

In any sane world, an organisation that delivered low-cost entertainment, housing and job creation in an area of high youth unemployment would be applauded. Exodus is one such organisation. If the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill had been in force two years ago, they'd probably all be in jail



The New Exodus

“The best way to describe the people in our community is to liken them to the buildings that we use. These buildings are redundant. So what we are, we're redundant people. We're not drop-outs, we're force-outs, we're people who are not wanted any more, one of five million who are unemployed or unwanted. There's no future for us in Britain plc.” That's Glenn Jenkins' description of Exodus, the Luton dance and squatting collective. Glenn's a former train-driver and ASLEF shop steward, now Exodus' spokesperson.

Exodus' Luton chapter opened on 5 June 1992. Rich Jenkins, Glenn's brother, is another of the founders, otherwise known as DJ Hazard. “I'd always dreamed of a stack (PA speakers) just a bit taller than me, so me and all my friends could go into a field and listen to Bob Marley, or some do music, some dance music.” Typical of DIY culture and what was to come, Rich heard about three empty speaker boxes that had been thrown into a skip. “I took them back to me Mum's garage—they were a bit tatty—stacked them up one on top of the other, and there's me stack there.”

A couple of days later he bumped into “Jack The Stack.” Jack was fitting car audios at the time, but reckoned he could fit speakers into Rich's cabinets. Rich bought three speakers and an amplifier which Jack promptly fitted. “And then on 5 June 1992 we took that stack up to a forest at the back of Dunstable, went to the two main pubs in Dunstable, told the people there was a party going on, and up they came. It went from 150 people for that first do to about a thousand by the third do.” Money from the soft drinks bar and bucket collections was poured back into extending the stacks. By New Year's Eve 1992/93, they formed a wall 30 feet long by 12 feet high, and 10,000 people had joined the party.

“It wasn't the intention to do the parties

unlicensed,” Glenn explained. “We spoke to the licensing officer, we spoke to the police, and although there was a general ‘Oh yeah, sure, go ahead,’ there was then telephone number size bills put in front of us for the licences, and obviously that was well beyond us, being unemployed local youth.” So Exodus undertook “a demonstration of the need for parties.” They established a gathering point every Saturday night on a local industrial estate. People would form a convoy and drive en masse to the chosen venue.

The assembly point was on Chief Inspector Mike Brown's patch, from Dunstable police. “The people who were running these unlicensed raves were trying to avoid any opportunities for violence, so I adopted a dual approach, on the one hand risk management for those attending, on the other hand, actively looking for a way for Exodus to hold these events legally.” Brown's motto was “jaw, jaw, not war war.” We need more such officers. A relationship of mutual respect developed between Brown and Exodus members, who consider him “a pukka copper.” Brown cooperated with Exodus in bringing in the fire brigade, once venues had been occupied, to advise on reducing fire risks. He was quoted in local papers appealing for suitable premises for Exodus to hold licensed dances.

Brown also noticed something interesting happening in Dunstable on weekends when Exodus held their dances. “Licensed premises were experiencing a fair amount of loss of trade, loss of customers. People might pop into the pub for a quick drink around ten, but then they'd be off for the rest of the night. Some licensees were starting to get into real financial trouble. As a consequence there was a lessening of alcohol-related offences, gratuitous assaults, bottle throwing, the random public disorder that generally goes with town centres and drink.” Coincidentally, the crime rate in Luton dropped by 6 per cent that year.

Not all police areas treated Exodus in the same fashion as Mike Brown. Squats occupied by Exodus members were raided seven times in eight months. “They smeared dogshit on our beds, nicked our money and trashed our gaffs,” Jenkins alleges. And, as many others have discovered to their cost, some police will happily seize vehicles and PA equipment they believe to be destined for a dance. Jenkins again: “Police had stopped our lorry. When I got there, my brother was being roughed up, punched and kicked and on the floor. I objected and was thrown straight onto me back, hit me head on the tarmac.”

The lorry keys had been thrown in the hedge, so the police sent for a tow truck. “There was a half hour period waiting for either the convoy or the tow truck to come. Then came the charge of the light brigade, over the hill, maybe a thousand people in cars. They all knew the score by now, get out of the cars, keys out, up to the front, to even up the negotiations, to bring some reason up there. I told the police the situation had changed now. I said they were lucky that we were different people to them, because they'd just beaten my brother up in front of me. I asked the Sergeant what right they had in law to steal our equipment. He couldn't tell us, because they had no right. Their vehicles were blocking our way, so we asked them to move them, or we'd move them. They moved them. We always made sure to the best of our ability that nobody broke this policy of massive but passive non-violent resistance. It worked every time.”

Exodus isn't only a party organisation. The dances have helped rehouse 29 young people in a derelict old people's home on the outskirts of Luton. It was originally squatted, then licensed and rented from Luton Borough Council. Money from the PA went into repairs. And one of the early party venues was Long Meadow Farm, purchased by the Department of Transport for the M1 widening programme, then left to rot. After

the party, Exodus squatted the farm and bungalow. They offered rent to the DoT who gave them a lease. Since then, using money from the dances, free pallets, and great graft, the place has been transformed. There's goats and sheep and carthorses and two pot-bellied pigs who behave like a couple of love lettuces, playing hide and seek in the straw. A forge is being built for Guy, Exodus member and fine farrier; and a cafe, The Pukka Cuppa. In September the World Community farm will open to local school parties, for free. Rosemary Davis, Headmistress of Luton's Ferrars Infant School, has visited it. "There are no other facilities like this round here. It's a unique experience. I'm very impressed."

Then there's the big dream, the Community Centre. Exodus has developed a detailed business plan for the centre, based on 30 dances a year at a £5 entrance fee, which, at 80 per cent capacity, would bring in £360,000. As well as the dances they plan a market, workshops, bar and café, theatre, a recording studio and counselling and education services. "It'd be extremely beneficial for the young people of Luton," affirmed Chief Inspector Brown. "It would give them an interest, opportunities for education and work." But the big dream nearly turned bad.

At 8pm on Saturday 30 January 1993, police raided Long Meadow Farm and seized Exodus' equipment, including the PA. Thirty-six people were arrested and taken to Luton police station. By 2am the next morning, 4,000 people had surrounded the station and were demanding everybody was released and the equipment returned. They even set up a sound system on the street to dance their displeasure. The police were taken by surprise. Everybody was later released without charge, save for a caution for herbal cannabis. A written promise was given to return the PA. The crowd dispersed peacefully. Chief Inspector Brown: "The crowd left the demonstration with some panache. They tidied up after themselves and put their rubbish in bags. I thought that was quite a nice touch really."

Chief Inspector Brown was not consulted. He only knew of the planned raid an hour before it happened. "I was rather put on the spot ... There was no time to question the decision." When asked why there had been a change of policy, he replied: "I heard a number of Members of Parliament had written to the Chief Constable saying this should stop, that the police ought to get on the case. At about the time the decision was made to pull the plug on negotiations, there were some Members of Parliament advocating drastic measures." Graham Bright, John Major's Parliamentary Private Secretary, is MP for Luton South and author of "The Bright Bill" imposing large fines for unlicensed events. He was quoted in the *Luton News* supporting the police measures and saying he hoped people "would be prosecuted to the maximum." NSS has tried to contact both Bright and Luton North MP John Carlisle, but they have failed to respond to our calls. Labour county councillor John Jefferson, at that time a member of the Bedfordshire Police Committee, claims: "I was getting information from Police Headquarters from disillusioned police officers. Some very senior officers were totally

disgusted by the way the situation had been turned around and become confrontational."

On the Monday after that farm raid, a local district council contacted the police offering a possible warehouse for licensed venues. Exodus were not informed. The owner of an Edmonton club, The Roller Express, also offered his premises to Exodus for a succession of dances to deflate the pressure. He says: "I was warned off by my local police who had spoken to Luton police. I was threatened with losing my licence if there was the slightest trouble."

Far from informing Exodus of the possible alternative licensed venue, Bedfordshire police carried out two further major operations at the Exodus dance assembly points, blocking off roads, Exodus say, ambushing, provoking violence and "noising it up". The police say they were preventing a breach of the peace and enforcing an injunction against unlicensed parties. This injunction was only taken out after the 30 January raid. The legality of these operations was at best dubious, the reported cost: £103,000. Exodus say they were assembling to protest against the ban, not for a dance. The PA never left the farm. Apart from licensing offences, out of 32 criminal charges arising from these and other incidents, there's been one conviction—the sentence: £80.

The timing here is crucial. Police operations against Exodus received shock horror national coverage. Yet they were clearly unnecessary. Exodus weren't told about the warehouse. Chief Inspector Brown's efforts were sidelined. And a month later the Home Secretary announced new police powers to stop raves. The day after this announcement, Luton MP John Carlisle greeted the proposals in the House of Commons: "We have had to ask local forces to be on standby so that police can stop a rave before it takes place or go in and break it up. That is why I particularly welcome the statement from my right honourable and learned friend the Home Secretary..." Who are "we"? Exodus believe, and I agree, that the police carried-out the operations against them under political pressure and against the wishes of officers on the ground. The consequent publicity was then useful as additional justification for the introduction of the new powers to stop raves. It was a set-up, not so much a conscious conspiracy, more an agreement amongst like-minded people in power. According to Chief Inspector Brown: "There was a fairly widely-held belief that Exodus and all its works wore horns and pointed tails."

John Carlisle made another comment about Exodus: "The popular conception is that drugs are sold and the profits used to finance the organisation." Whose popular conception?

On 13 February, Paul Taylor, the most prominent black Exodus member, was charged with possession with intent to supply of ecstasy tabs valued at £2,200, a charge Taylor has always denied. The ecstasy was said to have been found in Taylor's room at the farmhouse on 30 January. During Taylor's trial it emerged that at around 9.15pm, a Detective Sergeant Clements no 1313, recently transferred from regional crime squad, to Luton drugs squad

entered the farmhouse with a torch—the electricity had been cut. Police notebooks show that he stayed inside for 13 minutes, came out, then went back in again with PC Redfern, on his first day with the drugs squad. Within two minutes, at 9.30, PC Redfern, guided by DS Clements' torch, had found two separate caches of drugs in Paul Taylor's room, one in a coffee tin, one in his bag next to his passport, tenancy agreement and DSS forms. "Bingo," defence barrister James Wood remarked to the jury. "This case stinks, it stinks of a plot." The jury agreed, and acquitted Taylor. Taylor is suing the police.

"The charge against Paul Taylor was part of a policy to discredit and smash our organisation, because it was capable of organising civil disobedience and standing up for itself," Glenn Jenkins believes. "It was a plant. Those charges were part of a package designed to suggest that we were actually here to conspire to sell drugs." Chief Inspector Brown cannot believe that officers would plant drugs. But he is categorical about the results of the intelligence gathering operation he organised before entering into negotiations with Exodus. "There is no evidence that Exodus, in whatever sense one wishes to use that name, or Glenn or Rich or Paul Taylor in particular were selling drugs at the raves."

Exodus are now in the process of applying for planning permission on a warehouse in the middle of Luton for their community centre. Luton borough council has already granted Exodus several public entertainment licenses for events, family fun days at the carnival and all-night dances, which have all gone off without problems. The Labour-controlled council deserves high praise for putting its reputation on the line. It also helped Exodus train their own "peace stewards" in first aid and security. Tories on the council opposed the licenses. Luton police initially opposed the licences but have recently undergone yet another change of heart. "I now know a little bit more about Exodus than I probably did at the time," Chief Superintendent Alan Marlow from Luton division told me recently. "So if we were starting again from scratch I might not necessarily be making the same sort of objections." Marlow has now taken early retirement from the force. Chief Inspector Brown has been transferred to a desk job in Management Services. If he's given stick for talking so frankly, I want to know why. He was just trying to keep the peace like the "pukka copper" he is.

"It's about time the politicians got honest, stopped talking bollocks about green shoots in the economy and told the people the truth about work." Glenn Jenkins has the last word. He has thought about this a lot. "There's no future for a lot of people in the present set-up, no chance of decent work. So people need something else, a new existence. The system needs to assist us to diversify. Politicians should support this diversification, because it'll have positive effects on their world. We're on a mission. We're at the cutting edge of a way, an answer. It could even be a solution to the decay of Britain plc."

Tim Malyon