

Helping the unfortunate for 50 years

Caritas Anchor House is well-known for helping the homeless. But when it opened half a century ago, it did so with the intention of supporting dockers who were out of work and out of luck.

Caritas Anchor House is perhaps most familiar as a charity helping homeless people get their feet back on solid ground. But its origins lie with seafarers keen to get their feet back on board.

Originally named Anchor House, the charity was set up in 1962 as a mission to provide out of work seafarers from the nearby Royal Docks with a roof over their heads.

Four years later it was officially opened by the then Archbishop of Westminster, His Eminence Cardinal John Heenan, on December 10 1966.

Well entertained during their stays, the unemployed seafarers could enjoy drinks in Anchor House's bar, get a hair cut by its barber and sit back and relax in a 50-seat television theatre.

Mariners could also enjoy a turn on the floor with ballroom dances taking place every evening to keep the men – and some ladies – happy.

Kathy Blayney, who works as a receptionist at Caritas Anchor House but whose connections to the charity go back to the 1970s, recalled sneaking into the dances as a 17-year-old pretending to be one of the nurses who were invited along by the organisers.

She said: "The dances were always such fun and very popular. On most nights more than 150 people attended. The annual October anniversary dance was a particularly big event and one of my highlights."

"I made many really good friends there, including my now husband."

During the 1960s, things began to go into decline on the docks with technological advances resulting in tens of thousands of job losses. This changed the area for good – and Anchor House with it.

As the docks and industries linked to it began to close, Anchor House – which changed its name in 2014 – began operating as a hostel for the homeless. It has

been working with men and women in need of homes, work and support ever since with 220 people helped each year.

"Caritas Anchor House has changed for the better," Kathy said. "We do so much for everyone who stays here. You see such change take place in the lives of the people who come here."

One such person is Debbie who, after sleeping rough for four years, gained the support of Caritas Anchor House, providing her with a place to stay and a work placement in the office of former secretary of state for work and pensions Iain Duncan Smith.

"Without Caritas Anchor House I might not still be around," she said. "They gave me back who I am and probably a little bit more."

Now the organisation, which has been based in Barking Road since it was set up by the London Inter-Diocesan Council of the Apostleship of the Sea, is expanding with 25 flats now built to help people make the transition from living in sheltered accommodation back into the mainstream.

But demand for spaces at the 118 bed homeless hostel is high with 598 applications for places in the year to April 2016, an increase of 76 per cent over the previous three years. And new statistics published by Shelter show Newham has a homelessness problem with one in 27 people in the borough with nowhere to live.

The importance of Caritas Anchor House is as strong as ever.

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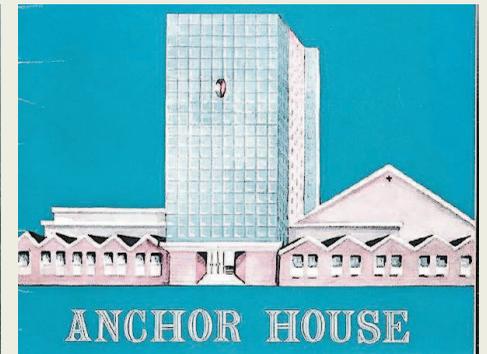
People helped by Caritas Anchor House every year



■ Caritas Anchor House's home in Barking Road. Pictures: CARITAS ANCHOR HOUSE



■ A ballroom dance held at the hostel.



■ The front cover of an annual review of the charity's work published in the 1960s.



■ Canning Town in 1968.