drank the wages".

George's kind nature was often well hidden under an argumentative

manner, that could certainly be the case at Simon's AGMs, but as George said, he only wanted 'what was best for the homeless'. He staunchly defended what he considered key Simon principles.

George became involved with Alcoholics Anonymous, stopped drinking and had many years of sobriety (for the rest of his life). George took part in AA Meetings, Conventions and Service including the helpline.

He once took a call from a 'posh lady' and told her that she needed to stop blaming others and take responsibility, she was unhappy and complained about George. However, a fortnight later she rang back to thank George. She said it was the first time anyone had 'told her straight' and it had been very helpful!

Religion was very important to George, he attended church and had a great identification with the hymn Amazing Grace. He was also involved for many years with the local Labour Party. George had his own flat and worked as a courier in London for a travel firm (his first regular work apart from stealing legal books to order!).



George at home during the filming in 2013

He was quietly proud of how much his life had changed. Even in the last few years, with dramatically declining health, George said how lucky he was that he had had a good life and that he wanted his funeral to be a celebration – which it was.

After moving to sheltered accommodation, then on to a nursing home, George stayed astonishingly good humoured, concerned for others and hospitable.

In 2013 George was interviewed for the Community's 50th Anniversary film. This is available to watch free at <http://vimeo.com/74518449>

People from the Simon Community supported George with visits. During his last year he had invaluable kindness and commitment from Libby, William and Anna (full time volunteers).

To George, a farewell he would sometimes use... 'cheers mate'.

Steve Jones

Thank you Steve Jones for your kind words and for supporting George with such care and commitment.

MICHAEL SWAM TO FRANCE!

This September Michael Cullen swam the English Channel to raise money for several charities. The Simon Community was lucky to benefit from his efforts.

Regular readers may remember reading Michael's article last year about his plans to swim to France and the gruelling early morning swims in the Serpentine in preparation.

On 6th September Michael set out from Samphire Bay in Folkstone and landed on French shores 15 hours and 54 minutes later.

Michael swam steadily along side the pilot boat while his coach and family urged him on. An official observer from the Channel Swimming Association was there to make sure that he did not receive any assistance or touch the boat at any time.

Aside the mammoth task of swimming for 16 hours without stopping, other challenges to overcome were the cold and the intimidating tankers and ferries in the busiest shipping lane in the world. On top of this Michael received no less than 6 jelly fish stings for his troubles!

Michael was raising money for several charities and we were lucky at the Simon Community to be included in his efforts. The Simon Community received £1420 from this fundraiser. This money is going towards buying

good quality, durable mattresses and bedding for our Winter Shelter that open on 1st January for 3 months.

Just as Michael endured 16 hours of extreme cold to raise this money, so many people who have to sleep outside have to live with the cold as a permanent challenge. The beds will provide a safe, warm place for our guests to sleep.

Michael, huge congratulations on your truly remarkable achievement of becoming a Channel Swimmer! And thank you to all that donated as a result of this event.

If Michael's story has inspired you to some fundraising (you don't have to swim to France by the way!) then we would be only too happy to hear from you.



THE SOUP RUN MYTH

Community Manager Jamie Nalton explains why the soup is not the problem!

We have been providing food, drink and company to the most vulnerable people in central London for fifty years in a communal, caring and non-judgmental way supported by a small army of part-time volunteers.

Throughout the history of the organisation, generous benefactors have ensured that we are able to carry out our work without taking a single penny from the Government.

In recent years we have seen many headline grabbing stories that giving out soup and sandwiches to the homeless only results in maintaining a street lifestyle and discourages people from engaging with (commissioned) services that are set up to help people move away from homeless. To be blunt this is absolute nonsense.

Our guests are not foxes or pigeons, if charities like ours stop providing nourishment the homeless will not disappear into the countryside and live happily ever after.

Food is not the problem here, it's a lack of housing, money, work, issues around local connection, age, benefits cuts and fear of engaging with a service that wants to put them on

the first bus out of the city back to a life they tried to escape from. If you leaving a previous life it's not because it was wonderful, more than likely you are escaping persecution, violence, a breakdown or are looking to provide a better life for your family.

Over the years you will have heard about numerous ways our councils/government have tried to eradicate London's homeless, from hard line tactics, to the Mayor's initiative that says no one needs to spend a second night on the streets.

Millions are spent by the Government on trying to solving homelessness and its associated issues. But homelessness is still here and the numbers living on the streets have increased dramatically in the past couple of years. People are still waking up on a cold pavement.

The Simon Community will be there on those mornings, providing a cup of tea with a slice of humanity and we will be there on a night time before people bed down to give a cup of soup with a little compassion.

Jamie Nalton

VOLUNTEER LIFE

After finishing high school in June, I decided to take a gap year before starting University. Leaving Switzerland to work for the Simon Community was an opportunity, which I'm very happy I took.

I knew that it was going to be a hard and difficult job, but it's just after three months that I realise how challenging it is and how much I've learned and how much I'm still learning every day.

Before becoming a full-time volunteer (FTV) I could have defined myself as a very lazy person: I couldn't cook, I didn't help out my mom enough with cleaning and tidying the house. What I've learned so far is still surprising me: I've learned to cook, to clean and keep the house clean, to prepare tea and coffee for Tea Runs and Soup Runs, to clean all the dishes after every meal, to be very patient and to be more organised.

Despite being lazy, I have always been willing to always learn something new, and this helped me to acquire these skills. For people who aren't native English speakers it is definitely a great and quick way to improve it.

Leaving my little town in Switzerland to move to London has definitely been a huge change for me.

The Simon Community is changing me in a very positive way. It is showing me how life really is and preparing me to be an adult.

“I'm still learning every day”

The choices I'm making now are the most important ones. When I moved here I knew that I wanted to study languages, business and culture in Copenhagen. In most of the cases what leads to homelessness is migration.

So, after spending more than 3 months here, I found out that what I really want to do is to support people who have immigrated and need help to find accommodation and a job. In December I'm going to apply for Malmö University in Southern Sweden to study International Migration and Ethnic Relations.

I've always been a sensible person, but it's with jobs like these, where you realize what kind of person you really are. Facing people with hard and painful situations is still something I'm struggling with.

Sometimes we just have to deal with the fact that our help is limited and in some cases there is just nothing we can do to help.

I don't miss home as much as I expected to, because the Simon Community soon became a second family to me. All together we have fun, we sometimes argue, we help and support each other, we share tears and spend a lot of quality time together and this is what makes us a family.

Sofie Untersee

If you have been inspired by Sofie's story and would like to get involved we would love to hear from you.



Sofie at Kew Gardens

HARVEST FESTIVAL

Every year we are fortunate to be remembered by many Churches, schools and individuals at Harvest Festival time.

The donations we are given are gratefully received and carefully stored in order to support projects through the winter months.

Thank you to all the churches, congregations, schools and individuals that have made donations of food and gifts to the Simon Community. We look forward to sharing your contribution with our homeless friends.

Many, many thanks.



WHAT'S GOING ON...

Through our work with London's street homeless, we make contact with people in Central London through our various services. We have had thousands of interactions since the last issue of the Simon Star.

Our soup run goes out on Wednesday and Thursday and makes 3 stops in central London. The number of guests we see on the Soup Run varies quite wildly from one week to the next but it is still our most visible and well-attended service. David and Phillip are the chefs responsible for the ever popular soup that feeds roughly 300 people across the two evenings.

We go out in pairs or small groups to do 'Street Work', taking flasks out and chatting to people who are bedding down for the night. We still maintain a strong presence in the centre of London on most days of the week, especially along the Strand and Piccadilly, where we see a regular core of rough sleepers. We are always looking for more part-time volunteers who are able to commit to this service however so we can reach other areas of central London.

Our early morning tea run goes out four times a week. Making three stops in the centre of town we usually see at least 100 people each morning as

rough sleepers come to get their first hot caffeinated drink of the day. The number of people attending each month has been pretty consistent in the past 3 months.

There has been a bit of disruption with the weekend street cafe over the past few months, with the Church at St Giles unavailable for a number of Saturdays. However, the number of people we see has been steady throughout the last quarter as 30-50 people on each day take up our hot drinks, home-made cakes, and (more recently) hot food. Hot food is now to stay on the menu for the next few months.

Music Tuesday is growing in popularity, our music teacher, Robbie, leads lessons on the piano and we have a new guitar teacher, Anthony. The sing-along at the end of every session is becoming legendary as we work our way through the classics from Monkey Man to Nessun Dorma!

All these services are vital to the people that use them regularly, we are hugely grateful to our volunteers, donors and supporters for affording us the opportunity to carry on with this work, Thank you from all at the Community.

Chris Francis

LETTERS

Dunk Gray celebrates 9 years as a Community member and remembers the man that inspired him...

I was an Art student in Hull between 1996 to 1999. As I walked through town I would see Carl selling the Big Issue outside Princes Quay in Hull his regular pitch and would regularly stop to have a chat after buying the Issue. Carl would generally mock, me about being a scruffy art student!

I last saw Carl on Graduation in 1999. I finally got back to Hull some 6 years later, I met Shane in Carl's old pitch. He told me the sad news that Carl had passed away. It was comforting to hear that Carl had come off the streets before he died, and that he was still remembered.

In 2005 I had a bicycle accident lacerating my kidney and I had some time off and I reconsidering what I am was doing in my life and I started looking of ways to be actively involved in the homeless sector. It was at the point I applied to be a full time residential volunteer with The Simon Community in London. That was 9 years ago. I lived and worked at the Community for 16 months, it was where I met my wife.

After that I worked in Arlington House, carried on with Simon's visits programme, driving the runs campaigning for soup runs. To mark my Simon 'anniversary' I will be doing the

driving for the Street Cafe and planning for my 3rd year of involvement in Forest Night Shelter. And this all down to friendship of Carl inspiring me to be active in my local community.

Dunk Gray

HELLO & GOODBYE

Since the last edition of the Simon Star we have said goodbye to William, who returned to Sweden. We hope that everything goes well for you William and that you will visit us in London.

More recently we have said goodbye to Anna who has used her experience to get a job at the YMCA supporting vulnerable homeless people. Well done Anna, we wish you all the best with your new job!

Our welcomes this time go to Oscar and Bridget who have all joined us at the house. We are very pleased that you have come to help us and hope that you all enjoy your Community experience!

If you have some news to share, good or sad, or have someone you would like to remember please get in touch with us at 129 Malden Rd, London NW5 4HS

