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Lifespring stories: the many faces of Oxford Road, Reading Town, United Kingdom

Book

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Lifespring Stories

The Many Faces of Oxford Road, Reading Town, United Kingdom

Edited by Alice Mpofu-Coles, Robyn Woronka, Caroline Bishop, Oli Hewson,

Lifespring Stories: The Many Faces of Oxford Road, Reading Town, United Kingdom

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Historic England
University of Reading
Reading Borough Council
Working better with you
READING HIGH STREET HERITAGE ACTION ZONE
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Disclaimer

Lifespring Stories: The Many Faces of Oxford Road, Reading, United Kingdom contains stories from people who come from all over the world, and the experiences that led them to Reading Town, United Kingdom.

The purpose of this book is to give these individuals a voice to tell their stories, as well as to present the emotions these narratives evoke.

The researchers, contributors, editors & writers have come together from diverse backgrounds and positionings to work together in the creation of this project.

We acknowledge as a team that it is impossible for us to give the greatest weight to all the issues and subjects discussed here. We do not wish to offend or hurt in any way, but simply to tell the stories we have been told in the best way, and make them accessible for all.

We want to evoke a balance between the reality of experience, and the hope for a greater tomorrow for all of those that live on Oxford Road, Reading and the communities they come from.

Foreword

Neville Hollands, Senior pastor, Lifespring Church

When we opened what is now The Pavilion in 2013, we did not want the building to become simply a venue for 'church' on Sundays; we wanted the building to become a hub of hope, or a beacon of light in our part of Reading.

We started with Cafe12 and springing out of this venture, a number of other community projects emerged. Looking back, and with the help of the stories shared, we can see that to many we have become that hub in our community, offering a warm welcome and friendship to all who come.

When we were told the project would be called 'Lifespring Stories' we objected, suggesting it should be called 'Pavilion Stories' as not everyone spoken to was part of Lifespring Church, but we were told "no, if it was not for Lifespring Church there wouldn't be stories to tell!"

I hope you enjoy reading how lives have been impacted. Some have found faith, but for many we have simply been there to support, to care, to listen and to befriend.

For us at Lifespring we believe this is part of our mandate – to show God's love and to be good news to all who come.

Dr Sally Lloyd-Evans, Associate Professor, Department of Geography and Environmental Science, University of Reading

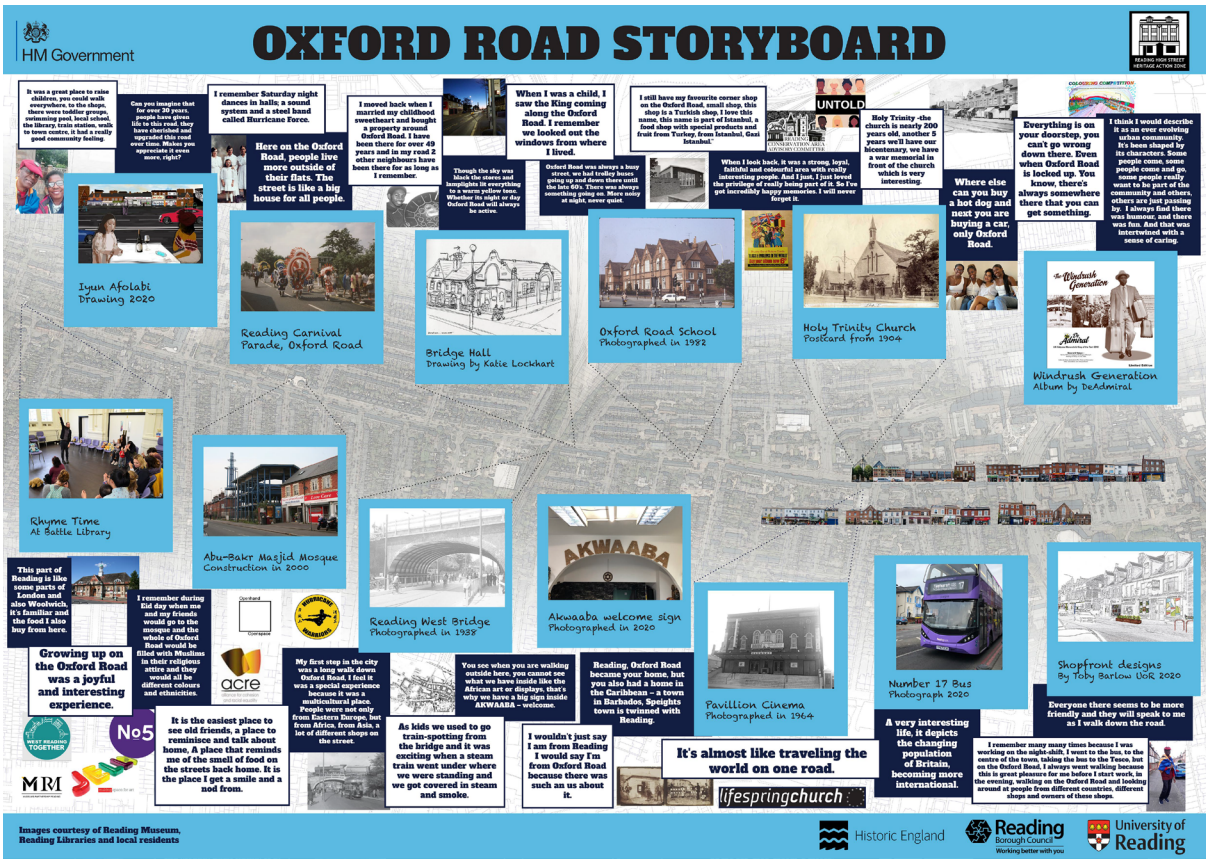
This unique collection of stories, experiences and memories stems from a five-year participatory action research project that sought to capture a local community's connection to one of the most unique and ethnically diverse urban places in Reading, the Oxford Road. With more than 72 languages spoken by its residents, Oxford Road has been described as a "United Nations" due to the ways in which the street has been shaped by decades of urban change, flows of migration and cultural innovation. The project was formed in 2020 during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Oxford Road Stories project emerged at a time when many of us were thinking about the meaning of community and how we connect to the places around us during lockdown.

In 2020, our Participatory Action Research team in the Department of Geography and Environmental Science were approached by Reading Borough Council to work with their High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) programme to undertake a place-based pilot community engagement project that enabled the authentic voices of residents to reimagine their high streets and explore their lived experiences of urban space. High Street Heritage Action Zones (HSHAZ) are a heritage-led regeneration initiative led by Historic England, working with local councils and communities to improve the quality of life for residents and businesses living and working on historic streets.

Using participatory storytelling to explore the lived experiences of the people and communities who live, work and play on the Oxford Road, Alice Mpofu-Coles, Robyn Woronka and Toby Barlow captured the rich and diverse cultural history of the area through photographs, memories, digital interviews and podcasts to co-create a multimedia online storytelling exhibition for Reading Museum – *The Oxford Road Project: Reimagining the High Street Through Your Stories*. Three local artists, Baker Street Productions, Gemma Anusa, and Caroline Streatfield were commissioned to create art pieces inspired by these stories to celebrate the vibrancy and richness of Oxford Road's multicultural history.

In 2022, a second phase of the HSHAZ project was co-designed with local people and community groups who frequent a community space, the Lifespring Church/Pavilion, to have conversations about community, highlight how the Oxford Road's vibrant history is connected to and through their lives, and what Lifespring means to them. Collaborating with Baker Street Productions and the University of Reading students, the team curated a series of interviews, life histories, artefacts, and photographs to explore and share a series of Lifespring Stories, which was exhibited in Reading libraries, Reading Museum and Oxford Road venues.

This book, funded by Reading Borough Council and the University of Reading, and co-produced with Baker Street Production, revisited the photographs, stories and interviews from the original participatory research project and combined them with personal reflections to add further depth and richness. Drawing on themes of community, memory and collective identity, the collection offers a unique insight into the lives of a few Oxford Road's residents and illustrates how sharing our lived experiences can create the thriving multicultural places that engender social change.



'Oxford Road Storyboard' and 'Reimagining the Oxford Road' images courtesy of Toby Barlow

Preface

In a world still marred by war and conflict, the kindness and care humans can exhibit toward each other stand as beacons of hope. This sentiment is vividly reflected in the vibrant community along Oxford Road, where differences in race, religion, and sexuality blend seamlessly, exemplifying how inclusion should manifest in wider society.

The evolution of Oxford Road mirrors the town's spirited diversity, bringing together individuals from various backgrounds who now share a collective identity. The streets here are a testament to how crucial places are for fostering a sense of belonging and unity, each new face and flavour adding to the tapestry of shared history. Maya Angelou's words resonate deeply: "We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their colour [or any other feature]."

Observing Oxford Road, one finds a microcosm of the world – a mini-globe in Reading, filled with food, items, and people from all over. This small yet bustling community teaches us that embracing diversity enriches our lives and strengthens our communities. Every individual contributes to the collective story, making the tapestry richer and more colourful. By learning from this mini-world, the broader community can be inspired to move toward a future where acceptance is the norm, not the exception.

Through the narratives of Oxford Road's residents, we see that Lifespring Church transcends its role as a place of worship. It acts as a beacon of hope, a builder of communities, and a testament to the power of small acts of kindness. This preface sets the stage for their stories, each contributing to a kinder, more accepting society for all.

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Photo by Gab Gibek

Introduction

"Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space and better space for everyone"
George Dei, 2006

The Oxford Road Stories Research project has shown great potential from the start of 2020 due to the methods used in participatory action research that engage with communities that are seldom heard in research. It received a second funding from Historic England after the pilot was successful and was nominated at the University for the Engagement and Impact Award. It has developed further with ongoing collaboration with young people of the UNTOLD organisation – Oxford Road Chronicles, the Institute of Languages, Economics and Politics and Psychology department as a learning model for participatory engagement research. The methodological approach used for the Oxford Road research has led to the Community Led Research Pilot co-created with the University of Reading and the British Science Association. The Oxford Road Stories Reading Museum, Oxford Road Lifespring Stories and this book are part of decolonising research and dissemination. They will have a lasting impact on those participants, broader ongoing collaboration with schools, universities, social workers, mental health, substance abuse, women and refugee organisations, and what we might call daily life problems for many in societies.

The Oxford Road is historically and culturally significant in Reading Town – it is ethnically diverse with areas of social deprivation. Using Participatory Action Research (PAR), issues in the community have been highlighted directly through the voices of the individuals who live, work or pass through this area. They tell stories about lived experiences through their authentic voices.

The research shows the stories and diversity of one road in a town and the use of the space. Reading Town is what the locals call 'nearly a city' with its rich history, population and diversity. It is important to understand the pathways into this geographical area of town through

drug addiction, homelessness, refugees, shoppers, food lovers, historical characters, vibrancy, languages and different people of all ages. We will take you on a journey to meet the people of Oxford Road in Reading, where history meets globalisation. The Victorian and Georgian houses will amuse the historians, the architects will stand in awe, the food lovers will smell and have their taste buds challenged by exotic food from around the world, the activists will want to change the socioeconomic inequalities, and the linguists will be bewildered by the sound of over 72 languages spoken in one road. It is a United Nations but in Reading Town, Berkshire. Transformed by immigration, the place still trades, creating new social stories. They also want something different on Oxford Road, something that happens in telling the stories, their creativity, and their participation, that brings the people to life through digital audios and photo exhibitions of their true nature. The stories told by the people of Oxford Road can potentially be distressing for others. Suppose you hear stories of the people of Oxford Road in Reading and how there are places and spaces like Oxford Road in every village/town/city across the country. Would you see a difference when you have listened to their stories?

The people of Oxford Road have many things that connect them to this space. Everything makes their identity unique, and they find commonality on one road – Oxford Road.

Dr Alice Mpofu-Coles and Robyn Woronka – PhD Candidate

www.reading.ac.uk/ges/staff/dr-alice-mpofu-coles
www.reading.ac.uk/ges/staff/robyn-woronka

Photo by Gab Gibek

Photo by Priya Hunt

Section 1:
Beginning the journey

We would like to share the stories of Oxford Road, Reading as it reminds us that inclusivity is not just a goal but a journey. By embracing our shared humanity and finding common ground in our differences, we can foster a world where every road leads to understanding and unity. As Jackie from Lifespring Church in Reading poignantly remarks, "An ocean is made of drops," highlighting how small acts of kindness and community efforts create the special, welcoming environment of Oxford Road and Lifespring Church. The majority of these participants, in yearning to bring new meanings to their lives, continue to create 'a home' that infuses the nostalgia of feeling at 'home' by engaging in different work, political, religious, cultural and social activities, especially when faced with stories of race, class, socio-economic, migration, religion, ethnicity and identity. The complex migration experiences of refugees, and their voices, can contribute to migration studies and offer a way to understanding what it means to 'identify' with a sense of place and 'belonging' across borders. Some of the stories are of a 'survival' attitude which have merely impacted their diverse identities but found a 'home' in a space called Oxford Road in Reading. The University of Reading in 2023 became a University of Sanctuary – an initiative to recognise and celebrate the good practice of universities welcoming people seeking sanctuary.

The stories unpack and interrogate the social construct of place, the stereotypes of identity, culture, refugees, substance misuse and bringing meaning to humanity to those who have against all odds assimilated with the local life. Like everybody's story, they want

Photos by Gab Gibek

to belong, to be able to form their own identities and aspirations. They struggle with the cultural, social, identity changes that interplay with the values imposed by others. Identities are no longer traditional and homogeneous; hence the lived experience of the participants bring social science to the forefront and create innovative approaches to research without extraction.

The feminist and participatory research methodologies used embodies the trust relationship created to bring the hidden voices of Oxford Road. Research that involves participation generates an understanding of worthwhile humans, and raises public awareness to influence policy and action. It brings co-production into the forefront in which participants feel validated, able to make their own decision about how the research is disseminated, and they can use methods of their choice. As researchers, writers and all those that collaborated in this journey, how we understand the positionality and emotions that can impact knowledge production is an important consideration in listening to these diverse, complex stories of people of Oxford Road in Reading, especially when faced with stories of race, domestic abuse, ageing, substance misuse, migration, language, and identity.

Dr Alice Mpofu-Coles

Community Research Associate,Department of Human Geography and Environmental Science, University of Reading

Echoes of sweet and sour memories

Laughter echoes from depths of memory's keep,
Old trolley buses and secrets they'd seep.
Drivers leaping out with a stick and a wink,
Childhood games in streets, wild and free to the brink.
Dodging Mrs. Miggins' scolds with glee,
In our hearts, those moments forever will be.

Rock music wafting, rhythmic beats in the air,
Strangers sway on the streets, smiling with vibrant flair.
Bands we befriend, yet unaware of their fame,
Tomorrow's legends, rising to acclaim.
In pubs alive with songs, kittens at play,
Memories linger, fresh as if today.
I almost hear their mews, a cherished refrain,
Echoes of moments that forever remain.

Faces new, like uncharted shores,
Childlike wonder, craving forevermore.
Mum, wise to differences, taught us not to stare,
Unlined faces of neighbours, memories we wear.
Why do we recall those bowler hats,
Elbows patched, tartan checks that sat?

Yet, some memories twinge with a gentle ache,
A woman in rain, cold and heartache.
Mum's kindness, tea and warmth did bestow,
Bridging differences, friendships did grow.

Names forgotten, yet memories cling,
Echoes of messy games in hearts that sing.
In our minds, names collect like autumn leaves,
But in our hearts, the joyful essence never leaves.
Feelings of happiness, laughter, and delight,
Stored deep within, in the still of the night.
For memories are more than just what we know,
They're echoes of life's long ebb and flow.
Through the years, they've weaved their gentle art,
Etched forever in the core of our heart.

Time passes, faces fade away,
Oxford Road, a different display.
Mrs. Miggins, no longer the same,
Neighbours forgotten, where games once came.
Change brings new hues where trolleys once rolled,
Cars now queue where engines once strolled.
Colours and flavours, a mosaic unfolds,
A shrinking globe, its stories retold.
Fish and chips blend with Middle Eastern fare,
Worlds mingle, a flavoursome table to share.
Mrs. Miggins learns Urdu with care,
To converse with friends at Lifespring's fair.
Through all changes, constants remain,
Friendly faces, kindness in rain.
Oxford Road shifts, yet stays the same,
In every heart, joy's gentle flame.

Priya Hunt

Photo courtesy of Reading Museum

Photo by Gab Gibek

An Ocean is Made of Drops

Jackie's story begins with a move from Darlington Town to Reading Town, drawn by the promise of a university education in classical and mediaeval studies. What started as a step towards higher education turned into a lifelong commitment. Reading won her over, not just through its educational opportunities but also through love, as she met her husband here, affectionately dubbed "the farmer with no farm." Jackie's story is filled with many moments of kindness, much like an ocean, built from tiny drops of water.

Today, Jackie is a pillar of the Reading Town community, heading the bustling hub at Lifespring Church. This hub wasn't always vibrant; it found its unlikely home in what used to be a derelict snooker pavilion. Jackie vividly recalls the transformation from a building with wires dangling everywhere to a well-loved centre that buzzes with life and supports various community initiatives.

Jackie speaks warmly about her colleagues and their contributions. She appreciates the pastor who came up with the idea of using a café to bring people together, the builders who dedicated themselves to modernising the old building, the event manager who has actively expanded their resources, and the French teacher who has switched to teaching English. It's clear from her tone how crucial these individuals are both to Jackie and the success of their work at the Lifespring.

PENGUIN SAYS: Did you know that a beacon is a bright light that guides people to safety and can symbolise hope because it helps people find their way forward even when things seem uncertain.

The Lifespring Church café, which Jackie describes as the heart of their community efforts, is more than just a place for coffee and cakes. It's a gathering spot that has grown into a support network, offering English classes, addiction recovery groups, and more. The café, largely run by part-time workers and volunteers, stands as a testament to the community's spirit and self-help spirit.

The church itself serves many purposes. On any given week, it may host children's groups, youth activities, a help hub and even a support house for men overcoming drug and alcohol addiction. Hope House, managed by a dedicated couple experienced in addiction recovery, provides a stable and supportive environment for those striving to turn their lives around.

The church's outreach extends far beyond spiritual guidance, and being good to the community is a basic value. Recognising the substantial needs along Oxford Road, Jackie and her team have committed to being "part of the answer" for the area.

Jackie acknowledges that earning trust and significantly impacting the community has been challenging. Whether it's through simple acts like picking up litter and providing free tea every week or through more substantial efforts like supporting addiction recovery, each action is valuable. Jackie firmly believes that the church should be a visible and positive force within the community, one that would be sorely missed if it were absent.

The church's importance grew, especially during the pandemic. It transformed into a vital local support centre, delivering groceries and essentials to those in need. This continued even as pandemic restrictions eased, with the church distributing free food and maintaining meal deliveries to the elderly.

Jackie's dedication to community service is evident in these initiatives. She envisions the church as a sanctuary – a place people can rely on for support. "The worst scenario would be a church that fades away unnoticed," she says. Jackie is committed to making sure the church is recognised not just as a building, but as a caring and essential part of the community.

Despite challenges in volunteer engagement and funding, Jackie remains positive. She believes in doing whatever little one can to help, a philosophy that underpins all their projects. The café not only serves the community but also connects people to broader food resources in Reading Town, promoting a sustainable model of support. With a background in working with charities and families, Jackie is well-equipped for her role, which she approaches with evident passion.

Looking ahead, Jackie aims to address broader societal issues such as mental health and family support. Her goal is clear: to forge a community where everyone is aware that help is available, and where the quality of life is enhanced by the presence of their church.

Through Jackie's narrative, it becomes clear that Lifespring Church in Reading is not just a place of worship. It acts as a **beacon of hope**, a builder of communities, and a testament to the power of small acts of kindness and efforts to create a better world. "An ocean is made of drops," Jackie remarks, and every drop of kindness shared in the community is crucial in making Oxford Road and Lifespring Church the special places they are.

Jackie
Community Development Officer

Darlington to Reading, 250 miles

250 miles

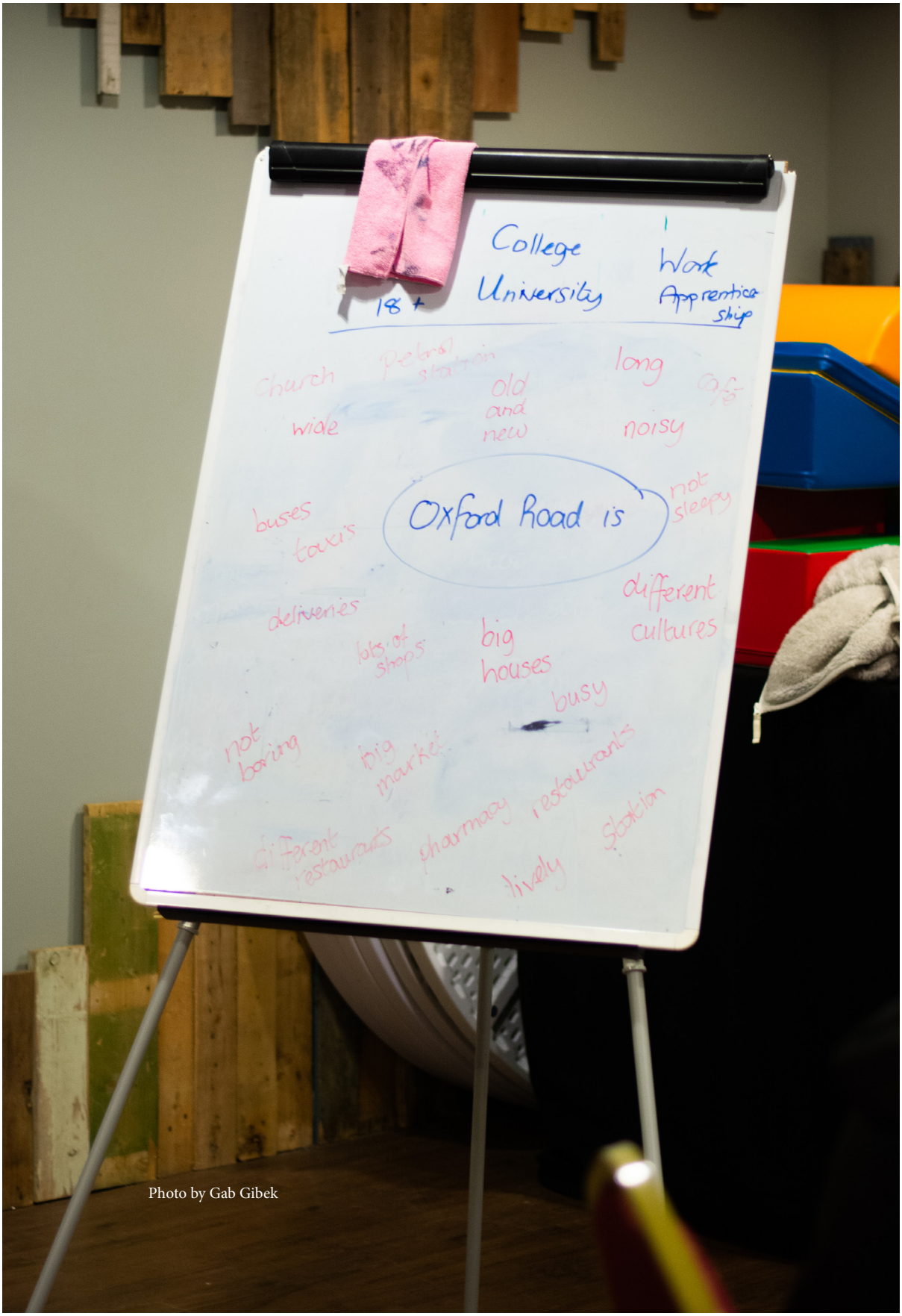


Photo by Gab Gibek

Pleasant Things do Happen as Time Goes by

A community can open its arms to change

Note: We are very grateful to Roger for sharing his story in his own words.

In Reading's Oxford Road we found the story of Roger (not his real name). Arriving as a student in the 1970s, Roger made his second home in this lively town. He came to attend the University, stayed to raise a family, and remained. In the 1970s gay men (and women) were disliked. It has taken many of the years between for Roger to feel accepted.

Roger has become fond of Reading, its rivers and lakes and the Oxford Road. Walking, driving and riding the bus along the Oxford Road, he has seen this community's transformation. Once run-down and avoided by many, it is now a colourful mix of people, shops and foods. Roger enjoys this diversity. Reading has become a place where differences in colour or sexuality are welcomed, not just accepted.

Not just society but also churches have changed. Places like the Lifespring Church welcome all and provide a service to all. Roger has worked there in the Help Club and now introduces new people to the services the Lifespring Church provides. The building's transformation from a cinema and snooker hall to a place of worship, community and service, is an inspiring testament to the power of community involvement.

Roger believes that the best way to help people is one-to-one. He talked to us about how the church no longer tries to change people's religious beliefs but focuses on the human aspect of the community instead.

Roger's journey reflects the evolution of society, moving towards greater acceptance and understanding. There is still more to be done and more awareness to be created in the world, but the Oxford Road feels like a good place to begin. Not just a street in Reading but part of the pathway to a more inclusive world.

Roger
Help Hub

Reading

0 miles

Photos by Gab Gibek

Photo by Robyn Woronka

Section 2:
Mundane vs. Grandeur

In our pursuit of the extraordinary, we often miss the beauty and significance of the ordinary. True magic and strength lie in the mundane moments and objects of our daily lives. This section reveals how simple routines, common objects, and everyday interactions can profoundly impact our lives.

Whether it's the act of photocopying documents, sharing a quiet cup of tea with someone, or offering a shoulder to lean on, these everyday acts build up to something remarkable. We rarely consider how a smile at a stranger can lift their mood, a simple thank you can cheer up a lonely soul, or showing someone how to find directions can make a significant difference. Each small gesture, seemingly insignificant, contributes to a larger web of connection and kindness.

Our modern world often celebrates grand gestures and big achievements, but it is within the quiet, uncelebrated moments that we find real strength and beauty. By redefining our perspective, we can unlock the unexpected power of the mundane, transforming how we experience the world and interact with those around us. This section invites you to join us in exploring the hidden potential in ordinary, everyday acts. Let us discover how these small moments shape our lives and the lives of others, revealing a profound and often overlooked source of inspiration and strength.

Penguin says: Did you know that mundane is another word for everyday, commonplace activities? And grandeur means something that is grand, big or splendid.

Photo by Gab Gibek

One of the Friendly People

Meet Ellie of Oxford Road

The interview starts with Ellie saying cheerfully, "I think she likes your macaroni cheese!", dividing her attention between the questions she's being asked and the child in her care. This makes the whole conversation fun and warm, painting a picture of her genuine interest in children and the people around her. Ellie has lived in Reading for a long time, raising four of her own kids and looking after many others for 25 years as a child-minder. She often goes to the Pavilion at Lifespring Church because of the friendly people and the toddler group, balancing the interview with feeding and playing with the kids.

Ellie has deep ties to Reading, having been part of the community since she was three months old. Her family, including her parents, husband, in-laws, and children, are all deeply connected to this lively town. She loves the old, terraced houses, the abundance of activities, and the great bus connections that make travelling easy. Ellie's natural ability to find friendliness everywhere shows a lot about who she is. She thrives on the lively, welcoming atmosphere of Oxford Road. "Everywhere I go, I meet people I know, which is nice," she says, an observation which captures her deep affection for the area.

Ellie happily observes the notable changes around Oxford Road, saying, "I've seen lots of changes, and there have been improvements in the area...like the population has changed. When I first lived here, there weren't many Polish people, but now there are a lot more, along

with Polish shops. Even the shops and food have changed." She welcomes these changes, especially appreciating the diverse cultural mix her children experienced in local schools, which struck her deeply. As a mother of **neurodiverse** children, Ellie values the openness and warmth in the area. She points out that people here are generally more accepting. Her children didn't stand out; rather, they were part of a community where everyone truly belonged, without any pressure to conform to a specific norm.

PENGUIN SAYS: Everyone has strengths and some things that they find challednging. Neurodivergent people are unique learners or different thinkers who find some things very easy and other things incredibly hard. In the right envirnoment, they can add great value and stengthen results.

The word "friendly" repeatedly surfaces during her conversation. It describes her children's schools, her neighbours, and the Pavilion at Oxford Road – a "friendly community of people of all different ages and backgrounds." Ellie highlights a unique aspect of the community: the children's group and the pensioners' lunch, where children have the chance to interact with an older generation they might not otherwise meet. In an otherwise busy world, she loves how people of different ages and backgrounds come together and get on well with each other despite their diversity - another example of kindness and inclusion in this place.

Ellie admits that the town isn't perfect – there are some instances of petty crime – but she has always felt safe personally. She suggests that while strangers and people from various cultures might make some feel shy or fearful, the diverse community of Oxford Road makes her feel less vulnerable. Ellie also connects with her neighbours through their shared love of food. She recounts fond memories, like a neighbour bringing over fried chicken, "delighting her children" and another who regularly made samosas for everyone. These stories highlight the warmth and friendliness of the people in her area.

Ellie's point of view offers valuable lessons. Kindness results in kindness, and this rings true in her case. She has the ability to see the good in people, the good that is often overlooked in the hustle and bustle of life. In a world where we can be anything, Ellie shows us the importance of being friendly and kind. It's a simple way to make our world a little brighter, just as Ellie does on Oxford Road.

Ellie
Cafe

Farnborough to Reading, 22 miles

22 miles

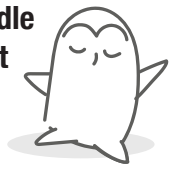
Photo by Gab Gibek

Here for Hot Chocolate

A loyal, reliable and hard-working member of Oxford Road, Shane seems to be the best man to know for anything, whether that be for help, a good chat, or a righteous game of snooker. A modern day 'renaissance man', ready to serve, help, and continue to foster the growth of the community around him.

Indeed, it was snooker that first strengthened Shane's connection to Oxford Road. Before it was Lifespring, it was *Riley's Snooker Club*, a place where anyone could come at any hour of the day, to play snooker of course, but also to socialise, to exist in a space where there was company and an excuse to meet new people in a safe environment. A social landmark, as impactful to the road as the foundations it was laid upon, where many friendships were formed that surely remain now through the Reading area. Shane, humble as ever, makes sure to point out it wasn't the 'big leagues' of snooker, but instead open play, where no matter who you were, or indeed how good you were, there was a place to go.

PENGUIN SAYS: Snooker is a cue sport played on a rectangular billiards table covered with a green cloth called baise, with six pockets, one at each corner and one in the middle of each long side. It was played as far back as 1875.



This closeness with Oxford Road is understandable when Shane begins to talk more about his history: 20 years spent living a stone's throw away from Lifespring and being part of this small-scale version of the world. A dentist, a doctor's surgery, the hospital around the corner, along with the vast variety of food available, what else could someone need that they couldn't find on the road itself?

As Shane tells tales of his employment history and how he has served the area of Reading and its community, he often takes on the roles society can tend to take for granted. First, he spent 12 years at Thames Water, helping to provide and aid access to water in the area. After this, he found a role driving the reliable Reading double-decker buses, a common sight for anyone who has spent any amount of time in Reading. The bus service is a lifesaver to students and commuters alike, and perhaps most importantly, providing residents with a sense of consistency within their routine. There's a great pride in this past, that while Shane lives the "easy life" now, perhaps it wasn't so bad beforehand. When describing how to get anywhere, Oxford Road is his base, his origin point. It represents the whole of Reading and holds points of comparison to many corners of the world.

While Shane no longer works in these roles, he has not stepped away from serving his community. Now, he is part of the local neighbourhood watch, as well as the community support team. He speaks casually about his friendship with the police, with the same familiarity as the friends he has on Oxford Road. To be able to manage these two loyalties, to remain approachable to those in the community and within Lifespring, while also working with these more formal organisations, speaks to the community's trust in Shane, and this is paid back by his willingness to serve and work for them in return. He is not a member of the police, he is just a person, but that is exactly what he needs to be to remain approachable to those whom he offers hot chocolate and conversation within Lifespring.

He also expresses his belief that Oxford Road is a safe place, asking "Why would I want to leave?". This question speaks volumes. It is a place which provides everything a man could need. He feels so safe, he must clarify that while leaving your door open might end up with a missing PlayStation, it wouldn't end with your house cleared out. It is indeed, a great thing, to live somewhere where you feel that crime is not surrounding you, that the people are kind, that you can trust the neighbourhood you work so hard to serve.

While the outside walls have changed, along with the place's name and purpose, Shane can still be found here every day, to have a "little chat" and "hot chocolate", as dedicated to his routine as any. What difference is there truly, between a snooker hall and a community centre? Perhaps the green tables have been replaced with coffee and conversation, but the social structure remains. He talks fondly of the many friends he has within the organisation and the road itself, that he is "very recognised around here" for "never saying no" to a request, whether for assistance or just a general chat. A man that never says no must have full faith in the people around him, that they all have good intentions, and he is well placed in Lifespring, to serve.

Photo by Gab Gibek

Shane
Cafe

Reading

0 miles

Doing Something Worthwhile

What do you call a person when you don't want to use their real name? In Sanskrit, an ancient South Asian language, there's a word "Anamika," meaning a woman with no name. That's what we'll call our hero today.

Anamika's story starts with her family and takes us back to when she was just 10 years old, arriving in the UK from Pakistan. She looked up at the grey Yorkshire skies and wondered, "Where is the sun? Where are the **mangoes**?" Back home, she'd heard stories of England's golden streets, but the reality was quite different – having to pay for fruit was a shock!

PENGUIN SAYS: Did you know Mango has been called the 'King of fruits, especially in South Asia, where Anamika is from'.

Anamika missed the mangoes and watermelons she could pick in her own backyard in Pakistan. It was strange for her to see her mum paying for apples here. She even asked her parents to send her back! With a hint of a child's grumble, she recalls how her parents made up stories about why they couldn't return right away. Despite having to put up with these little irritations, including an outdoor toilet, Anamika stayed in England – long enough to become the great-grandmother she is today.

Settling in wasn't easy, especially with no community from her own background. School was a new world, too – different timings and no other Asian students. Even though it was tough, caring for her sick mum made her grow up quickly. But the people were kind, and there was no racism, which eventually helped her feel more at home and in becoming a 'Yorkshire lass' as she calls herself.

Her life took a twist when she changed her religion and divorced her husband. Despite having a family, she had to leave her old life behind and start a new, which led her to move to Reading. Anamika values community deeply, maybe because she didn't have one when she first came to Yorkshire. In Oxford Road, she started a club called the 'Chit-chat club' to help Asian women feel at home, just like she wanted to feel all those years ago.

What does Anamika do at the Pavilion on Oxford Road? "I talk!" she says. Talking, making friends, and sharing stories in five different Asian languages is her way of bringing the community together. She's even thinking of learning Polish to connect with more people!

Oxford Road, Lifespring, and the Pavilion are vibrant places, full of life and connections, partly thanks to Anamika. She tried to start an Asian curry club, but it didn't work out. Yet, she hasn't given up. After all,

Photo by Gab Gibek

food is a great way to bring people together. And curry is one of England's favourite meals, she notes with a twinkle in her eye.

Anamika is all about helping others. She often meets strangers at bus stops, and within minutes, they share their life stories over tea or coffee at the café. "No one should feel isolated," she says. She's especially keen on supporting the elderly, creating a place where everyone feels safe and cared for. "It doesn't cost anything to be kind" is her mantra, and when someone says a simple thank you or appreciates her listening skills, it makes her feel special - that she is doing something worthwhile.

Anamika's kindness shines through when she tells us about helping a pregnant woman in danger. She kept the woman safe, hidden from her husband, who didn't want a daughter as a child. Anamika went out of her way to sort out this woman's paperwork and provided her much needed support in a tough situation. The mother-to-be was deeply grateful and requested Anamika to be at her side during the birth of the child, a girl who's now grown into a beautiful young lady. Anamika speaks of this as the "icing on the cake" – clearly a magical experience for her.

Behind her story is a brave woman who puts others before herself, seeing everyone as deserving of love and care. Anamika's life journey from Pakistan to the UK shows us the power of building connections and caring for one another. She has turned Oxford Road into a place bursting with colour and kindness. It's people like her that make our community truly special. Her story is a great reminder that kindness costs nothing but means everything!

Anamika
Volunteer

Pakistan, to Yorkshire, to Reading, 4000 miles

4000 miles

Oxford Road, Reading.

Photo provided by Reading Borough Council

Section 3:
Old Reading - How Old is Old Reading

Walking along Reading's streets, one often wonders about the town's age. When do we consider a town to be old? Is it merely a matter of counting the years it has existed, or should we also celebrate a town that matures and adapts through centuries? On the surface, Reading appears modern, with a skyline dotted with 21st century buildings and it is well connected to other urban centres in England. It balances contemporary development with the conservation of its historical heritage. The history of Reading dates back to the 8th century; it was an important trading and religious centre during the Middle Ages. The Abbey, now in ruins and located at the centre of Reading, was one of Europe's largest royal monasteries. The magnificent ruins, even after so many centuries, narrate the glorious past of the town.

Following World War II, Reading transformed from a historically industrial town into a progressive service sector economy with up-to-date facilities. During this period, new housing estates were developed to accommodate a growing population along with the expansion of railways and other infrastructure. The Tilehurst area, once agricultural land, was developed into housing. With the changing times, Reading shifted from brewing and biscuit manufacturing to a more diverse economy. The present-day Biscuit Factory does not manufacture biscuits but is instead a landmark cultural centre. The latter half of the 20th century saw the rise of technology and service industries in Reading, attracting a new wave of businesses and residents. The University of Reading, established in 1892 further boosted the town's profile, contributing to its economic and cultural development.

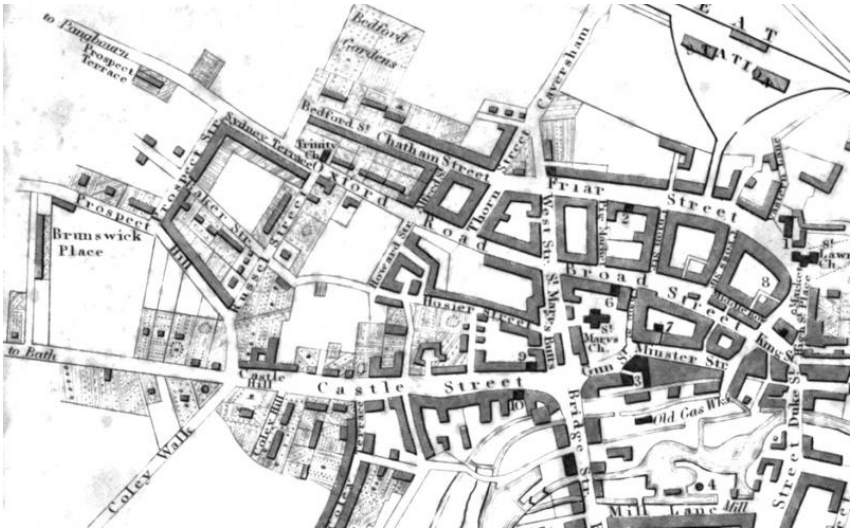


Photo provided by Reading Borough Council

Located at the union of two rivers: the Thames and the Kennet, Reading symbolises this spirit as a meeting point of many cultures and languages. In the following stories, our central characters – William, Benjamin, and Fran – address the changes their beloved town is experiencing. In their narrations, the sense of loss for the old times is loud and clear, but they also celebrate the newness of diversity. Accepting change is not easy, but Reading's community embraces it with open arms.

Penguin says: Spread over 45 square kilometres with a population of 174,000, Reading is growing faster than many other urban areas in England. Oxford Road, the town's nerve centre, is as diverse as its more than 72 spoken languages. It is not uncommon to hear people conversing in Punjabi, Polish or Pashto while riding a public bus.

A Beautiful Place to Be

Twin Brothers from Reading Town

Benjamin and William (names have been changed), both now past sixty years of age, have spent their entire lives in Reading Town. They are twins and have grown up together with many fond memories of their young days spent in and around Oxford Road – now a bustling commercial area. In their childhood, Oxford Road was very different: it was much greener and not as crowded. It was mainly a residential area occupied by the local people. Oxford Road is now a global melting pot, something the twin brothers celebrate. However, they feel nostalgic about their familiar neighbourhood, which seems to have changed completely. As they grew older, the road network became denser, almost at the same pace as their skin aged with new wrinkles. They have grown here in this town, but the reverse is also true - the town has grown with them.

At present, Benjamin and William both live in Tilehurst near the Tilehurst Railway Station. Benjamin says, "He lives on one side of the road, and I live on the other side". It seems that they are destined to remain together just as they were born together. Benjamin and William may have moved to Tilehurst, but their connection with Oxford Road remains intact. Both brothers visit the church regularly and look forward to enjoying a nice meal and catching up with their friends there. Benjamin shares, "They're very, very friendly people, and the meals are extremely cheap, and they do an awful lot for the old people". Both brothers are sad that many of the old people they knew are no longer around – many have passed away.

Benjamin and William have seen the town grow, and as with any growth story, it also has its flip side. William recollects, "The Oxford Road used to be a very pretty place. There used to be a lot of trees, and benches, everywhere for people to sit on. But now you come along Oxford Road, and all you see are rubbish bins. They want to make it a city, but there's nothing here to make it a city". The resistance to accept that their charming little neighbourhood has grown to embrace the world is understandable. William is probably not happy with the increasing population on Oxford Road, but this is where his friends are. Benjamin recalls that "Oxford Road had many children playing on the street". Those memories of that street, now littered with garbage, are disturbing for him. Both Benjamin and William are not very happy with the Internal Distributional Road (IDR) as they believe it has impacted the accessibility of the town centre. Benjamin chuckles, "In my day, you go along Oxford Road, straight through the town and straight into Kings Road and Queens Road. Now,

since they built the IDR, it's all changed. You try telling someone to go to Kings Road. It's a work of art". Yes, the Oxford Road neighbourhood is now a layered global hub that attracts people from all over the world.

Digging into childhood memories, Benjamin shares a story about a friendly police officer or 'Bobby' as they were popularly referred to by the locals. They were caught while they were **scrumping apples**. The police officer knew them by name, and he was known to everyone in the neighbourhood. This level of familiarity made the relationship quite friendly. Benjamin fondly remembers that the police officer was nice and did not punish them.

Penguin says: Scrumping apples means stealing apples from an orchard during harvest time. When done by young children they are usually given a warning as punshment. While it is not considered as serious an offence as shoplifting today it is still disapproved of by adults.

Both Benjamin and William's memories are spread across all the roads and streets in Reading. Benjamin remembers his nursery school, which was erased to make way for Overdown Road. After finishing school at the age of 14, Benjamin went to the University of Reading and got a degree in technical design. Although he was trained in a technical discipline, his passion lies in films. He acted in films more by chance than by design. He says, "I applied for extras, and I went for an interview, and they said, 'Can you read a cue board?'." From being able to read a cue board, Benjamin, in due course, learned a lot more about filmmaking – green screen, camera angles, and all that. He has many fond memories of his film experiences. He has not forgotten his co-actor Vicky, with whom he used to practise his lines at night.

While Benjamin had adventures working in films, life for William was not dull either. For reasons he does not share, William was expelled from the University and sent to Queen Anne's School, a private school, where he learned gardening skills. The image of his mentor is imprinted quite sharply in his memory. "We had a Polish chap, he would come to work with a bowler hat and umbrella, and you would think that he worked in an office, then he would change into his gardening clothes. He was a great bloke to work with." What he learned in his school days has not been wasted. William continues with his gardening to this day. Another strong incident in both of their minds is the many fires on Oxford Road. In fact, their father moved from Yorkshire when they were very young to work as a part-time fireman in Reading. Following in his father's footsteps, William briefly worked as a fireman.

Change, as the common saying goes, is the only constant we have.

Photo by Gab Gibek

Photo by Robyn Woronka

Benjamin and William are trying their best to cope with these changes, yet they struggle with accepting the perceived arrogance of the younger generation. They find the youth to have a "know-it-all attitude" sparking a timeless debate on generation gaps. While infrastructure like Overdown Road or the Great Western Railways may connect places such as Tilehurst and Oxford Road, these are inadequate to bridge the divide between the communities. To truly connect communities belonging to different ages, cultures, and religions, the search for bridges built with love, trust, and shared ideas is never-ending. The lunch and coffee sessions at the Lifespring give Benjamin and William the opportunity to interact with others and build an understanding of them. Achieving peace and harmony is an ongoing journey, requiring continuous effort and understanding. Lifespring is the platform that allows both brothers to build such bridges.

Benjamin and William
Volunteer

Reading

0 miles

Just Catching Up

Echoes of Reading's past

In the bustling town of Reading a special tale of friendship unfolds at the Pavilion on Oxford Road. Here, three friends, Fran, Bettie and Carol (some names have been changed) brought together by their passion for staying active, cherish their time together beyond their workout sessions. After burning calories at the community organisation, Oddfellows, they gather at the Pavilion at Lifespring Church across the street. This place not only serves as a spot for a hearty, affordable meal but also as a hub where pensioners mingle and enjoy each other's company. "We have a laugh," shares one of the trio, highlighting the joy and laughter that fills their lunches, while they're just catching up.

Penguin says: Did you know that 'having a hoot' is a phrase, believed to have originated from the United States of America in the 20th century. It means having fun and spreading laughter and cheer.

Amidst their daily routines, one of the friends volunteers at the Salvation Army, helping young mothers and others find necessary clothing at affordable prices. Bettie, another of the trio, has spent over two decades greeting and assisting patients at local hospitals, from the Battle Hospital to the Royal Berkshire Hospital. Her role at the reception desk has put her at the heart of community healthcare, where she mixes humour with responsibility, especially when reminding visitors to wear masks. The

Photo by Gab Gibek

Thursday meals at Lifespring Church have become a cherished ritual for her, offering a break from cooking and an afternoon filled with friendship. Their community service speaks volumes about their dedication to helping those in need, reflecting the warm spirit of Reading Town itself.

Fran, a Reading Town native, paints a vivid picture of her childhood in the bustling market town. She relives the memory of "people coming from everywhere" to the cattle market. From the multicultural buzz along Oxford Road to the peculiar yet fascinating trolley buses that needed manual fixing when they derailed, her stories are filled with a childlike wonder and a deep appreciation for her hometown. She recalls a curious first encounter with a West Indian man, a memory marked by her mother's gentle scolding for staring, teaching her a valuable lesson in manners early on.

Fran's youth was dotted with memorable moments, including watching the iconic rock band "The Who" perform. She shares a touching story about the band's famous drummer, Keith Moon, who once attempted to give her a newborn kitten during a film shoot – a tale that showcases her past's unexpected and heartwarming moments. "Everybody knew everybody," Fran remarks, longing for the tight-knit community feel of old Reading, where neighbours shared treats like toffee apples, creating sweet memories for all. Annie also shares a touching story about her mother, an Irish immigrant, who extended kindness to a lonely Polish lady after the war, inviting her in for tea from a cold bus stop and introducing her to other members of the Polish community. This act of kindness was celebrated at her mother's funeral, leaving a legacy of compassion and community support that Annie proudly remembers.

Carol, originally from Wales, has seen much of the UK thanks to her husband's railway job. Despite moving away from Tilehurst, Reading, her "spiritual home" for 40 years, she has found a new sense of belonging at Lifespring Church. Here, the importance of community is rekindled as she and her friends eagerly anticipate their weekly gatherings, always checking on each other's well-being and planning their next meet-up.

There's a touch of sadness in their tales as they talk about how Reading Town itself has changed and grown bigger and less personal. But some things have also changed for the better – they talk with approving smiles about the variety of vibrant food that is now available on Oxford Road, a bit of a change from the usual fish and chips that used to be served in the past.

Lifespring Church isn't just a place for lunch; it's a beacon of laughter and friendship. "**We have such a hoot**" the friends echo, as they often leave the volunteers bemused with their playful uncertainty. This place, woven with stories of past and present, continues to symbolise the unbreakable bond of friendship that started with fitness but grew to encompass so much more.

Photo by Gab Gibek

This charming tale of three strangers who became friends in Oxford Road over shared lunches and laughs, is more than just a series of events – it's a celebration of life, happiness, and the enduring spirit of community.

Fran, Carole and Bettie
Over Sixties Lunches

Wales to Reading, 112 miles

112 miles

Photo by Gab Gibek

Four Walls & People

cold biscuits and warm tea
well, it can't always be perfect
a room full of
hands that need warming
words that need hearing
food that needs eating

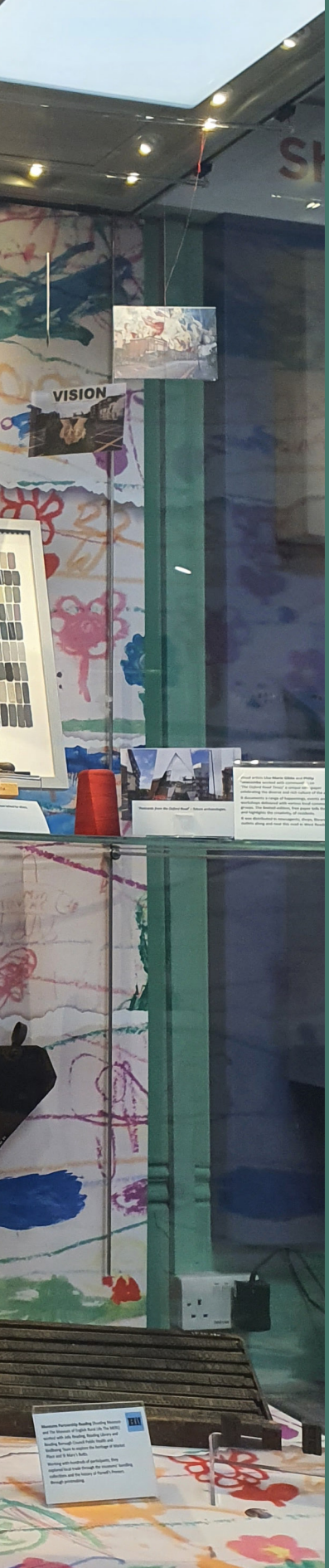
foundations that need building
concrete that needs time
to set and dry and strengthen
windows that need staining
pamphlets that need folding

a hand on a shoulder
a phone call of an evening
borrowed books and freely given time
comfy seats and air conditioning
time and heart and all the rest of it

a home away from home
anywhere in the world
all you need is
four walls and people

Maisie Crittenden

Discovering
Untold Histories
High Street Heritage Action Zone
Co-created by communities participating in Reading's High Street Heritage Action Zone project, this display showcases some of their creative collaborations, telling the story of how local people and Reading based artists are responding to the vibrant everyday life, rich cultural diversity and fascinating untold stories of our streets.
Hidden Recipes From My Ancestral Home
CYPRIOT POTATO
NASI LEMAK
GOULASH
PEAS & RICE
High Streets
Heritage Action Zone
Lifespring Stories



Section 4:
Resettled communities

People fleeing their own country

It is commonly believed that people flee their countries in pursuit of a better life elsewhere. Is that the whole story? Over the centuries, people have moved across borders by choice, but a significant proportion have left to escape tough situations at home. The stories in the following section elaborate on these lived experiences. Ernesto and Marianne from El Salvador, or Elsy from Honduras, were not poor; they could have managed their lives if their countries had offered them a safe environment. Most of the refugees that come to Lifespring Church in Nikki's English class have come with stories of persecution from their country and are in the UK for safety. Arriving in a new, unknown country and leaving a life that has been built over the years is stressful. Ernesto, Marianne, Elsy and others all landed in a new country where they do not even know the language – such is the strong desire to be alive. What is a home when everybody leaves or dies? They want a place they can call a home even if they carry their home in their memories. They want safety and for their children to thrive despite the scars they carry when they move. The United Nations states that One Refugee Without Hope is Too Many.

The last decade has seen historically high levels of forced displacement worldwide according to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) 2024. Immigration is a topical political issue in the UK. According to the UK government in 2023, around 67,300 applications for asylum were made in the UK. According to UNHCR statistics, as of November 2022 there were 231,597 refugees, 127,421 pending asylum cases and 5,483 stateless persons in the UK, including recent Ukrainian refugees. Iran, Turkey, Colombia, Germany

(Unfinished Story of a Carpenter' carpentry piece displayed at Reading Museum)
Photo by Alice Mpofu-Coles

Photo by Robyn Woronka

Penguin says: "Refugees didn't just escape a place. They had to escape a thousand memories until they'd put enough time and distance between them and their misery to wake up to a better day." Nadia Hashimi

and Pakistan host the highest number of refugees. There are more than 100 armed conflicts in the world at the writing of this book and against a backdrop of people fleeing persecution, famine, poverty, and climate change that is causing devastation in communities. People flee conflict and there is trauma in their stories which affects their mental and physical health, as we have heard from some of the refugees in this book. The space given by Lifespring Church to refugees creates a place of welcome and belonging.

Further information:-
https://cityofsanctuary.org/
https://togetherwithrefugees.org.uk/
https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/
https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/
https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/
https://care4calais.org/

Photo by Gab Gibek

The Importance of Hearing Stories

Knowing about Reading's own Huntley and Palmers and Suttons Seeds doesn't tell us what the echoes of Berkshire accents sounded like behind the ring of the trolley buses, or whether the smell of the delivery vans in the crowded streets was a pleasant or even recognisable one.

Historical information is useful to a degree, but it can never tell us what it feels like to be there, to be a bank manager in a bowler hat strolling home along a tree-lined Oxford Road eager to see a wife who has just purchased her first Kenwood Chef food mixer and to children who will be delighted at the small packet of sweets you've brought for them now that rationing has finally been lifted.

Penguin says: Huntley and Palmers began making biscuits in 1822 from a factory along the Kennet and Avon Canal. They supplied the British Army with their ration biscuits during The First World War.

The local policeman cycles past on his way to The Albion for a few drinks and greets a West Indian gentleman in a trilby, who is not yet familiar to all in this area.

The human experience is ultimately emotional. Facts about politics or fashion do nothing to give an impression of the Oxford Road at ground

level. What were the pavements like at rush hour? Where was a good spot to watch the sun go down?

The road has a rhythm that has changed throughout these years. What was the past like between the events set down in textbooks? Between election days and football victories, who hung out in Reading's cafés?

Penguin says: Suttons Seeds were set up in 1806 and were the first company to mail seeds to customers from their small shop in Market Square.

The way community forms, settles and changes in relation to those who make it up is affected by an immense relay of effects, a loop of constant give and take, absorbing and influencing new experiences all at once. Communities are constantly changing and as a result their nuances are so, so different from generation to generation.

As Ellie says about the elderly at Lifespring: what is so important about appreciating these details – feeling them and understanding them beyond their existence as simple fact – is hearing them from those people who experienced them. It's so important to engage with these tales as they are being told, allowing your interaction to expand the level of detail, to slow the pace or encourage distractions.

We forget that stories are the oldest form of human information transfer. Thousands of years ago, before the invention of writing, our history was passed along out loud and, as a result, became a part of the listener in a different way. Stories told aloud keep the past alive in such a human way. Each one passes a part of us on, down the years, to be held by some as yet unborn person. We hold our predecessors with us in this way.

Tell your stories, and look for stories in return.

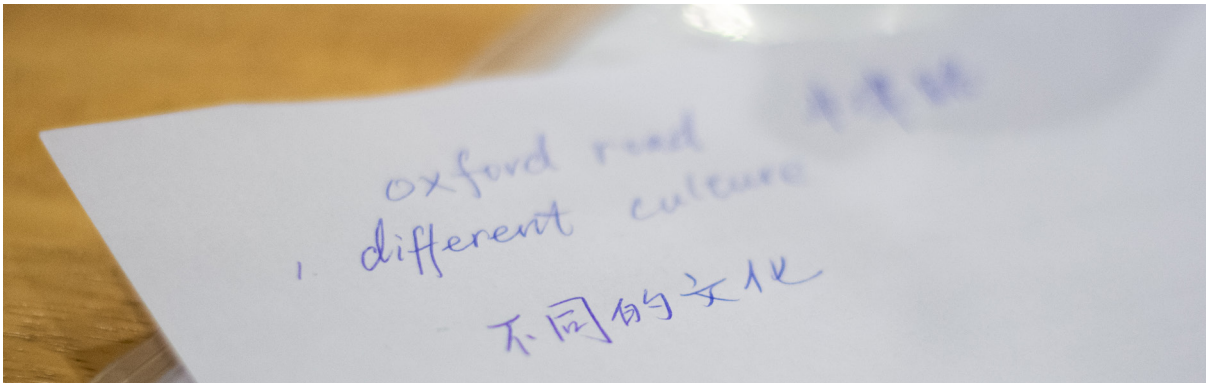


Photo by Gab Gibek

Oxford Road in Cantonese

Lifespring's wide array of volunteer-run activities provides a much needed space for vulnerable people. In this interview, we meet a woman from Hong Kong after her first day in Nikki's English class. "Nice teacher, very helpful, very calm." She's planning on returning next week.

We were asked not to publish her audio – she fled the civil unrest in Hong Kong only five months before, arriving in Reading with her family and eventually finding the English class at Lifespring.

So instead, the comic strip on page 45 sums up her flight well.

Her English is halting but spoken warmly in this second language. She left her home when she could no longer see Hong Kong as a safe place for herself, or her husband or young boy. This decision was deliberated over for 18 months, planned out. She does not tell us whether her son was involved in this decision, or how much he knew about his parent's growing concerns. But she and her husband made use of something that usually escapes most refugees: time.

Penguin Says: Hong Kong was a British Colony returned to China in 1997.

They spent time researching possible places to set up their new lives.

"We looked at cities near London, convenient, not like village, must drive a car and we look at good school for son, so we move here."

They had a flat they could sell to raise funds for this monumental move.

These words she uses to communicate were taught to her in quiet English classes that she attended after work, all in slow preparation for a life changing shift across the planet.

But no amount of time can prepare for the sudden culture shock, the strain of uprooting decades worth of days immersed in such a familiar place and knowing you'll likely never be able to return.

She's a curious woman, asking as many questions as were asked of her, gathering information about this town.

Her son seems to be help her understand Reading's culture – he is in Year 9 and despite what she describes as a harsh first few months, he prefers his school here. The teachers were far stricter back in Hong Kong. And this makes her happier too, about the move.

And then this is what she opens up about far more than the home she has left behind, about how he has changed now he's a teenager: "I saw a video about him when he was very small, I miss him". He used to bring her cuddles and loved to hold her hand, but now he's in his teenage grunting phase. "Just short words, it's very sad".

His life will continue here, likely much more English than he ever thought it would be. Perhaps, his early childhood in Hong Kong will become some sort of half-defined identity, a heritage he is aware of only in his parents' cultures.

We hear her learn the phrase "fingers crossed". She repeats it several times, "fingers crossed, fingers crossed", followed by "I hope so". Her hopes for the future are focused on her son beginning to talk properly again, and becoming a kind and caring human: "Maybe 2 or 3 years it will be better and better and better".

These are human worries. Perhaps this means she is settling here in Reading. At least, she gives little thought to the idea of returning to Hong Kong at the moment.

"The Hong Kong situation? No more freedom."

And here she starts to weep. She's offered a tissue and takes it, but she's not thinking of herself. "Not about me, but Hong Kong's future. About the children." This must be the hardest part of leaving your home - forced to watch as those people you know so intimately are stripped of freedoms and the place that has shaped every moment of your life begins to become unrecognisable.

She's here at Lifespring, she's found some structure and peace again. "For me, life is okay." She is still able to talk to a lot of the friends who remained, and makes little mention of anyone in Reading.

Lifespring has become this woman's introduction to the wider culture of Reading, and Britain, one that is so different to Hong Kong's daily heave and shining skyscrapers. The people, the smells, the cars, the sounds – all are so different.

She marvels at the variety of shops along the Oxford Road, this space where a variety of cultures meet and blend, share and grow. This space is undefined and constantly changing. It welcomes newness precisely because its normality is fluctuation, is change.

Her son immerses himself in school, what spaces exist for adults to begin to be introduced into worlds that are completely new to them?

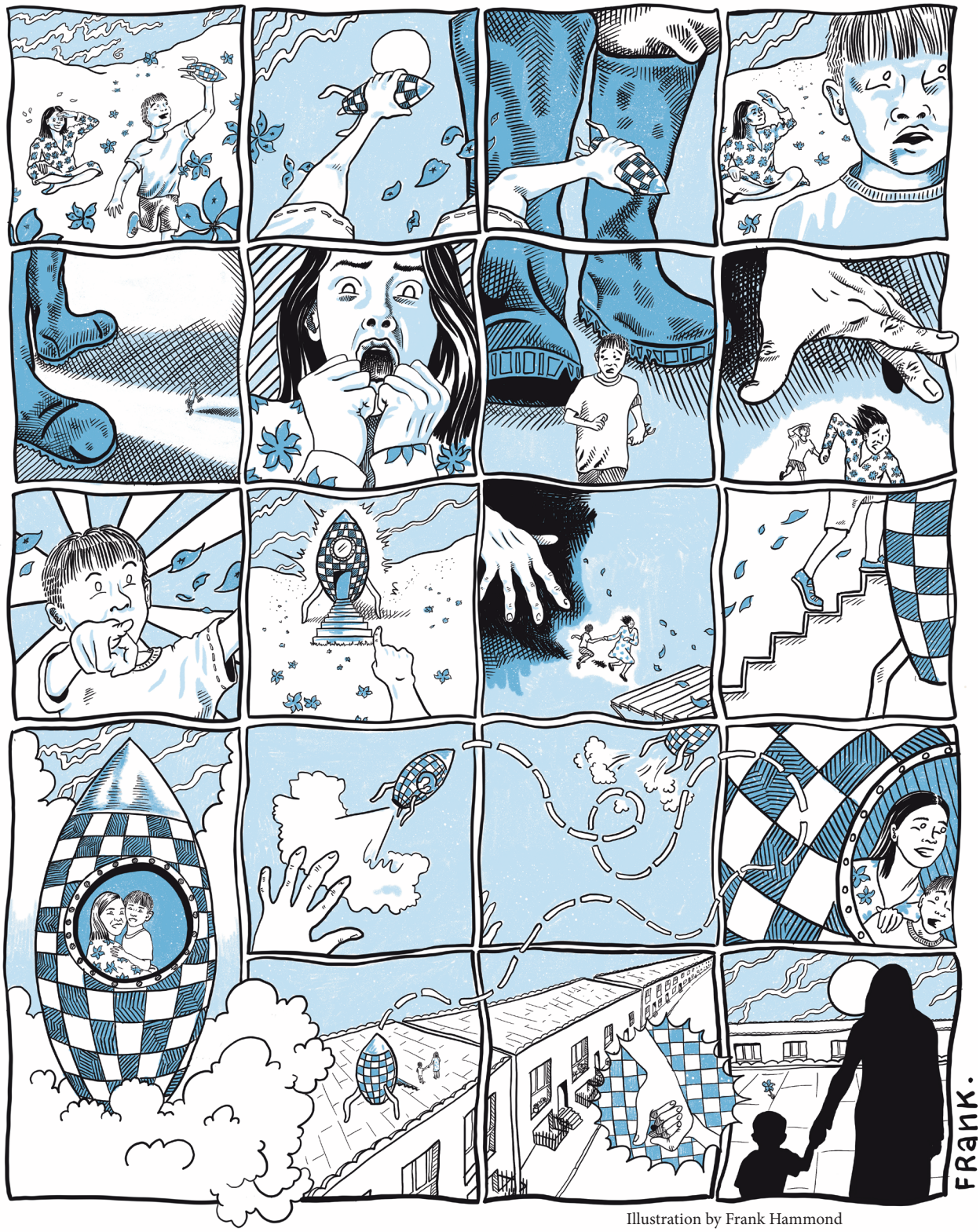


Illustration by Frank Hammond

So Many Things Happened

Elsy – an Aspiring Journalism student from Honduras

The following story contains references to miscarriages, gang violence, which may be distressing to some readers.

Elsy, at 27 years of age, has had a rough journey through no fault of her own. She is from Honduras, Central America, a country experiencing a severe law and order crisis, coupled with high levels of poverty and inequality. Amidst these difficulties, Elsy dared to dream – she aspired to be a journalist in her country, fully aware that it would not be an easy path. "There is a problem when the truth is presented with the information. The gangs and narcotic networks target anyone who speaks against them," she reflects.

Elsy shares with grief that she grew up amidst violence and gang wars. A few years ago, her father was shot by gang members in front of her near their home in broad daylight. Murders and massacres had become routine for her. "There is a problem between gangs. They are fighting with the police, among themselves," she says, expressing her hopelessness about the breakdown of law and order in her country. Despite all these difficulties, she remained hopeful and found love. She got pregnant and looked forward to nurturing a new life. Four months into her pregnancy, she went for a regular medical checkup. The medical staff were negligent while examining her, and she was traumatised when she learned that she had lost her baby. "In Honduras, medical care is horrible. They insult you; they treat you very badly. They ended my baby's life. It was going to be my first baby." The emotional trauma of this loss left a deep scar on her psyche. She said with disgust, "Being pregnant in Honduras is chaos. There is no medical care!"

Disheartened with her situation, Elsy decided to go to the United Kingdom to join her partner. Her partner, her love, also from Honduras, had left the country one month earlier. She hoped that once they were together, life would settle down on its own. She believed in him and trusted him the most. Elsy arrived in London on a tourist visa. It was easy for her to hire a taxi and reach Kingston, a town located in south-west London by the Thames River, where her partner lived. She realised that her English was not good enough to communicate, but the taxi driver was kind and brought her to the right address.

Elsy's dream was short-lived. Honduras is infamous for human trafficking, and as it happens, women and children often fall victim to false promises to escape poverty. She discovered that her partner was reluctant

Photo by Gab Gibek

to accept her, and he was staying in a shared flat. After three days of staying with him, he threw her out of his flat. She didn't know anyone else in this new country besides him. Standing on the road with her suitcases, she felt helpless. She remembered it was raining, and tears were streaming down her face miserably. With no other option, she planned to spend the night on the road near a shopping mall.

While Elsy was stranded, a Mexican person approached her and advised her to seek help from the police. Since he could speak Spanish, communicating with him was much easier for her. At the police station, Elsy recalls receiving good support. "They paid for my stay in a hotel for three days", she says. The police also asked if she had any family or friends in the UK and counselled her about her option to apply for asylum. Elsy was still blinded by love; she still had feelings for her partner. She approached her partner again, but this time he was ruthless, stating that he was living with someone else and couldn't help her any further.

Penguin says: What is Human Trafficking? Human trafficking refers to the process through which individuals are placed or maintained in an exploitative situation for economic gain. Trafficking can occur within a country or may involve movement across borders. Women, men and children are trafficked for a range of purposes, including forced and exploitative labour in factories, farms and private households, sexual exploitation, and forced marriage
(www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/FS36_en.pdf)

Dejected, she returned to the police and accepted their offer to apply for asylum. The date is very clearly registered in her memory: it was 12 January. She is now waiting for the acceptance of her application. She has moved to a hotel in the Oxford Road neighbourhood, in Reading from Kingston. In the meantime, she is trying to improve her English through classes offered by the Pavilion. She is finding it difficult to cope with her English language skills. She giggles nervously as she communicates in her broken English and says, "Oh, difficult, difficult, difficult". It is a steep learning curve ahead for Elsy, but she has not given up on her dream of becoming a journalist one day. She remains hopeful that she will be able to continue her journalism studies once she is accepted in her new country.

Elsy finds the Oxford Road clean and likes it a lot, especially the historical buildings. She is not fond of the food offered at the hotel, but she sees many options on Oxford Road. She shares she is not fond of restaurant food but loves to cook. She has friends in the neighbourhood now, and whenever she feels an urge to cook, she uses their kitchen.

Photo by Gab Gibek

While violence and the breakdown of law-and-order affect everyone, their impact is not equal. Elsy's story highlights that violence, misgovernance and other such dysfunctions affect women more severely than others. The scars inflicted on Elsy are difficult to heal, but with the friendship offered by the classes at the Pavilion, she hopes to bloom again.

Elsy
English Class

Honduras to Heathrow airport, London, 8530 Km/ 5300 miles by air
Heathrow Airport to Kingston, London, 16 Kms / 10 miles by car
Kingston to Oxford Road, Reading , 50 Kms/ 30 miles by car

5390 miles

Photo by Gab Gibek

The Story of a Carpenter

Ernesto From El Salvador

The following story contains references to gang violence, which may be distressing to some readers.

Ernesto, around 35 years of age, is a carpenter by profession. He used to run a small wood shop in his home country, El Salvador. Skilled in the art of wood carving, Ernesto could effortlessly shape wood into any form he wished. Unfortunately, he did not have the same control over his life. He never felt safe in his own country, always haunted by the lingering shadow of death. Whether on the streets or on his way to work, he constantly feared for his safety. "When you leave your house, you are not sure if you're gonna come back," he said, expressing his helplessness over the breakdown of law and order in El Salvador. Ernesto says while he was still in El Salvador a few years back, his brother-in-law left home for work one day and never returned. To this day, his whereabouts are not known to anyone. He worries about the safety of his sister and her young daughter, who were living with Ernesto before. Now that Ernesto has left the country he is concerned about them. He expressed his horror while describing El Playón – a hill in El Salvador where the gang members dispose of human bodies as if they are animals. The experience of salvaging a limb or the mutilated face of loved ones from that dump has left his countrymen numb. The entire country is terrified by the cruelties of these gang members.

Penguin Says: El Playón, a volcanic lava field near the capital city San Salvador, gained disrepute during the Salvadoran Civil War (1980-1992) as a dumping ground for bodies of political violence victims. It continued to be used for this purpose during subsequent years of gang violence. Both government forces and guerrilla groups were known to use this area to dispose of their victims.

Ernesto always had a feeling that the gangsters would soon be chasing him, and that's exactly what happened. Now, it was his turn. The gang members demanded $4000 dollars from him within seven days. Ernesto knew it was next to impossible for him to organise such a large amount. If he failed, he had no other option but to end up on El Playón hill. This very thought sent a cold shiver down his spine. He made a bold decision. He sold all his assets in just three days, wound up his entire life, left his near and dear ones, and fled to the United Kingdom - an unknown country with no one there to receive him, but a country he believed would allow

Photo by Gab Gibek

him to live. He landed at Heathrow Airport in the evening after a journey of almost 13 hours.

At the airport, Ernesto was stunned by the sheer number of people and was clueless about what to do next. He says that God was kind to him. He received support from many officials who guided him in seeking asylum to enter the country. This process took several hours. He was tired, and exhausted, but grateful that the officials were exceptionally kind to him. How could he forget James? An official who interviewed him was welcoming and respectful towards him. At that point in time, he appeared to be a God-sent person. During his interview, he established that he did not have any criminal background; rather, he was running away from criminals. While fleeing, he was mindful about carrying his carpentry tools. He considered his tools as his extended self. He could create his next phase of life with these hard, cold, metallic pieces. During the interview, the officer checked his bags, looking for any sharp objects. He feared that they might take away his tools. The officers were kind and appreciated his skills. He felt confident and saw hope for his future.

It was the following day, Sunday, he remembered clearly, when he received permission papers from the authorities to enter his new host country as an asylum seeker. He was happy; at least he had the permission papers, but he felt helpless without knowing where he could go next.

With the assistance of a few people, he converted the little money he had brought with him into sterling and made his way to a hostel in Russell Square, London. The hostel was essentially a small room in a basement, dark and dingy, with as many as sixteen beds stacked up together, leaving hardly any space to move around the room. As he opened the door, the damp stench hit him. Luckily, he got a lower bed to sleep on. He collapsed onto it, feeling tired, thirsty, and utterly exhausted. It had been stressful to make his way from the airport to here. Everything was new. Out of exhaustion, his eyelids closed. His mind drifted to the streets of El Salvador, and he imagined being pushed by a heavy, black AK-47 rifle on his chest. He woke up in fear. Slowly, the fog in his mind disappeared. He was still alive. Despite so much violence, he was still alive. There is Christ, and he believes in God. He lived there for the next ten days. He was worried as his money was running out. He only had around two hundred pounds – how long could he live on that? He approached the officials again, and this time they assisted him in reaching a hotel designated for asylum seekers on Oxford Road in Reading.

He has been living on Oxford Road for almost a year. He has a room to himself. He expresses his gratitude to God for this new lease on life. He loves Oxford Road for its diversity, especially on Saturdays when he goes out. It is a pleasure to see families enjoying their meals together and children playing on the street. He feels jubilant, as if Christmas celebrations are going on. A devout Christian, he cannot express more gratitude to God for his new life. He is happy that his skills are valued in this new world. He aspires to share and contribute by teaching his skills to younger people. He is motivated to give back to society.

Ernesto misses his sister and his niece and prays for their safety. He values the safety that he enjoys on Oxford Road: "Safety, you know, you feel safety here." Coming from a country where each day is a struggle to stay alive, Ernesto now enjoys the safety and security of his new host country.

Ernesto
English Class

El Salvador to Heathrow Airport 8,800 Km / 5470 miles by air
Arrived in Heathrow approximately one year back
Heathrow Airport to Russell Street, London 28 Km /17.5 miles
underground train
Russell Square, London to Oxford Road, Reading 45.9 miles/ 73 Km by car

5470 miles

Photo by Gab Gibek

A Journey to Reading

Marianne – The Hairstylist from El Salvador

Every cloud has a silver lining

The following story contains references to gang violence and rape, which may be distressing to some readers.

"Every cloud has a silver lining" – this saying holds true for Marianne's life. The silver lining may not shine as brightly as one would hope, but it is certainly better than before. Eight months ago, Marianne arrived at Heathrow Airport with her mother and three young children, seeking refuge in a foreign land with only one hope: to stay alive. She had left El Salvador, her homeland, fleeing from the gang who had threatened to murder her and harm her children. She knew if she had stayed, they would all have been killed by the gang. She came to the United Kingdom hoping to get refugee status, giving her a chance to live a safe life with her family.

Marianne was running a reasonably successful hair-styling business in El Salvador, enjoying a decent lifestyle. She had a good, helpful client base. Marianne's mother was staying with her to help raise her three children. Her eldest son is 15 years old, followed by two daughters aged 9 and 7 years. Life for her was not picture-perfect, but it was not too bad either. Like many in her country, her biggest concern was the breakdown of law and order. She had to pay 'rent' to the gang members. She was paying and had accepted the fact that this would go on forever.

In 2021, the lockdown due to the Covid pandemic forced her to shut down her business for nearly eight months. She was living off her savings and with the little support that the government provided at that time. She was facing financial hardship, and on top of that, the gang members were inconsiderate about the ongoing crisis. After the lockdown was lifted, she slowly started to revive her business. However, the demands from the gang kept increasing. She never refused them and requested more time to pay. Once she resumed work, she started making payments, but they were never satisfied. The gang even demanded money for the period when she

Penguin says: An asylum seeker is an individual who has sought international protection and whose claim for refugee status has not yet been determined. War, persecution, and human rights violations force people to flee their homes. At the end of 2023, there were approximately 6.9 million people around the world waiting for a decision on their asylum claims.
(www.unhcr.org/asylum-seekers).

Photo by Gab Gibek

had no earnings. They demanded US $2,500, an amount she could never manage to gather.

One unfortunate day, late in the evening, while she was alone at her business, three men broke in and overpowered her. To her horror, they raped her and warned of even worse punishment if she didn't pay. They threatened to kill her young son and do the same to her daughters. On another occasion, she saw the gang members approaching her young son. He was alone, returning home from his friend's house. They threatened to kill him if she failed to pay. These incidents have shocked her for life. She breaks into tears when she tries to describe them.

Marianne knew she and her family were extremely vulnerable. She was aware that some informants shared information about anyone in exchange for a little money. She did not feel safe. She has seen how young boys were killed and their bodies dumped in the infamous El Playón hills. There was no one to protect her; even approaching the police would be of no use. Marianne was completely devastated. After the incident with her son, she decided to leave her homeland forever. She gathered money from her clients and bought plane tickets. After a long 13-hour flight from El Salvador, when Marianne and her family landed at Heathrow Airport, they were mentally as well as physically exhausted. At the airport, she asked several people for directions to the refugee counter, but none could assist her. Language was a tough barrier. She was completely at a loss, and

the entire experience was unnerving. She realised the power of language. With much difficulty, she managed to contact the officials and after the **asylum-seeking** process, she was sent to a hotel on Oxford Road, Reading.

Marianne is now living with her family in the United Kingdom, her new host country. She has been living on Oxford Road in Reading in a hotel for the last eight months. Living in a hotel can never be compared with a normal life, but she is determined to keep her family safe. As time passes, she and her family are trying their best to get their life back on track. Marianne regularly attends English classes offered by Lifespring, recognising that she needs proficiency in the English language to provide a good life for her children. She also engages in voluntary work and does what she is best at: giving haircuts to young people. She gets pleasure from styling their hair to make them feel confident. She is happy that her children are enrolled in school, and all three of them are slowly getting comfortable with the English language. She is concerned about her mother, who feels left out because of the language barrier. She is grateful that her mother is safe here and someday, she will be able to get enough language skills to communicate. She loves being on Oxford Road because of its diversity. With a twinkle in her eyes, Marianne chuckles, "There are so many varieties of food on this small stretch of road. I want to go to each restaurant and eat." Oxford Road is where she feels welcomed and where she can be part of giving.

Marianne
English Class

El Salvador To Heathrow Airport 8,800 Km / 5470 miles by air.
Arrived in Reading eight months back. Heathrow Airport to Oxford Road, Reading 52 Kms / 32 miles by car

5470 miles

"No Penguin"

Nikki – The English Teacher

Nikki, a British-born citizen, is a linguist and an enthusiastic teacher. She is passionate about teaching English to people whose mother tongue is not English. "I've wanted to teach English to people from other countries since I was, well, very, very young," she says. Driven by this passion, she has found a way to do what she loves over the years. At present, she runs English teaching classes at the Pavilion as part of the Lifespring Church community activities.

She has been living in Reading for the past twenty years, though this is not what she had planned. Initially, she moved to Reading only for a year but developed a liking for the town and decided to stay. Nikki is very familiar with Oxford Road and its neighbourhood. For the first ten years after moving to Reading, she lived close to McDonald's on Oxford Road. After that, she moved to Prospect Park, which is not too far away from her old neighbourhood. Nikki has fond memories of her children studying at Oxford Road Community School. "When my children were at Oxford Road school, there were lots and lots of different languages spoken there". This, in itself, was a big education for them. She is very proud that she could expose her children to the world's diversity.

Early in her career, Nikki tried different jobs; she worked with the NHS, taught in secondary schools, and also taught German and French. While teaching at Prospect School – one of the secondary schools in Reading – she came across an opportunity advertised by the local church to teach English to people from different countries. She got in touch with the church, and to her surprise, they offered her a place and some resources to begin with. She never thought it would be this easy to work towards her dream job. Having said that, Nikki also admits that she has an advantage. She is a local, and everyone knows her in the neighbourhood. They all trusted her. She was honest in accepting that "I know the people, it's not like I walked in off the street".

Penguin Says: Who is a Refugee? A refugee is forced to leave their country due to harassment, war, or violence, often facing threats because of their race, religion, nationality, or political opinion. Refugees seek asylum in another country to find safety and rebuild their lives and abide by local laws. In 2023, 117.3 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced due to conflict, violence, and human rights violations. (UNHCR, 2023).
www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2023)

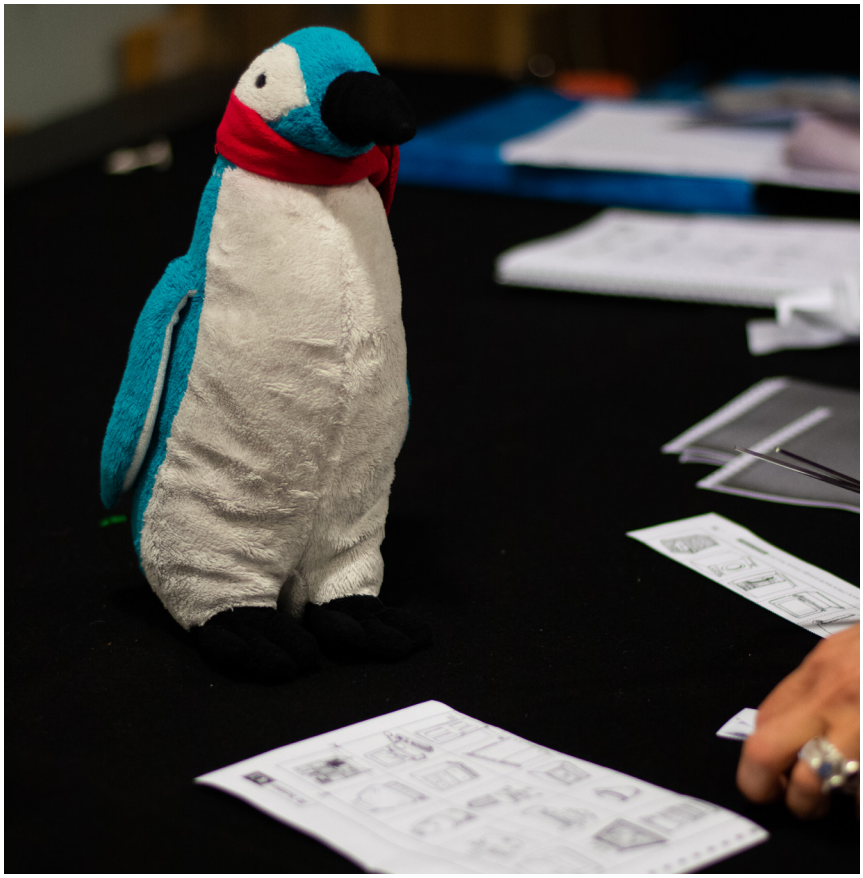


Photo by Gab Gibek

Around 2014, Nikki began offering drop-in English conversation classes with only two students. She continued, and now these classes have flourished under the Lifespring community banner. Her class includes people who speak Arabic, Farsi, and Kurdish. In any given class, there are students from as many as seven to eight language backgrounds. Recently, a large number of people have been coming from Ukraine. Nikki says the cohort of her students keeps changing depending on the socio-political changes the town is experiencing. At present, a large number of students, both young and adult, are asylum seekers. This may be because she is involved with Care for Calais, a growing charity organisation that works with refugees. Through them, she is in touch with the asylum seekers living in a hotel in the Oxford Road neighbourhood. As there is no space in the hotel, the classes are conducted at the Pavilion, which is convenient for everyone.

Nikki has two people assisting her. One of her assistants knows many languages, allowing her to bond with the students. The other is a

local from the United Kingdom like her, but they both have distinctly different English accents. This puzzles the students. Nikki uses this to emphasise the point that there is no single English accent. She says, "It doesn't actually matter a hundred percent how you pronounce it and what your accent is. It doesn't matter". The idea is to communicate, and if that is achieved, the purpose is fulfilled. Nikki encourages students who are ahead in their language journey to come forward and support other students. This empowers them, boosting their confidence. Peer-to-peer learning is undoubtedly more effective.

For almost two years, from around 2019 to 2022, COVID-19 caused unexpected disruptions. Online teaching was not easy, as students were shy and unwilling to talk to an adult. To address this, Nikki devised a technique using animal soft toys to make the students comfortable. She tried many animals, but it seemed a penguin won the students' hearts. Nikki shares that while students may feel hesitant to speak to her, they are comfortable speaking to a soft toy. Students, especially asylum seekers, are stressed for various reasons, making it difficult for them to learn. Learning the English alphabet, which is very different from their own languages, can be intimidating. Using the penguin to communicate has helped to reduce this stress. Nikki is happy that she is able to make learning fun and contribute to their education.

Nikki defines Oxford Road in one line: "It's the whole world on one street." If you cannot travel the world, then let the world come to you. As an English teacher, Nikki considers herself lucky that through English, she is exposed to a large number of languages, allowing her to experience various cultures, countries, and their people. Over the years, Nikki claims, "I've had people from 42 different countries; they've just turned up in Reading for various reasons." It is not always necessary to travel the world physically; often, language can be a means to travel too.

Nikki
English Teacher

Arrived to Reading 20 years ago and now lives near Oxford Road

? miles

Tomorrow

there's not a light at the end of a horizon
but there's a horizon
for now, that is enough

the ceiling fan is predictable
water runs all day and night
the lock never shakes from force
or fear

we eat dinner
able to make eye contact
our hands reach softly over the tablecloth

our children get tall
all of a sudden
they don't need our help to reach the shelves

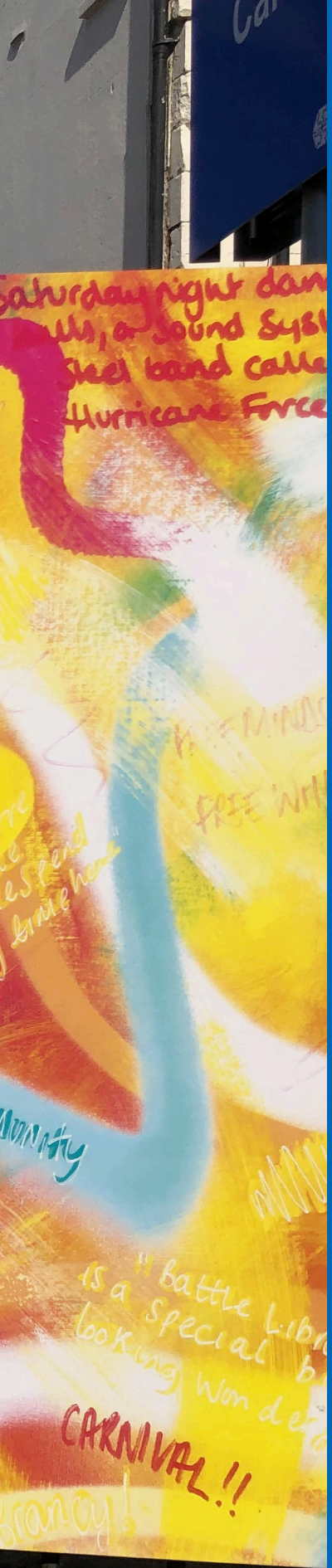
they speak a different language
sleep soundly and softly
they begin to forget the bits we remember

and when we head to bed
with the radio still whispering
tomorrow seems brighter than today

Maisie Crittenden

LIFE SPRING
I have so many memories from Ford Road
MultiCultural!
IVUN AFOLASI
Great place to meet up with old friends
MAKAFUI
CULTURE
TH - as kids we used to to go train spotting from the bridge & it was exciting when a steam train went under.
@ANUSA.CREATIVES

image ?



Section 5:
Individual purpose

To find purpose, is to have purpose

What is individual purpose? It can be defined as the pursuit of what matters most in your life; a goal, aspirations, or any specific objective. A person's purpose can only be discovered and defined by them themselves. The pursuit of finding purpose is the first half of a long battle in life, and the second is indeed to fulfil it. Sometimes, purpose can be as simple as getting to the next day ahead, or keeping your family well-fed and warm. We're all ultimately looking for a space to exist within. Development of self-respect is a wonderful side effect of the process of finding your place.

And we know ourselves best. No one else can really decide for us what the most fulfilling use of our time will be – you alone know what you find difficult and what you enjoy.

In modern society the burden of working, social responsibilities such as family alongside any physical or mental struggles can leave little space for people to truly reflect on what their purpose is in life, and how they can best reach the goals they have for themselves.

In this era of limited time, of working two jobs and constant monetary worries, why do people volunteer the little spare time they have for little to no compensation? The answer is purpose and fulfilment. The stories throughout this project show how much volunteering gives to the community, but also to the person who volunteers, and offers their time and support. There is a sense of pride, a sense of satisfaction, in seeing the people around you benefit from your presence. Humans are social creatures. We have

(Gemma's Mural created to celebrate the diverse and rich culture of Oxford Road)
Photo by Robyn Woronka

Photo by Gab Gibek

evolved to cooperate and the sharing of tasks is such an important part of our survival. Think about the feeling you get when you do something for someone. *Anything* for *anyone*.

The neighbourhood of Oxford Road is enhanced by those who work in these community cafés, who help run language groups and organise meetings for those struggling with addiction, those who offer a sympathetic ear in times of hardship, and an ability to relate and offer advice based on their own experience. Lifespring's first task is showing those people who come to them for help that they *are* worthy of the time of day, but this must emerge alongside their own self-belief.

It's been said previously, that,"you can't be paid to care." It's also true that there is an inherent self-fulfilment in volunteering that could not be matched in any financial compensation. A sense of internal purpose, which is paramount in a feeling of self-worth, which, while different for everyone, is tied together as a feeling that you matter, regardless of your societal position, and can change the lives of those around you positively.

Photo by Gab Gibek

Firm Foundations

Cooking and Moving on in Life

Stuart, now in his early forties, was honest in sharing about his mother's boring cooking skills. This, however, turned out to be an advantage for him. As a child, he spent more time in the kitchen alongside his Nan, who was a great cook. At school too, he engaged in cooking and later gained some work experience as he prepared for the next phase of his life.

The town of Reading and Oxford Road are new to Stuart. For the last twenty years, he has struggled with addiction. Only a year and a half ago, he came to the rehabilitation centre in Reading Town, hoping to overcome his addiction. Stuart grew up in Brentwood Town, Essex, and later moved to Chelmsford City to work in pubs and bars. Working in a restaurant was a natural career choice for Stuart; he was charmed by the bustling kitchen atmosphere in pubs and restaurants. For the first five or six years, he worked hard, creating his own dishes, and looking forward to a bright future. Unfortunately, he began finding comfort in alcohol after work hours. What began as a friendly pastime slowly led to alcoholism which then further dragged him into drug addiction. Amid the aromatic delights of the kitchen, the shadow of addiction loomed large. The decline into emptiness was quick, and he felt powerless to stop it.

He found himself in a dark pit, lacking hope or dignity. Stuart became distant from his family, and even his sister refused to let him see her children. This humiliation left a deep scar on his identity.

As the saying goes, "Life sometimes offers second chances to kind souls." Stuart arrived in Reading Town with the hope of getting a second lease on life – perhaps not the most normal reasons to visit a town. But it is here, at the rehabilitation centre in Reading, that Stuart was reborn. Reading, especially Oxford Road, is his cradle, nurturing him back on his feet again. With the support of many friends, some of whom had similar struggles, Stuart was able to break free from the grip of alcohol addiction. The journey to recovery has not been easy, but with the support of friends, he feels hopeful. Being in Reading and in the welcoming environment of Oxford Road gave him a firm foundation on which he could now stand tall.

The second part of the rehabilitation program required Stuart to volunteer at Lifespring's café. This gave him an opportunity to pick up cooking again. Stuart admits that working at the café has given him a routine and a purpose in life – something that he missed before. He now works at the café three times a week and enjoys making food from scratch. He particularly enjoys cooking traditional English food. He's not very happy about English cuisine being reduced to plain fish and chips. Like a true expert, he excitedly describes English food as being much more than just fish and chips, stressing the importance of good meat, potatoes and vegetables, and not to forget, an impressive presentation. He also experiments with making Italian food, insisting on making proper dough, sauces, and pasta fillings himself. He resists hurrying while preparing food, strongly believing that food is best when it is made with love.

The café gave Stuart a regular work routine and some discipline, while the Lifespring Church helped him develop a social identity. The Church serves as an integration of many cultures and faiths. Stuart has been meeting many people here from different walks of life – some with challenges, others not. The people generously offer friendship and support to keep his morale high. The Church also offers many opportunities to socialise and be part of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Cocaine Anonymous (CA) meetings. Oxford Road is vibrant and bustling, and he enjoys it very much. Currently, he is spending his time taking online cooking lessons, preparing himself to be able to join work full-time. He is confident to walk along the road of recovery, carefully arranging blocks of his future again – bit by bit and this time very cautiously. He hopes to move from his current support accommodation to Woodley Village with his friend and secure a regular full-time job, but not in the pubs or bars – never again.

The biggest reward Stuart has received is having his parents back in his life. He fondly remembers his brother and acknowledges his support. He has also been able to mend his relationship with his sister. Having earned back his sister's respect, Stuart is now a dignified uncle, showering his nephew and niece with love and affection. He feels ready to embark on his second chance with a firm foundation.

Stuart's journey is proof of the strength and compassion found within the community of Reading Town. In the face of addiction, providing second chances can empower individuals like Stuart to rebound and establish a renewed sense of purpose, laying down the groundwork for a fresh start. The Lifespring Church, situated at the bustling intersection of Oxford Road and Russell Street, symbolises the heart of the neighbourhood – a place where diversity thrives, and the vibrancy of its people shines through. It's a reminder that the soul of a town lies in its inhabitants, their stories, and their willingness to support one another, shaping the urban landscape into something greater than the sum of its parts.

Penguin Says: Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) and Cocaine Anonymous (CA). AA and CA are supportive communities of people who share their experiences and support each other in their journey to overcome addiction. The methods adopted by AA and CA are influenced by Carl Jung, a renowned Swiss psychiatrist. Jung emphasised spiritual transformation and the need for a deep, personal change to overcome addiction.

Stuart
Kitchen Volunteer

Brentwood
Grew up in Brentwood, Essex
Worked in Chelmsford (5-6 years)
Oxford Road, Reading (1-1.5 years)

80 miles

Giving Back

You don't have to live somewhere, for it to become home

Sarah's journey to Reading Town and, indeed, Lifespring, unlike many others, was one of coincidence. After 20 years spent in Leeds, Sarah moved to Winnersh Village for love. Winnersh is around 30 minutes away from Reading via bus. But by her own admission, it is Reading Town that stood out to her as a centre for outreach and became the cornerstone of her experience, growth, and development as an individual.

Sarah's experience with Lifespring started six years ago, as she began to attend **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)** meetings at the church after a long-term struggle with alcoholism. The church offered weekly meetings at a time when support and accountability meant the world to her. The centre served as a calming place. There was always someone there to talk to about the stresses of life alongside the struggle of addiction. Sarah partly attributes her current three years of sobriety to these meetings. Her confidence has grown with the support of the community around her, leading to her ability to talk so honestly and openly about her past.

Penguin Says: Sobriety is a term which means avoiding use of mind or mood altering substances, in this case, alcohol. Alcoholics Anonymous is a peer led group in which people come together to form a community and work to solve their drinking problems and addiction. Multiple Sclerosis is a disease that affects the brain and spinal cord, causing a multitude of symptoms including fatigue, pain, and issues with the nervous system.

Alongside these, she is also part of a life group specifically for women, which takes place during the week, and which gives participants a chance to catch up and share stories and experiences. This is important as it is regular; without such a schedule, many of these women could go weeks or months without having this opportunity to talk and relate to the people around them. Without this social structure, people often struggle with greater mental health problems caused by isolation.

Prior to moving to Reading, Sarah had already experienced struggles before her experiences with alcoholism, dealing with childhood abuse and an alcoholic mother, all of which led to her self-confessed "abnormal childhood". Alongside this, she has been diagnosed with **Multiple Sclerosis (MS)**. She speaks about the experience openly, saying that it can cause her to feel physically limited, and it is very easy to become overwhelmed when working or, indeed, volunteering for the church. However, she is able to adapt her role to work alongside these issues, changing her responsibilities from the café to the reception desk when physically struggling.

Photo by Gab Gibek

However, all these issues, these past struggles, seem to vanish when Sarah begins to talk about her children. Sarah first had a daughter at the young age of 16. Her daughter now lives nearby in Wokingham Town. The word "amazing" is what Sarah repeats when describing her daughter, and what she has achieved in working in the construction industry and having her own flat. Sarah is proud of her daughter, and proud of her second child, her son. At 18, her son still lives at home, yet to "leave the nest", but it is clear the sense of pride and satisfaction she has at how her family has ended up, and therefore, how she now wants to go on and "give back" to those around her, and not just sit around.

This sense of giving back is what led to her joining Lifespring's job club – using her past occupation as a career advisor to help those in the community, specifically those living on Oxford Road. Her description of the road reflects reality: "The people on Oxford Road aren't perfect. Many struggle with addiction to drugs and/or alcohol, and there is also a large homeless community who make use of the centre. Working in the centre can be 'scary', but there is an acknowledgement that often the people struggling have no other options, and that the positive work and support being given out is hopefully beginning to 'ripple out' amongst all residents of the area. A lot of the time, people just want someone to talk to for five minutes." Sarah can poignantly reflect that she has needed those five minutes before, so is now more than happy to give them back to people.

Sarah is well aware of the relationship between her attendance at the centre, her volunteering work, and the positive impact this work has had on her life. She's there at least four times a week, for life group, job club, volunteering in the café on a Friday, and then the church service on a Sunday. Her recovery has built upon the foundations of AA to follow the path set to her by Jesus, and her sobriety is strengthened by the constant social support supplied by the centre.

Sarah is not someone with past drug or alcohol issues. She is not someone framed by her disability or past experiences. She is a community member fighting to help those in need, much like she herself was supported and lifted to where she is now. At the Church, Sarah is Sarah, a volunteer, a mother, and a champion of those around her.

Sarah
Volunteer

Leeds 200 miles - Winnersh - 20 miles - Reading

200 miles

Take the Thorns Back

Obviously, Sean

Born in the town of Oxford, United Kingdom, Sean's journey to Lifespring is a complicated one, involving battles with alcohol addiction, but when he tells it, with a smile on his face and a joke not far from his lips, it seems to have led him to exactly where he should be.

After moving between Oxford and Bournemouth, Sean spent some time in prison due to an alcohol-related incident, which led to him ending up in Reading. After a period at Yeldall Manor, a treatment centre for men struggling with addictions, he now lives at **Hope House**, a place for those in discipleship training. He discovered the church while at Yeldall Manor, where the centre holds its recovery group in the church once a week. There is a clear appreciation for the tea and cake Sean was offered at the time, the stability of such a programme when perhaps, there was little else. At this time of inner conflict, being part of the community, and being treated the same as all those around him, was important in keeping Sean grounded in the world outside of Yeldall. The ability of the church to offer these programmes is clearly something that has granted Sean this opportunity to thrive as an individual.

He self-confesses he is at the church "every day of the week", even "including Mondays," whether volunteering or attending meetings, forming as crucial a part of the organisation as the walls and windows. The foundations the church provided in his recovery are now repaid in excess with his involvement in the organisation. It is a stronghold of perhaps the greatest cup of tea ever given.

Sean speaks of the "peace" he finds within God's house and, indeed, the community that has been created alongside it. At the **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)** meetings held within, he uses the compassion and empathy developed through his experiences to relate to people who come from all different backgrounds of life, with their similar struggles leading them all to the same place.

Sean's next goals are varied. He wishes to have a full-time job in the church and currently works as a landscape gardener.

"Even when it's cold and wet, I still like it": a brave statement as to his passion for the work he does, which emerged from his time in Yeldall where the residents were responsible for the condition of the gardens and landscape there, even being chased by the odd bee on occasion.

A common theme emerges from Sean's passion, and it seems to be one of repair, or more specifically, salvation. Recently, in his newly found role as a local landscaper, he worked in a house where the garden had

Photo by Gab Gibek

been abandoned, and allowed to grow out of control. However, the original design and the area's foundation were still there. What the garden once was, could still be seen. Behind the thorns of debris and age, were the roses of the beauty beneath.

He was able to "take all the thorns back and see it come back to life". Perhaps that's what Sean is best at, as shown by him taking back solid control of his life, and his ability to fight past his own battles with alcohol and circumstance. The thorns of life are different but exist in every person's experience, and Sean's ability to take those thorns and change his own situation is inspirational in its simplicity: a man who can now smile while talking about God, who attends discussions on workshop music and gives back to the community.

Penguin Says: Hope House is a supportive housing unit to empower people into work and education, specifically helping those struggling with life-controlling problems (such as alcohol addiction) and the reintegration of their residents into society. Vape shops are becoming a massive part of the modern day high street.There are three currently open on just the Oxford Road!

After finding God in prison, Sean talks with the same fondness of Oxford Road, Reading as he does his religion. The reliability of the **Vape Shop** and Subway is not lost on someone with such a unique perspective on the people of his community. A friend's birthday at the Tandoori, a church which offers salvation, is simply a few feet apart. Working with people who share his faith as well as the wider community outside the church is a big part of Sean's day-to-day life.

When asked what Lifespring means to Sean, he answered very simply: "compassion". It speaks to the community he has purposefully built around himself. It speaks to what the church provided for Sean during his stay within Yeldall Manor. Perhaps, most importantly, it speaks to exactly the sort of man Sean has learned to be from his time on Lifespring. To feel compassion not only for those around him, the community he has helped build, but also for himself, and for all that he has been through.

Sean
Volunteer

Oxford to Reading - 75 miles

75 miles

Photo courtesy of Lifespring Church archives

The impossibility of credence

sunlight feels different
through stained glass windows
there's a weight to the warmth
different colours shifting softly across skin

and if faith could be held
malleable between two pale hands
the weight would be too much
for any man to bare

time is a healer
and they say God has the patience to wait
but the bible has too many words
for me to read on a short lunch break

so I carry a full-size cross
but only the exterior is wooden
the hollow inside filled with rusty chains
and empty bottles that rattle around

when we walk down Oxford Road
me and him
I wonder if he knows before I do
exactly where we'll end up

Maisie Crittenden

Photo by Gab Gibek

Section 6:
Faith in recovery

Having faith in recovery can mean two very separate things. For one, it can mean having a belief that recovery will work, that programs such as Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous will give an individual the steps to overcome their addiction and take back responsibility within their own lives. The alternative meaning is that faith itself, belief in God or a higher power, is an extremely useful tool in an individual's recovery and rediscovering purpose in one's life.

At Lifespring, both of these meanings are explored in the stories presented, as discovering faith served an incredibly important role in many of the stories within this upcoming section. There is no one right answer for what faith means to an individual, and indeed, having faith is having an acceptance of impossibilities and knowing that belief can lead a person to incredible things.

The relationship between faith and recovery is eternally complex, and nuanced. Many of the stories presented here embrace faith and religion as a useful weapon in the battle against addiction and struggle, but others find it an additional weight to bear alongside that of the minutiae of day-to-day life. 84% of studies in the U.S. have recently shown that faith decreases the risk of substance use disorders, and those who have faith feel more comfortable reaching out for help from their community.

There is no right answer when it comes to faith, many beliefs coexist among those who live on Oxford Road, and recovery is much the same. Every individual journey is different, and what works for one person doesn't always impact the same with others. Acknowledging these differences is an important part of the modern day faith system installed by Lifespring and other similar organisations

which envision giving people the choice to use faith as a tool in their own lives for positive effect.

Lifespring is both a community centre and church at once, so it is natural those using the facilities in the first aspect become naturally drawn to the second, as most of the members of the church also volunteer in the Pavilion. This symbiotic relationship only makes sense when we remember one of the core tenants of faith is to help those around us. Volunteering, and working on oneself, is having faith that recovery can happen and is accessible to everyone.

Photo by Robyn Woronka

8 Years Sober

Recovery
(Names in this story have been changed to maintain confidentiality.)

Charlie's story of how he came to Reading shares many similarities with others who have ended up on Oxford Road. This road tells a story of struggle, faith, and an understanding of the self and the journey we all take to understand and eventually forgive ourselves.

Prior to coming to Reading, Charlie lived in Southampton, before battles with alcohol addiction led to him entering Yeldall Manor, a treatment centre for men struggling with drug and alcohol addictions. With the support of the centre, the church, and the community he has built around himself, Charlie has not had a drink for eight years.

Charlie's ability to talk about alcohol is refreshingly frank and honest. He admits freely he would love to have a drink, that alcohol relaxes him, but that it is also not good for him. It ends with him saying the wrong thing to people he cares about, like friends and family, which has led to him losing connections with people such as his brother and others still living in Southampton.

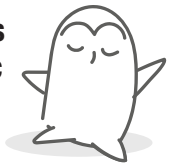
Charlie has not only suffered through these battles, but he has also struggled with disability, specifically **Crohn's disease** and **fibromyalgia**. Crohn's disease is the chronic inflammation of the digestive system, often causing severe pain, fatigue, and malnutrition. Fibromyalgia is a disorder that affects muscle and soft tissue, often leading to chronic muscle pain, fatigue, and disordered sleeping. Due to these symptoms, Charlie requires use of a **stoma bag**, and experiences constant fatigue and pain. Charlie is currently unable to work, meaning Lifespring has become his place to frequent for the "good café, coffee, tea, and people". His description of the people around the church is overwhelmingly positive, that people are "friendly and supportive" at the family church. He is not self-defeating with these conditions and doesn't see the point in sitting around and "feeling sorry for yourself". It is here he insists upon his current mindset, to "march forward in the light of Jesus".

Charlie's relationship with faith is complex; he is still in the process of fully accepting his faith and the burdens that come alongside it. He can be truthful and upfront about his relationship with both addiction and the faith that he has used to combat it. He is firm about one thing: his belief in Jesus, and that he is being looked after. Faith is a constant process, and there is conflict between the time it takes to receive the "salvation" or "healing" promised by religion, but Charlie describes it all as a learning process. The outlook he holds is that God, and specifically Jesus, does not

Photo by Gab Gibek

want him in the gutter. The two, or indeed, one spirit, want him to march alongside this path.

Despite these struggles, these moments of being wary of faith, Charlie is firm in the fact he is set upon the "main road" of moving forward. His life is accelerating in the right direction, and he walks that road alongside God, and his own self-belief. He admits it is hard work to resist temptation, that it would be easy to simply go and get a drink, but that would isolate him. He surrounds himself with people of the church, and specifically, the recovery group serves as an additional reason to withhold from drink, as he understands those people share his current journey through sobriety. **Sobriety** is a term for staying away from substances which alter the mood or mind, in this case, alcohol. Perhaps this is an excuse, perhaps it is a strength of the church in bringing those who struggle together, but most importantly, it is one reason in a long list why Charlie has managed to resist falling back into his own addiction.



Penguin Says: Crohn's disease is the chronic inflammation of the digestive system, often causing severe pain, fatigue, and malnutrition. Fibromyalgia is a disorder that affects muscle and soft tissue, often leading to chronic muscle pain, fatigue, and disordered sleeping.A stoma bag is a medical device which collects waste from the abdomen and stores it on the outside of the body.Sobriety is a term for staying away from substances which alter the mood or mind, in this case, alcohol

Charlie's relationship with the Bible is flawed. He insists it feels like a task or job and that it does not give him strength. However, he does feel the word of God through music, at the church and outside of it. Christian music gives strength through its words, through the uniting of people into one place, and allows Charlie to pray with the words that are made more accessible to him rather than those of the Bible.

When talking about Oxford Road, there is an uncertainty. Charlie does not lie for the sake of satisfying his fellow residents, he is "not in love with Reading". Forced here due to the funding provided for his attendance at Yeldall Manor, he has become another part of the multicultural patchwork that forms the foundations of Oxford Road, another of those that have found a home in Reading. It is not Reading that matters to Charlie, but it is the shared attendance and love of those he knows within the church and the life he has begun to live under the light of God, which empowers him through each day.

Charlie
Volunteer

Southampton to Reading, 60 Miles

60 miles

Love Who Walks up the Steps

Often in our life experiences, a seemingly mundane activity – like visiting a grocery store or waiting at the bus stop – can prove to be a life-defining moment. Six years ago, Chris, a resident of Whitley, Reading, aged 56, walked up the steps of the Pavilion, the home of Lifespring Church. Alan, a regular at the church, encouraged Chris to do so. For Chris, walking up those steps on that Sunday changed his life. Once there, he never looked back. "I knew I needed help. So, I walked up the steps, and I've been here ever since. It's been a miraculous journey," Chris says. He met his wife at the Pavilion, and now both work at the Hope House within the church. He never thought this was possible for him. Chris was on prescription opioids and had been battling heroin addiction for almost 30 years until he walked up the stairs of the Pavilion.

Penguin Says:
1. Prescription for Opioids
Opioids are a class of drugs naturally found in the opium poppy plant. Prescription opioids are used mostly to treat moderate to severe pain. These are generally safe when taken for a short time and as prescribed by a doctor, but they can be misused too.

Chris works as a Facilities Manager at Lifespring. Making fun of himself, he says jokingly, "They call me the facilities manager. I think it is a glorified word for caretaker". However, he seems to be enjoying his work. With pride in his voice, he elaborates, "I set up events, cleaning toilets, making sure the safety of the people in the building by taking care of fire regulations, health, and safety – basically anything and everything ". He acknowledges that all this is possible as he has a good team to work with. Chris is a devout Christian, having faith in the power of Jesus. He says, "We all believe in that scripture with different parts of the body of Christ, and we all have our role to play, but we all work together as one body". He remembers his mentor at work, Jan. After he got sober, he started helping Jan at Lifespring Church by assisting him with odd jobs. Today Jan is no longer with us, and Chris is working in his position. Now the young ones help him – the cycle of life goes on.

Although it took Chris many years to walk up the steps at the Pavilion, neither Oxford Road nor the Pavilion is new to him. He has spent all his life in Reading. His association with the Pavilion and Oxford Road goes way back when Oxford Road was not what it is today – a vibrant, diverse global hub. In his childhood, in the seventies and eighties, Oxford Road was known as 'Irish Road'. The neighbourhood was dominated by Irish people and their families. There were a few popular Irish pubs: the Nags

Photo by Gab Gibek

Photo by Gab Gibek

Head and the Battle. It was only in the late eighties and early nineties that other communities started moving in, making Oxford Road more diverse.

The Pavilion Building is a big part of Chris's childhood memories, and he remembers this building in various forms as it changed its purposes over time. Chris shares, "This building's been a big part of the Oxford Road. I came here when I was a child to watch Saturday morning pictures. When I was an adult, I played snooker here, and now I worship the Lord here". He remembers as a mischievous child how they used to throw polo mints from the cinema balcony onto people's heads. He has so many good childhood memories about this building. It seems the Pavilion's life trajectory – from a cinema hall to a snooker hall now to Lifespring Church – mirrors Chris's life. Chris, now in his later years, finds his salvation in the building where he spent his youth. He visited Oxford Road to buy and

sell drugs when he was young, and in the same location, he now worships and shares his kindness with strangers. The Pavilion stands as a repository of his and so many other Reading people's childhoods.

As it is said, experience is the greatest educator, and Chris has learned his life lessons through his experiences. For him, the kindness he can offer gives his life purpose. He is happy if he can offer a hot drink to someone who enters the church building, and share a chat to lift their mood. He admits "There is poverty along Oxford Road. There's prostitution, there's drug addiction. It's sad that people have to live like that". But he does not want to lose hope in darkness. He believes that the small act of kindness by opening the church building to everyone – whether they believe in the Lord Jesus or not – is a step forward.

Penguin Says: Pictures: The 'pictures' is an old 'slang' term referring to the cinema. It comes from the phrase 'motion picture' which was how movies were originally made with stop motion film.

Chris is happy that the church embraces the diversity of the Oxford Road community. This is a place where people come in because they feel safe and secure, and they seek help with the hope that their lives will be changed. He says that he has seen many lives transformed within this building. It is like seeing two sides of a coin in a person, "They have gone from one side to another", and most often for the better. This building stands as testimony to these life-changing stories.

Chris believes that, "Oxford Road is a blessing in a way". It allows him to see brightness, and hope amongst all the darkness. It teaches him to be hopeful and embrace kindness with people whom the world would shun.

Chris
Facilities Manager

Whitley

0 miles

Photo by Marcin Czyż

Closing Reflections

As the sun sets and shadows stretch across the pavement, Oxford Road takes on a serene liveliness. This street, once just another busy part of Reading, can become a symbol of community and kindness, if only we stop to look. The various faces that have crossed our path in this book show us that even when times are tough, small acts of goodness can make a big difference.

Oxford Road serves to remind us that even in dark times, people's kindness can light the way. The warmth of smiles, sharing tea in the Pavilion, and the laughter of young children interacting with pensioners create a human bridge across different cultures and generations.

In these pages, we have travelled through time, visualising the trolley buses of Old Reading, old rock bands and the bright faces of children playing in the streets. We have journeyed through the world, listening to people who carry precious memories from the countries and regions they've come from. They bring with them sadness, grief, and love, but also a glimmer of hope. This shows us how times have changed – from childish stares at new faces to a place where an Indian curry, a Polish pierogi, and the English fish and chips are served at the same table. Change, with its mix of good and bad, shapes our community and helps us grow.

Oxford Road reminds us that in a world where we can be anything, all that really matters is to be kind. As Mother Teresa said, "I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples." These ripples of kindness, no matter how small, can spread and create a supportive, vibrant community.

As we close this book, we hope to carry the spirit of Oxford Road with us. Every smile, every helping hand, and every kind word can make a difference. There are still many problems, but there is also hope. In these moments of kindness, we find the true heart of our community and the strength to face the future together.

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https://research.reading.ac.uk/oxford-road-stories/

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The Oxford Road Stories Research project began in 2020, with funding from Historic England's High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) fund. Managed by Reading Borough Council, the fund supports investment in buildings and shop fronts with community engagement and cultural events. The Oxford Road is historically and culturally significant in Reading – it is ethnically diverse with areas of social deprivation. Developed through Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods, issues in the community have been highlighted directly through the voices of the individuals who live, work or pass through this area. They tell stories about lived experiences through their authentic voices.

Researchers from the University of Reading's Human Geography department worked with the local residents and businesses to tell their Oxford Road Stories. One building, the Pavillion, home to Lifespring Church on Oxford Road participated in a further storytelling project, about the people who pass through. This book shares their stories.

The diversity of one road in a town and the pathways into this geographical area of town through drug addiction, homelessness, refugees, shoppers, food lovers, historical characters, vibrancy, languages and different people of all ages. This is their legacy.

Their stories are also available to listen to here
https://research.reading.ac.uk/oxford-road-stories/

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