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Suburban Hymns: Restoration plan for the humble allotment clubhouse that once hosted Bob Marley and Pink Floyd.

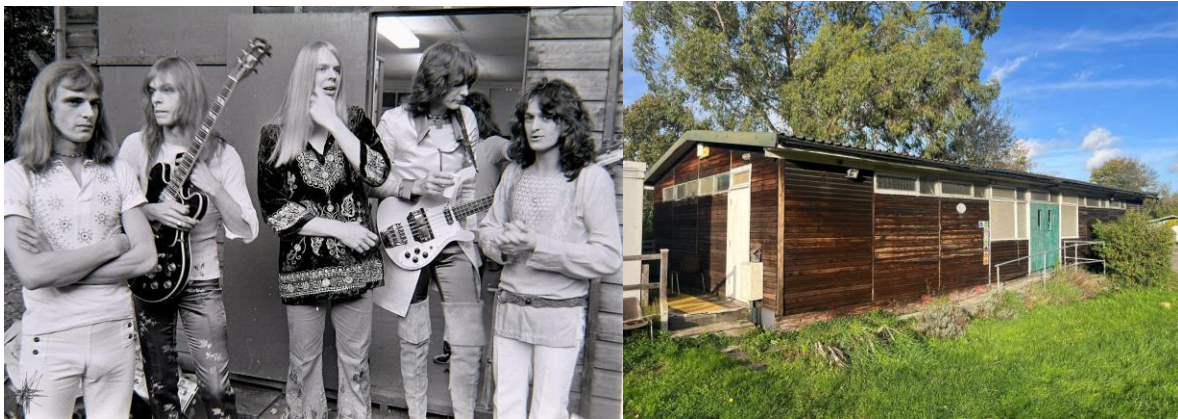


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In a sleepy allotment in suburban South London, is a humble timber shed with a remarkable secret history that's been recently rediscovered. Today, the clubhouse at Dorset Road Allotments is a haven for plot-holders and the local community, more used to the sound of a whistling kettle than raucous rock and roll. Yet for nearly 40 years it was the backstage dressing room at the iconic Crystal Palace Bowl, hosting some of the most famous names in popular music: from Pink Floyd to Bob Marley, Elton John to Vera Lynn.

A crowdfunding campaign has now been launched to refurbish and renew the historic clubhouse, telling its remarkable story and securing its future.

Park rangers hut to the stars

The modest prefabricated timber structure began life as a park rangers hut in nearby Crystal Palace Park during the early 1960s. The popular public park is laid out in the former grounds of the Victorian Crystal Palace, that burnt down in 1936. When the site re-opened to the public after the Second World War, the long tradition of live music at the Palace resumed with the inauguration in 1961 of Crystal Palace Concert Bowl - one of London's most beautiful outdoor venues, set in a natural amphitheatre with ornamental lake.

The park rangers hut was located in the backstage area and swiftly became the dressing room for visiting pop-stars, orchestras, roadies and crew. The famous Crystal Palace Garden Party's of the 1970s and 80s brought some of the world's greatest performers to this leafy corner of SE19, and pioneered the one-day music festival concept.

Yet by the mid 1990s the temporary stage at the Concert Bowl had long outlived its intended lifespan, with many of the bigger acts outgrowing the venue and starting to go elsewhere. Backed with funding from the Arts Council, Bromley Council held a design competition for a new state-of-the-art permanent stage, geared more towards classical and community programming. When the dramatic, sculptural new stage (designed by Ian Ritchie Architects) was built in 1997, the old park rangers hut cum dressing room was surplus to requirements, and it seemed destined for the scrapheap .

Yet the nearby Dorset Road Allotments in Beckenham stepped in, arranging for the building to be dismantled and reassembled at the allotments at their Clubhouse. Reopened by the Mayor of Bromley in 1999, the building has been in constant use ever since for community events, charity fundraisers, birthday parties, meetings, workshops, courses on beekeeping, biodiversity, composting, Christmas wreathmaking and allotmenting, to name just a few.

Crowdfunding campaign

After nearly 60 years of service, the historic Clubhouse is now in need of refurbishment and renewal, to ensure it can continue serving the local community for many years to come. The Dorset Road Allotment and Leisure Gardens co-operative has launched a crowdfunding campaign, raising funds to replace the deteriorating wooden cladding, improve the insulation, install solar panels, a new kitchen and interpretation boards telling the remarkable history of the clubhouse. £14,000 in grant funding has already been raised, with proceeds from plant sales and open days. The group hope to raise £3,500 which will be match-funded by the Aviva Community Fund.

The clubhouse crowdfunder comes shortly after the hugely successful ['Back the Bowl'](#) campaign by another local community group. This raised in excess of £60,000 to restore the stage at Crystal Palace Bowl, reviving the iconic venue after it had fallen into disrepair and been unused for more than a decade. In 2021 the South Facing Festival was launched and brought live music back to the Palace, while the stage itself has become a versatile new public space that regularly hosts local bands, a cafe, aerobics, vintage markets and a wine fair.

Comments

Oli Marshall, Co-Founder of the Crystal Palace Bowl project:

"When Bob Marley, Lou Reed and Vera Lynn played the legendary Crystal Palace Bowl, the backstage facilities might not have been the most luxurious, but we were amazed to discover recently that not only did this humble footnote in rock and pop history still survive, but it was now a thriving community clubhouse in a suburban allotment.

There's a great British tradition of extraordinary things happening in rather ordinary sheds - from the Enigma codebreakers at Bletchley Park, to Ken Tyrrell creating his F1 World Championship winning cars, and the invention of the Anglepoise lamp and Dyson Vacuum

cleaner. It would be wonderful to see this particularly star-studded shed restored for the more green-fingered VIP's that now call it home."

Linda Phillips MBE, Chair of Dorset Road Allotments:

"It's hard to believe that our modest Clubhouse has had such a rich history. We are really pleased to be able to share the story. The project to renovate the Clubhouse will mean it can continue to be an amazing resource for our local community for many years to come."

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Links

Crowdfunder: <https://www.avivacommunityfund.co.uk/p/refurbishing-the-clubhouse-for-the-community>

Dorset Road Allotments: <http://dorsetroadallotments.org.uk/>

Crystal Palace Bowl: <https://www.crystalpalacebowl.com/>

Crystal Palace Park Trust: <https://www.crystalpalaceparktrust.org/>