

## All our Yesterdays

A conundrum. Where in Barnes would you have found:

- an old country house
- forty young men being boarded and educated at the village academy
- a chocolate maker
- an ice-cream and Christmas pudding factory
- a laundry
- a Postal sorting office
- an arts centre

No, not seven different places as might be expected – but just one. All were former incarnations of the **OSO Arts Centre on Barnes common.**

It's been an interesting, exciting and often frustratingly opaque journey from 18th century country house to 21<sup>st</sup> century hub of artistic endeavour – and thereby hangs a tale or two ....

Cleveland House was an attractive late 18th century country residence on the edge of Barnes Village common. Little has been recorded about this old building but, thanks to an aquatint by J. Rouse – a drawing master from Parsons Green – we know, at least, what the house looked like.

By 1820, a prospectus for a 'Cleveland House Academy' was advertising space for 'forty young gentlemen to be boarded and instructed'. Similarly little is known about this small educational establishment, save that it was a boarding school for young gentlemen and classes were held in the old country house with a 'magnificent hall, fine rooms and a staircase leading to the first floor'.

For the next several decades, the history of the old house remains hazy – but by the 1920s, having been used at some stage as a laundry, local records show that a chocolate factory operated in the back part of house, which was bought as a going concern by the Zeeta Company who quickly doubled the previous establishment's boxed chocolates orders – and began producing Easter eggs. The firm's Director, R.J. Hellingham, remembers his demonstration of how the eggs were made appearing on *Picture Page*, one of the first television programmes broadcast from Alexander Palace.

Because of their financial success, Zeeta's were able to buy the front part of the old house too, which they demolished in 1927 and put up in its place a 'very modern factory' making 'high class ice cream, Zeeta layer cakes – and 6,000 puddings each Christmas'. For a quarter of a century, the wonderful smells of chocolates and cakes wafted over Barnes common – until the company apparently sold out to the House of Fraser who were not interested in the factory, made all the staff redundant and sold the property on. From 1958 it became a sorting centre for Post Office mail – owned, records indicate, by Barnes Council – and by 1993, the unloved, untended, dilapidated building was ear-marked for closure.

But Leander Estates stepped in the nick of time into the breach, worked a bricks and mortar miracle and transformed dilapidation into restaurant, offices, a clutch of luxury flats – and a 320 sq metre community building. In 1999, as the first residents moved in to their homes, our wonderful Arts Centre had begun to take shape.

Today, the OSO Arts Centre is an increasingly special part of everyday life in our local community. It took nearly 5 years to raise the money to refurbish these

historic buildings and, from its opening in September 2002, this hub of artistic endeavour has provided a home for theatre productions, live music, art exhibitions, dance classes, drama for all ages and abilities, educational opportunities and much, much more. Several free-to-all events are staged as part of the centre's all inclusive menu. The OSO's attractive, airy layout provides space for neighbours to meet and greet each other and to sample the delicious food in the Centre's Everyday Barnes cafe. A long and varied journey from the old country house – but a journey which is still underway ...