

Seven Souls in Search of Sanctuary in 1937

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*In November 1937 Effingham was the setting for a ground-breaking social experiment, one which can be seen as a precursor to both the BBC radio series *Desert Island Discs* (by four years), and to Channel 4's much later television programme *Big Brother*. The experiment was to bring together a group of strangers in an isolated house and cut them off from the world. *Big Brother* extended the concept by using cameras to capture the strangers' interaction, but other features such as its *Diary Room* had already been innovated in the Effingham experiment.*

Introduction

The experiment was the brainchild of Hugh Cudlipp who in 1935 had joined the staff of *The Daily Mirror*. By 1937 he had become Editor of *The Sunday Pictorial* (later *The Sunday Mirror*). He called his experiment "Seven Souls in Search of Sanctuary": seven people from different walks of life would be cut off from all contact with the outside world. The remote house chosen to host the experiment was Flower Cottage, the property adjoining Norwood Farm on the edge of Effingham Common. This was not a random choice as it was the home of one Mrs Winifred M E Allen, the mother of Eileen Ascroft. Eileen was at that time a member of the features department at *The Daily Mirror* and would later, in 1945, become Cudlipp's second wife. Winifred's and Eileen's stories are recounted in greater detail on ELHG's website.



Figure 1 Hugh Cudlipp of *The Daily Mirror*.

How Flower Cottage was taken over by the *Mirror* is described in Cudlipp's book *Publish and Be Damned: The Astonishing Story of the "Daily Mirror"* (publ. Andrew Dakers Ltd, 1953). He wrote:

'So that the facilities could be rapidly acquired the mother of a member of the features department was removed from this abode and parked in a hotel.'



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SOURCE: Historic England Archive

Figure 2 Flower Cottage, Effingham Common.

The Experiment

The experiment was a response to persistent complaints from *Mirror* readers that the newspaper reported only doom and gloom. Cudlipp wrote, again in his book (*ibid*):

‘Why, they asked, do you persistently mention unemployment and slums? Why must you stick your nose into politics and depressing social problems? It is almost impossible, they complained, to pick up the *Mirror* without finding yet another warning to the nation to be prepared for war.’

The experiment was to take these complainants at their word and examine whether people could turn their backs on life and escape reality. Cudlipp wanted to see how strong the dream of a place far away from a world preparing for war and immune to the consequences of the Great Depression would be. So, on Friday 5 November 1937 he asked this question:

‘Can we shut out the horrors of 1937 – and lead our calm lives away from it all?’

He defined the parameters of the experiment. There were to be no newspapers, no radio or telephones in the cottage. The Seven Souls would be cut off from civilization as if stranded on an island.

In truth this was rather pulling the wool over his readers’ eyes. Given that Effingham Junction station was no more than a brisk 10 minutes’ walk from Flower Cottage in one direction, and the village with all of its amenities 20 minutes in the other, the seven would hardly be cut off from civilization. And yet, at least in the mind of Eileen Ascroft, for whom Flower Cottage was her idealized childhood home, Effingham really was her definition of sanctuary, a theme she returned to repeatedly in her newspaper columns in 1938.

The Seven Souls



Mrs Olive Clarkson



Mr James Bygrave



Mr Albert Burden



Miss Eleanor Leach



Mr Denis Sullivan

Figure 3 The Seven Souls.



Miss Rita Dell



Mr Arthur Groom

Mrs Olive Clarkson was a young wife aged 25, from Hampstead whose hobbies were shopping and the pictures, twice a week.

Mr James Bygrave was a ledger clerk who was married with a son aged 5 and lived in Hendon. He was content with a quiet life.

Mr Albert Burden was an unemployed man aged 42. He lived in Westmoreland Street. He had been wounded in WW1 and was the youngest survivor of the retreat from Mons. His principal interest was walking the streets and getting into conversation with foreigners to broaden his mind.

Miss Eleanor Leach was a spinster aged 48, from Northwood, Middlesex. She had spent her whole life caring for other people but was out to prove that the vinegary spinster stereotype was a myth.

Mr Denis Sullivan was a young bachelor who lived in London W6 and had a degree in philosophy. He doubted the success of the experiment, believing that putting all of them on a desert island for a year would produce a more interesting result.

Miss Rita Dell was a 'glamour girl' who lived in Dulwich and performed in five shows a day at the Windmill Theatre.

Mr Arthur Groom was a married man aged 40 who was a writer of children's books by trade. He was from Oxford and believed in a return to the simple, old ways, saying : *'Children today know too much, most of them will grow up nervous wrecks. Parents sacrifice too much for them and as a result, the children's character is ruined.'*

Their Experiences

The *Mirror* left the seven Souls alone for a week and in the following week printed each of their stories, starting with Arthur Groom. He didn't have a bad word to say about the other six, and seems to have thoroughly enjoyed the experience. His desire for a return to simpler ways was matched exactly by his week in Flower Cottage. He described his experience as:

'A paradise of peace and quiet, where a fellow could work, read, smoke his pipe, walk through the woods, whistle in the bath and splash in the washing up water.'

He ended his piece by saying:

'Cheerio friends, and once again thank you for giving me a chance to prove that the brotherhood of man is not only existent but as strong as it has been since the world began.'

The following day Olive Clarkson reported similar sentiments:

'I found myself at first aching for news, and later, wishing there was a street of lighted shops or a cinema just behind the woods. I had a feeling this would happen before I started out for the sanctuary. And so all I have learned is to be more tolerant of my fellow men.'

Her findings were not shared by the other internee to report on Tuesday, James Bygrave:

'The prospect of this week, without wireless, dancing, radio or newspapers, and living with six strangers, rather appalled me.'

although he later wrote:

'I found that seven people chosen at random can and did live peacefully together, working for one another, being kind to one another and amusing one another – sometimes even without conscious effort.'

His rather diffident assessment of his companions concludes:

‘These were the six people whose company I have enjoyed, with whom I am loathe to part company. Now I look forward with a lot of pleasure to being reunited with my wife and little boy, and, a very important point, a comfortable bed.’

Wednesday’s edition featured the unemployed, and as described by the other souls, rather sad figure of Bert Burden. His opening few paragraphs are worth quoting in full:

‘During the war I did my bit. There are sixteen wounds on my body to prove it. They told me I should come back to a country fit for heroes to live in. But I came back to poverty. And I had to sit back, humiliated, and see my own dear wife go out charring so that we could live.

I don’t think I’ve had a square deal since I came back from the war. I was getting very bitter about it, too. Sometimes ‘couldn’t see any good in anything.’ All my attempts to find a job seemed doomed to failure. Tramping round searching in the rain. It drives a man mad. Many a time I go out on the streets selling matches.’

Bert found that he could not sit still and always had to be doing things for the other occupants, despite their attempts encouraging him to relax. However, he also wrote most movingly of the modern conveniences in the cottage:

‘I had two baths a day. And I pressed my trousers every morning. The place seemed like a little heaven. I could live without newspapers, without radio, without the cinema. I could live for ever in a place like that. Only all the time I was wishing my dear wife was with me to share comforts and happiness I had not known for a long time.’

As Mrs. Clarkson observed, Bert struck up a particularly close friendship with the glamour girl, Rita Dell, with whom he shared long walks in the woods, learning the names of trees. Of all the occupants, it appears that the week had the greatest effect upon Bert. He finishes his article with:

‘One thing this week taught me. The better-off people are not all against me. They are sorry for me and would do anything in the world to help me. ... I’ve found my feet again. And I know I am in a better condition and state of mind now to get a job than I have been since the war.’

The comments by Rita Dell, who had reminded Bert of his little sister, followed on Thursday. Her reaction was positive, although she had not been able to observe all the strictures:

‘It was nice to forget glamour and to live naturally, simply and sincerely. I have a confession to make. Several times I escaped from the sanctuary to meet a man friend. We went for a drive together in the country. I missed him rather a lot — and, well, I had to break just that one rule!’

Rita was another of the internees who would have stayed longer and she echoed the compliments paid to her by the others that she was completely unlike what they had imagined a glamour girl to be. Instead, she had proved to be a good cook, intelligent and – as Bert Burden had found – knowledgeable about trees.

The sixth of the Souls to report was the spinster Eleanor Leach who started by saying that the troubles of the world faded away as soon as they were all in, but then used her remaining space to detail the fervent political discussions and cooking disasters which befell them. She closes her account with a detail reflecting the fact that Flower Cottage faces West:

‘But my favourite picture is the tea-time one, with the firelight playing on the old beams, and making deep shadows in the corners; the windows, framed in red curtains, wide open to the sun setting in golden glory – a sight seldom seen by City Workers in the winter. A perfect setting for sanctuary and for friendship.’

The last of the Souls reported on Friday 19 November – Denis Sullivan, the 28-year old bachelor. The *Mirror* saved the most cynical reaction to last, and also the testimony of the only Soul to desert the delights of Flower Cottage early. Two days from the end he walked up to the station and returned to London. He told the readers why:

'Here's the true story. I was fed up. With the people, the place and the false, cowardly, running-away philosophy behind the whole idea ... Above all I was sick of that smugness which pretended everything was lovely in our Garden of Eden. In another week I'm sure there would have been a dozen quarrels.'

He went on to spell out what he wanted:

'I wanted the newspapers and the wireless. I wanted to know what Hitler was up to and whether I had had any luck in the football pools. I wanted to see aeroplanes instead of sparrows, cars instead of cows.'

Denis finishes with a call to arms that is more than a nod to Churchill in its anticipation of the conflict to come:

'How silly and dangerous is all this dreaming of escape! Silly, because only one in a thousand of the dreamers will ever have the chance to try it. Dangerous, because it saps the energy we might be devoting to improving whatever is wrong with our present circumstances. We need stout hearts before we find peace of mind. With them, come what may, we don't fret and fuss. We have an inward strength that no bludgeon can weaken, a serenity of spirit that cannot be ruffled. That is sanctuary. Once you've decided to chuck out those escapist yearnings you'll find it far easier to set about solving your problems. The more you dream the less you fight, the more firm will become the grip of fear upon you. And you'll never cast it off by a change of address.'

Assessment

It is interesting that Hugh Cudlipp finished the series of articles with Denis Sullivan's passionate response to the enforced peace of Effingham, as it chimes so well with the *Mirror's* radical, pre-War editorial stance. Under Guy Bartholomew, it had adopted an anti-establishment tone, called for increased defence spending and attacked Stanley Baldwin for complacency while praising Churchill's calls for rearmament. It is possible that Sullivan's response was ghost-written and furthermore he may have been deliberately planted into the Seven Souls experiment with a brief to leave early and issue his call to action.

The *Mirror* had published articles by a 'Denis Sullivan' earlier in 1937, and from January 1938 it published pieces by a sports reporter with the very similar name of Denis O'Sullivan whose picture (Figure 4) appeared in the issue of 3 March 1938. This image resembles so closely that shown earlier for the 'Denis Sullivan' participant in the experiment that one is bound to conclude that the two men were one and the same.



Figure 4 Denis O'Sullivan.

Sullivan's early departure from the cottage caused controversy amongst readers who followed the series and he received several abusive letters from the public for not finishing the experiment. Ultimately, then, the Seven Souls experiment was more about providing a platform for the *Mirror's* political stance, rather than examining how strangers could get along when deprived of communication with the outside world.

For all that, however, the story of Bert Burden retains its power 80 years later. It is worth sparing a thought for how Bert reacted to the outbreak of the Second World War and whether he ever found employment again. His moving testimony of feeling abandoned after serving his country in the Great War and struggling through the Great Depression, must have rung true with many of the *Mirror's* readers, so their reaction might have been more complicated than the paper's editorial team had anticipated. If war was to come, they would not wish to be forgotten as Bert had been.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures 1, 3, 4: by permission of Reach Plc / *Mirropix*

Figure 2: from Historic England: © Muriel Ascroft

APPENDIX

Reporting the Experiment

The Seven Souls experiment was reported in *The Daily Mirror* during the period 5-19 November 1937. This appendix gives transcriptions of the introductory parts of the two articles written at the start by Hugh Cudlipp, in which he sets the scene. His contributions do not give the impression of his having any deep grasp of the social, political or economic contexts in which this 'experiment' was conceived; but we must remember that he was writing without intellectual pretensions for a popular tabloid publication. The other articles were ostensibly written by the individual participants and these appear on the weekdays 15-19 November, although these articles were doubtless the result of Cudlipp's editing of their own accounts.

Curiously, despite the newspaper's headlining of the event as 'the greatest social experiment of the year', as soon as it was over neither the newspaper nor Cudlipp himself apparently had anything to say about it. After Friday 19 November no further mention appears. The experiment had, arguably, demonstrated nothing at all other than the potential to fill a few pages during this one week of publication.

Cudlipp's article on Friday 5 November

ANNOUNCING Greatest Social Experiment of 1937

Look back for a moment across the years ... Look back to the Courage of 1914. To the Pride of 1918. To the economic Falls of 1920 and 1925. To the Recovery of 1932 ... And heed now the Disillusion of 1937.

We know it all today, this desperate and tragic truth, that the four years of bloodshed and strife which crushed Prussianism and were to make the world safe for democracy have made the world safe for Fascism. That the war waged so tenaciously to preserve Honour Among Nations sounded the very death-knell of international decency: gave birth to nationalism more insular and arrogant than mankind had ever known before. Disturbing rumours. Audacious threats. War – even war itself. That is life today. This ceaseless turmoil.

Peace? Yes, we pray for peace all right. Pray – and fight for it. And again and again we lift our hearts and plead "How long, O Lord, how long?" Escape? We dream of that, too. Dream of a place far away from this insanity; a place immune from the hideous shape of things to come; a place of – honour, brotherhood, loyalty, peace; a place where the swords really have been beaten into ploughshares. "What are you going to do if ever there's another war?" We all ask each other that question nowadays. "Oh," we reply, "I'm going to Greenland." Or – "I'm going to a nice little place I know in Cornwall." Or – "You won't see me for dust."

Escape ... Is there such a thing? Can we really turn our backs on life without regrets? Can we shut out the horrors of 1937 – and lead our own calm lives away from it all? Everybody wants to know the answers to those questions. And the *Daily Mirror* is going to give them to you. Follow now the greatest social experiment of the year.

Cudlipp's article on Monday 8 November

THE GREATEST SOCIAL EXPERIMENT OF THE YEAR!

A cottage in the country, surrounded by green fields and peaceful woodland. Its old oak timbers have withstood 500 years of rain and sun and wind. Five centuries of tradition lie buried in its peaceful walls.

And this little white-washed cottage, in the heart of Surrey's countryside, becomes now the sanctuary we have chosen for our great experiment. Seven people are going to spend a week under its peaceful roof. Away from civilisation. Away from their friends and families. They have gone to discover peace, brotherhood – all the things that seem so impossible to find in this crazy, unstable world of today.

We do not know if they will succeed, but we have given them the chance and every help we can. When they return at the end of the week they will tell you, one by one, the story of their experiment. On Saturday morning these seven people met for the first time at the *Daily Mirror* offices – then set out together for their sanctuary. On this page you see them all – four men and three women. All honest enough to admit they are seeking something – all brave enough to go in search of it. Let us introduce you to them one by one.