

We played it at her funeral in March: "A change is gonna come" by Sam Cooke, an African American song that harks back to a time when the world was calling for change. Terri Gibbon was a founder of the Brixton Advice Centre over 40 years ago, when Lambeth Council staff along with volunteers created it in Railton Road Methodist Church in recognition of the high levels of need among what was then the West Indian community.

Terri worked there for the next 30 years. You could not go anywhere with her in Herne Hill, Brixton or most parishes in Jamaica, without Terri being approached by someone she had helped.

The Centre reflected a hope for change; a belief that things could be better. A ferocious amount of volunteer effort went into it. Fundraising enabled us to lease nearby 167 Railton Road, and Lambeth Council provided a grant to employ two staff. It was soon a much-loved facility and, in the 1980s rioting, when Railton Road was in flames, the Centre did not suffer as much as a broken window. The Trustees

● **If you have legal skills or specialist knowledge of welfare benefit, housing or debt issues, or might like to contribute as a general volunteer, or even a Trustee, we would be delighted to hear from you. Email our Acting Director, Patrick Torsney, patrick@brixtonadvice.org.uk**

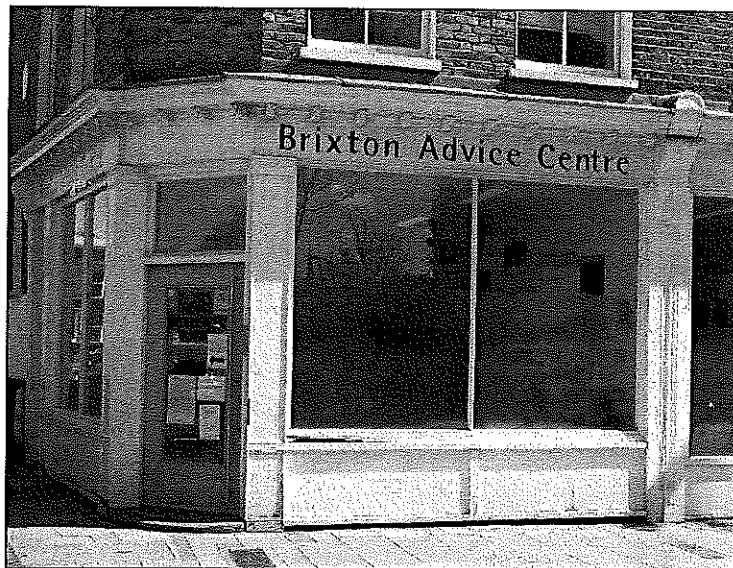
worked hard and in 1994, with grants, bought the premises and then secured our first Legal Services Commission contracts for specialised advice services.

In 2003, again with grants, we acquired the adjoining 165 Railton Road and integrated and modernised both premises. The distinguished West Indian writer and political activist C.L.R. James had lived there until his death. So we asked English Heritage to erect a Blue Plaque. In 2004 Dame Tessa Jowell opened the refurbished offices and Darcus Howe unveiled the Blue Plaque. A triumphant day.

Terri recruited me as a Trustee in 1986 and I have since witnessed a steady increase in the numbers seeking our help; and then more latterly a slow loss of hope. House prices in gentrified Herne Hill and Brixton may have gone through the roof but we are living in the twilight of the welfare state.

BEHIND OUR BEAUTIFUL FAÇADES

40 years of Brixton Advice Centre



The advice centre has grown from a humble start and now has 13 staff, with four lawyers

The casualisation of employment, low wages, zero-hour contracts, homelessness and a benefits system that does not provide enough to live on has created a tidal wave of need reflected in the quiet desperation of many who come to the Centre.

For most of us our sense of what is happening to poor people is defined by those with power and money - politicians, media and business leaders. We see headlines about "welfare scroungers" and cuts from budgets that support our social infrastructure: cuts accepted by the comfortable on the grounds that if they don't hurt them they don't hurt anyone.

But the Centre has given me an insight as to what it is like for ordinary people to grapple with bureaucracies that have their own agendas, an experience no longer confined to "the poor", but if not yet "the comfortable", increasingly the "not poor". In the struggle to exercise the rights and entitlements that the system says are yours, people have to fight every inch of the way against bodies that were set up to help them. Unjustified stoppages of benefits, evictions, unfit housing, homelessness,

loan sharks, unfair dismissals, incompetent housing agencies, bad employers, bad landlords: the Centre sees it all.

Today, with funding from Lambeth Council, the Legal Aid Agency, charities and personal donations, we can afford 13 staff, including two barristers, two solicitors, and generalist advisors who, with our volunteers, deal with 20,000 people and 4,000 cases each year. Last year we enforced the rights of hundreds of clients and recovered £590,000 for them. We run outreach sessions at Food Banks, on Estates and in Brixton Prison.

When Terri started she believed the world would get better. The country has never been richer, but thousands in Herne Hill and Brixton face a struggle just to live. The human cost is dreadful.

Beneath our veneer of prosperity, economic and other pressures are making matters worse for too many. "A change is gonna come" and it is probably not what any of us will like. The Centre may never get to close its doors.

**Fred Taggart, Honorary Secretary
Brixton Advice Centre**