

## **Camphill Catastrophe**

In a clash of cultures, a community set up in North Yorkshire to support adults with learning disabilities is seriously under threat. It is rapidly becoming the Camphill catastrophe.

Ironically, it was in another clash of cultures, at the height of WWII, that Austrian paediatrician and refugee, Karl König, established a school for 'mentally handicapped' children (to use the terminology of the period) at Camphill House near Aberdeen. By 1949 the school had 180 children and a long waiting list of parents wanting their offspring to join.

In the present climate of much greater respect and openness regarding disability, it is difficult to appreciate the innovative nature of König's thinking. Until then children and young people with learning difficulties were uneducated, regarded as patients rather than people and either stayed at home, preferably out of sight, or were institutionalised. Even a royal child was kept hidden from view. By way of contrast, König believed that every person has an inner personality and the role of the school was to recognise, nurture and educate the developing personalities of the children, regardless of their mental abilities. During the early 1950s several more schools were founded, based on the evolving Camphill philosophy of care, trust and mutual respect. In October 1954 the Camphill Village Trust (CVT) was set up to act as guardian of these communities.

The success of the schools resulted in a request for an adult community, which was facilitated by the acquisition of Botton Hall along with three farms and land in the North York Moors. Botton was set to become the forerunner and the flagship of the Camphill Village movement.

The community at Botton was soon thriving. The residents, those with varying degrees of intellectual disability, were joined by unpaid co-workers who had all of their living expenses met. Each received according to need and each contributed according to ability. Initially this was financed by those paying to have family members at Botton with supporters raising additional necessary funds.

From the earliest days, and long before it was fashionable, organic farming was introduced and a range of practical workshops were established in the dale. The workshops included woodworking, weaving, doll making and glass etching. The village also established a bakery, a creamery and a printing press. The home-made products were for sale in a shop opened at the site. Over time a church and an all-purpose community hall were built at Botton and a School of Eurythmy (a movement performance art also used therapeutically) was established. Today there just over 100 villagers (learning disabled residents) living with co-workers and their children in 22 houses. There are two flats where villagers live independently.

The farm land and gardens of the village are, justifiably, the pride and joy of the community. In recent years the creamery has won an award for its cheese and featured on Paul Hollywood's cookery programme; in 2005, on its 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, Botton Village won

special recognition in the Deputy Prime Minister's award for Sustainable Communities. Judges commented on the ethos of sustainability and mutual respect: "Botton offers both lessons and inspiration in the endeavour to create sustainable communities. Botton Village has demonstrated a long track record of working to realise the potential of all residents".

Men and women of all ages, and with varying disabilities, have been accepted here and given dignity through worthwhile work and meaningful contribution. The villagers run the farms and gardens, houses and workshops, alongside the co-workers; everyone has a role. In the shared living arrangement, co-workers and residents cook, eat, play, laugh and live side by side. Many co-workers choose to raise their families here with a number of them coming from overseas, particularly from Europe. In 1960 a Steiner School was opened for co-workers' children so that families could fully embrace the philosophy on which Botton was founded.

Co-workers come from a range of backgrounds but all have been willing to give up a place in the finance-fuelled work-a-day world most of us inhabit. Instead they have chosen to live very closely with adults with learning disabilities. Almost by definition, they are people of a pacifist nature, unused to confrontation, willing to make sacrifices for others and are particularly creative with all of the sensitivity that that brings. They have embraced a philosophy that avers that every individual counts and can make a contribution. Everyone within the Camphill village at Botton is valued and has a place; no-one is excluded. The greatest achievement of König's Camphill model has been the emphasis on living like a family in a community of equals.

Above all, residents and co-workers know this place as home. Some of the villagers have lived at Botton for all of their adult lives, in some cases up to forty years. There are some, who were raised here, leave but then return to be co-workers in their turn. For over half a century this remote rural idyll has flourished. It is highly regarded by the people of the Upper Esk Valley and its example has been copied across the world.

While initially the Botton model was financed privately, and regular fund raising continues, in more recent decades the community has also received local authority funding set up specifically to support those with disabilities.

In 2011 concerns were raised regarding both the financial and social arrangements within Camphill communities (there are over twenty in the UK, nine of which are part of the CVT) with some issues relating specifically to Botton. As a result of those concerns, North Yorkshire County Council, the Care Quality Commission as well as the Charity Commission stepped in to investigate the community in Danby Dale. Several issues were raised at Botton and a review of practice was required and initiated.

This was a bruising experience for the co-workers but they accepted the need to co-operate. In the years since, structures have been embedded to ensure greater financial accountability and necessary changes to social care have been put in place. A management

framework has been implemented and the CVT has appointed a general manager for Botton. By the beginning of this year co-workers were assured that they were meeting current financial and social care legislation and believed that they were all working together with common aims.

Until 13<sup>th</sup> May that is.

On that watershed day, a letter was sent from CVT trustees to the co-workers. Without discussion or any prior warning, the co-workers were told that they either had to become employees or leave. This had to be decided by April 2015 although the date has now been brought forward to September 2014. The co-workers were shocked and confused. They wrote to the CVT asking them to suspend the directive and to meet with them to discuss why this was happening – to date the trustees have continued to press on disregarding all pleas from residents, families, MPs and local people to stop and talk first.

And there have been other worrying trends.

- In December 2012 the trust deed of the CVT was changed and the conditions of trusteeship altered – only one seat on a board of nine was to be for co-workers, ex-co-workers, their partners or spouses. Currently there is no co-worker on the board.
- The vast majority of parents and family members associated with Botton want the original Camphill model, of co-workers and residents in shared living accommodation, to continue but the CVT is driving the change to independent living. In the opinion of co-workers only some of the residents could manage to live independently.
- Almost all villagers themselves are extremely happy and want these arrangements to continue but the CVT is not listening to them.
- Parents and family members have left legacies to the CVT on the understanding that Botton Village would continue to be run according to the original Camphill model.
- Some parents have moved their adult children from Botton out of concern for what has been happening.
- The charity has not informed members and donors of the historic changes now being undertaken. Community decision making is being replaced with top-down management that flies in the face of the Camphill philosophy.
- The CVT now only refers to the mentally disabled as ‘beneficiaries’ or ‘service users’ rather than residents or villagers thus devaluing them as individuals.
- Co-workers have been threatened with disciplinary action if they question the CVT or bring it into disrepute by going public in any way.
- Management costs in the CVT have soared in recent years from £300,000 to £2.5m. Some of this can be accounted for by financial trends but much is believed to be due to the costs of management and public relations fees incurred by the CVT.
- Thirty four families have recently met with the CVT the outcome of which was an almost unanimous support for the shared-living co-worker model and a vote of no confidence in the charity officials.

- Even if they agreed to become employees, CVT would employ only some of them, who as employees would not share their lives with villagers, and they are very concerned about what happens to the residents if they go.

Frustrated at the unwillingness of trustees to stop and talk, a handful of local professionals have set up an action group to support the community. Action for Botton called a public meeting on 24<sup>th</sup> July to which co-workers, Botton villagers, local residents, the MP and the CVT were invited to discuss the current situation. In a packed Danby Village Hall the CVT was conspicuous by its absence.

There is a great deal at stake here. In a society post Winterbourne and Saville, accountability and safeguarding are the new imperatives. In a time of financial belt tightening any organisation must be economically sustainable. There is a great danger here, however, of not only throwing out the baby with the bath water but of discarding the bath tub as well. And it is not just that two groups of people are in disagreement. In an era when minority and vulnerable groups are being given a voice, non-contractual vocational co-workers (a very small minority group) and the disabled Botton residents (amongst some of the most vulnerable in our society) are not even being heard. At a time when they should be empowered, the co-workers and residents of Botton are being disenfranchised. Whatever one's views on the detail of the situation, the disempowerment of these people has to be called to account.