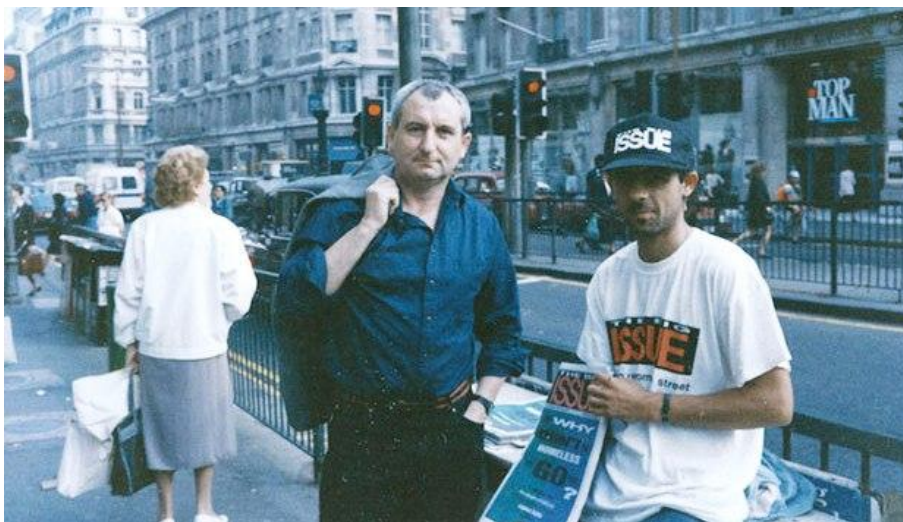


John Bird

Born 30.1.1946

Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk



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This life story was compiled by Alex Reid from internet sources in November 2020. Acknowledgement and thanks to the Big Issue website, the parliamentary website, and Wikipedia.

1. Early life

Bird was born in a Notting Hill slum to a poor London Irish family. He became homeless at the age of five, resided in an orphanage between the ages of seven and ten, and was often excluded from school.

He became a butcher's boy after leaving the orphanage, and supplemented his income by stealing. Between work, he spent several spells in prison during his teens and twenties where he learnt to read, write and the basics of printing.

Bird attended Chelsea School of Art, but was homeless again by 1967, sleeping rough in Edinburgh while being sought by the police for petty offences. In the early 1970s, he started to build upon his prison education and set up a small-scale printing and publishing business in London.

For two weeks in 1970, he worked as a dishwasher in the Houses of Parliament canteen, an institution he would later return to as a life peer.

2. The Big Issue

In September 1991, Bird launched The Big Issue with Gordon Roddick, co-founder of The Body Shop. In November 1995, he launched The Big Issue Foundation to further support vendors of The Big Issue.

He is currently on the Board of Directors for The Big Issue Group, which incorporates The Big Issue, Big Issue Invest (its social investment arm) and The Big Issue Foundation.

The Big Issue magazine started as a London venture but expanded with specific editions and services to other British cities, and then to other countries. Bird is also the founder of the International Network of Street Papers, which now incorporates over 100 street papers, and is published in 34 countries in 24 languages.

In 2001, with The Big Issue Group chairman, Nigel Kershaw OBE, Bird founded Big Issue Invest, a provider of finance for businesses, charities and NGOs with the aim of creating positive social change.

It is the social investment arm of The Big Issue Group, and initially only dealt in loan finance. In 2009, Big Issue Invest launched a social investment fund, and has since invested more than £30 million in hundreds of social enterprises making a positive impact in communities across the UK.

3. Political work

Bird was a member of the Workers Revolutionary Party in the 1970s.

In March 2007, Bird announced his intention to stand for election to the post of Mayor of London as an independent candidate. In May 2007, he unveiled his election manifesto for the 2008 poll, but in October of that year, Bird announced that he had decided not to stand and was instead going to launch a movement "to try and do what the CND did over the bomb, but over social injustice". In November 2016, Bird suggested that he had been asked to stand as the Conservative Party candidate in 2007 - in place of future Mayor and current Prime Minister, Boris Johnson - but turned the offer down.

Bird was a Social Enterprise Ambassador, a scheme was run by Social Enterprise Coalition to promote awareness of social enterprise - a business model used to address a social or environmental needs. The programme was supported by the Office of the Third Sector, part of the UK Government Cabinet Office, and ran between 2007 and 2010.

Bird revealed in 2010 that "my secret is that I'm really a working class Tory. I'd love to be a liberal because they're the nice people, but it's really hard work. I can't swallow their gullibility. I know this may destroy my reputation among middle-class liberals, but wearing the corsetry of liberalism means that every now and then you have to take it off." He has since stated that he has "been hurt by the left, and helped by the left. Just like I've been helped by the right and hurt by the right."

Bird was nominated for life peerage by the House of Lords Appointments Commission in October 2015 to become a non-party-political "people's peer". On 30 October, he was created Baron Bird, of Notting Hill in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, sitting as a Crossbencher. In his maiden speech he stated:

"Someone said to me, 'How did you get into the House of Lords?' and I said, 'By lying, cheating and stealing'."

Bird's work is non-partisan and focuses on dismantling the root causes of poverty in the UK, with an emphasis on the well-being of future generations, early intervention and prevention. In the House, he also speaks on social enterprise, social mobility, literacy and the Arts.

He co-chairs the All-Party Parliamentary Groups on Future Generations and Libraries, and is vice-chair of the Groups on Poverty, Ending Homelessness and Social Enterprise. He leads debates on poverty, literacy and social business, and is a member of the Lord Speaker's Advisory Panel on Works of Art.

Bird is currently working to promote his private member's bill, the Well-being of Future Generations Bill, as part of a cross-party campaign, Today For Tomorrow.

4. Awards and recognition

Bird was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for "services to homeless people" in the 1995 Birthday Honours;[18] and in 2006, he received the Beacon Fellowship Prize for his originality in raising awareness of homelessness and his support of homeless communities worldwide.[19]

He was awarded the UN-HABITAT Scroll of Honour in 2004 from Mwai Kibaki, President of Kenya (2002-2013) on behalf of The Big Issue.

He is currently a Visiting Professor in the School of Journalism at the University of Lincoln and holds an honorary doctorate of business from Plymouth University[20] and an honorary doctorate of letters from Oxford Brookes University. He is an honorary fellow at Liverpool John Moores University and Goldsmiths, University of London.

Bird was the British Society of Magazine Editors Editors' Editor of the Year in 1993 and was awarded The Revd. Marcus Morris Award from the Professional Publishers Association in 2000. In 2018, Bird was also inducted into the Professional Publishers Association hall of fame.

In 2008, Bird was named Entrepreneur of the Year by Ernst & Young. In 2015, he became a senior fellow of Ashoka and in 2017 he became a fellow of Social Enterprise UK.[21]

He was voted London's Living Legend in 2004 in a public poll by BBC London which included Sir Terence Conran, Dame Barbara Windsor and Linford Christie OBE.

5. Maiden Speech in the House of Lords



John Bird, Baron Bird of Notting Hill, gave the following maiden speech in the House of Lords on 26th February 2016.

My Lords, I know it is normal to declare an interest, but I have to declare an ignorance: I am not too hot on charitable trusts around hospitals. But I am hot on some things.

In 1991, I started a project called the Big Issue. The reason I started it was that the provision from government, and from charities, was completely and utterly lacking in one area, which I will refer to later. I support this Bill which gives trustees their head, the belief that they can make changes and the opportunity to spend money wisely. The very idea of a Minister of State overseeing charity trusts is a situation that I would want to end. I would like to use the opportunity of my maiden speech to get behind freeing up charities and encouraging them. But, as the noble Baroness, Lady Barker, said, charities themselves need to go through some pretty thorough work. When we started the Big Issue, we ran into enormous problems with virtually all the charities that acted in and around homelessness.

I am also interested in the subject because, even though I have never used Great Ormond Street Hospital, I am from west London, where Paddington Green kids' hospital was where we went when we harmed ourselves. Unfortunately, it is with us no more. But I was born around the back of where JM Barrie wrote "Peter Pan"—I am a Notting Hill-Bayswater boy, and the swings that the Llewelyn Davies children played on in the early part of the last century are the same swings I was playing on just after the Second World War.

I should give the House an introduction to who I am. Thank God I am in the House; I am really pleased, and I think noble Lords will become aware of that. I would like to thank my probation officer. When I was 10, my probation officer stood beside me and, instead of chastising me as a post-war statistic, encouraged me to read and to write, even though it took me many years to master those arts, and encouraged me to look upon myself as not simply an underclass boy who, at the age of 10, had already been banged up for a few things, put on probation and fined. They were silly little things for which, today, they slap a child's hand and say, "Don't do that".

But in the good old days after the Second World War and in the 1950s, they trod on you hard.

I would also like to thank a wonderful woman, Baroness Wootton. Baroness Wootton (right) was a marvellous woman who, when I was 10, put me on probation; when I was 12, made me a ward of court; when I was 13, put me in a remand home; when I was 14, sent me for a short, sharp shock; when I was 15, took me from a boys' prison and put me back into a reformatory so that I could learn to read and write. Baroness Wootton is very important to this House: in 1958, she became one of only four women who were allowed to sit in this House and broke the male domination of the House—we should be thankful for that. I would love to think that, if she were alive today, Baroness Wootton—who would be now 118—would come running over to me and give me the biggest hug of my life.



I want to pause for a moment and go back to the Big Issue. When we started the Big Issue, I was rather aggressively anti-charity because I saw a situation where there were 501 organisations in London alone working with the homeless. They supplied you with everything from auricular acupuncture to a place to wash your undies and a shoulder to cry on, but one thing they did not give poor people was the opportunity of making money. One of the reasons they did not give them the opportunity to make money is that the laws around charities meant that you could give all sorts of things but you could not give opportunity in the form of work.

I was born in the slums of post-war London, brought up a Catholic racist—I am not having a go at the Catholics. I was brought up to hate black people, Jewish people and even English people, because we were London-Irish. I was brought up with all that poison. I was sent to all sorts of institutions, I slept rough and I stole. Someone asked me how I got into the House of Lords, and I said, “By lying, cheating and stealing”, because if I had not gone through that terrible self-defeat, I would never have been able to get out and learn to read and write in a boys' prison at the age of 16.

Then I had a period of being a Marxist-Engelist-Leninist-Trotskyist—I would not recommend that to anybody—which lasted a considerable time. I tried becoming a working-class Tory, but that did not work very well. I tried everything. But eventually, I realised that I had got out of poverty. I had got into the middle classes, and the most exciting thing about being in the middle classes, which sounds remarkably rude, was how clean their beds were, the fact that they had clean underwear and that they were nice to each other. I thought, “Wouldn't it be good if I could get some of the people I grew up with and who I knew and morph them into the middle class”, but how could I do that?

I could not do it politically. There was no party that could get the underclass out of the grief—the long-term unemployed, the drug users and the drunks who I knew. There was no conceivable way.

When I was 21, I had the misfortune—and the fortune—to be hiding from the police in Edinburgh of all places. I was begging, and I can tell noble Lords that it was not a very good place to beg—that is no reference at all to our Scottish colleagues. I met a very large-nosed Scotsman called Gordon Roddick, who had no money. We became friends. Then he met a young lady called Anita. They got married and they started the Body Shop. I did not see them for 20 years, but 20 years later I saw them on the telly. My son Paddy was with me and I said to him, “I know that big-nosed bugger”—excuse my French. I got hold of him and we became friends again and he said to me, “Are you one of those persons who crawls out of the woodwork when someone becomes incredibly successful?”. And I said, “Yes”. He said, “Well I know where you’re coming from”.

In 1990, Gordon Roddick (right) was walking through New York and a very large man who he described as looking like a wardrobe, came towards him. Gordon blessed himself and thought, “This is it”. The bloke said, “Excuse me Buddy. Would you like to buy a copy of a street paper?”. Gordon said, “Yes, how much is it?” He said, “It’s \$1”. Gordon said, “That’s brilliant. I’ll buy it. How does it work?”. The bloke said, “I buy it for 50 cents and sell it for a dollar”. Gordon said,



“Why are you doing this?” The bloke said, “Well, I’ve been in and out of prison and I come from Brownsville”. That is where Mike Tyson comes from and you do not get out of Brownsville without being a sportsman or having a criminal record. That was how predictable the failure rate was for that particular part of New York.

The bloke said, “I’ve got a drug habit. If I go back to where I come from, I’ll be banged up again and they will throw the key away”. So Gordon said, “This is brilliant. What you’re doing is working and poisoning yourself, but you’re not harming anybody else”. The guy said, “Yes. I don’t rob old ladies to feed my habit. I’m like everyone in Manhattan who works in the finance industry. If they want some drugs, they just ring up their dealers”, which is brilliant. So Gordon came back here and tried that. He got the Body Shop Foundation to do a feasibility study, and every one of the homeless organisations said exactly the same thing: “What do you want to give money to homeless people for? They will only drink it all, shove it up their noses or stick it in their arms”. That was that.

Gordon came to me in the early part of 1991 and he said, “Why don’t you do this free paper? First of all, you have been homeless. Secondly, you’re a printer and you know about magazines and, thirdly, you are a cheeky sort of chappie and a great beggar and ponce”—which is a subdivision of begging. He said, “Also, you do not have one sentimental bone in your body for the poor”, and I do not have one sentimental bone in my body for the poor. I look upon the poor as people who should use poverty as opportunity, which it was intended for. There is nothing wrong with poverty so long as you can get out of it. You will be stronger and fitter and better. You do not want all this always stopping you and impeding you from getting out of poverty. You only have to scrape the surface and the patina of most people in Britain today and go back a few generations to see someone who burnt the

candle at both ends so that they could get out of the grief, and they passed that on to their children. That is what we need to replicate and duplicate.

We started the Big Issue and we ran into all the problems. We stood up and we said, “Look, what we want to do more than anything is give people the opportunity to make their own money”—a hand-up, not a hand-out. Later on, we started a charity and we melded those together. We helped them to get ready to become capable of finding the means to help themselves. But many people could not get to self-help, so we held their hands, and we keep on holding them.

My wife is now telling me to wind up, so I should listen—I guess that must be the only reason for that sign. I will wind up. But I end on one point. The simple fact is this. We need to prevent people from falling down, but once they fall down, we have to have the means of getting them up as quickly as possible. The Big Issue has invested in 320 businesses—social businesses around Britain and charities—to prevent the next generation of Big Issue vendors and the next generation who are using drugs and falling through the net, filling up our prisons and our A&E units. I thank noble Lords for their patience.

I was going to go on for another hour and a half, a bit like Ken Dodd, but I will not. Thank you and God bless you all.

Noble Lords: Follow that!

Response by Lord Patel

Lord Patel (CB): My Lords, I know why noble Lords are all laughing. I have to follow that. Many a bigger man than me would have found that difficult. It is a privilege to follow my noble friend Lord Bird, and I thank him on behalf of the House for his remarkable, moving, humorous and rather unusual maiden speech.

Lord Bird: You chose me.

Lord Patel: It will go down in the records of maiden speeches. I do not know what words will be used—astounding, eccentric, and I hope not to be repeated. My noble friend has educated noble Lords in words they have not heard for many a decade; they will have to go and look them up in the dictionary. My noble friend is also a truly remarkable person. Today really is a Big Issue day.

My noble friend’s personal story is, as he described, also remarkable. If I can encapsulate it in one sentence, I would say that it is poverty to purpose.

Lord Bird: You have stolen my line.

Lord Patel: Brought up in a slum, raised as an orphan, illiterate to start with and sleeping rough, my noble friend Lord Bird went to jail several times. But he has inspired millions. He is a trailblazer. He is a social entrepreneur. He has a mission to provide a hand up to thousands of people who are too often forgotten by society.

My noble friend was awarded an MBE in 1995 for services to homeless people and he is a doctor, holding an honorary doctorate from Plymouth Business School at the University of Plymouth. He also tried to stand as Mayor of London—there is a

vacancy coming up. Then, as he told us, in 2010 he was asked what his guilty secret was. He said, “I am really a working-class Tory”. He also said that he would actually like to be a Liberal because they are nice people, but that that would be too much like hard work. I cannot repeat what he said about being a socialist. Noble Lords will have to look it up because the language he used cannot be repeated here.

He was also asked whether he has any ambitions, to which he replied that he would like to write a book; I hope that that is correct. The book was to be a different version, or a replacement, of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. I do not know how many here have read the book; it is an education in itself. Noble Lords might not be surprised to learn that the title is *Why Drawing Naked Women is Good for the Soul*. I have given the noble Lord a plug for his book because I am sure that the sales will now go up by millions.

I welcome my noble friend Lord Bird to this House. We look forward to many contributions from him. They are obviously going to be challenging, colourful and, dare I say it, enjoyable.

6. Looking Back

The Story of the Big Issue

The following article by Peter Ross, in which John Bird looks back on the founding of the Big Issue 25 years earlier, was published on the Big Issue website in October 2016.

“The Big Issue?” says John Bird. “It was turmoil, chaos, waste, rottenness of poverty, stupidity, foolishness... and inspiration.”

On the occasion of this magazine’s 25th anniversary, Bird – the founder and first editor – is reflecting on how it all began. Sitting beneath the trees in his Cambridgeshire garden, he seems to be enjoying himself, relishing the punk savour of that word “rottenness”, sucking on its marrow and spitting out the juice.

Bird is 70 and, since last October, has been a member of the House of Lords – “How the hell am I in there? I wouldn’t let me in” – but resists any attempt to portray him as a doer of good works or, worse, some kind of master media strategist. “I’m not the Mother Teresa of Fulham Broadway”; “I fucking hate the idea that I’m some kind of genius”; Vide Arthur Seaton and the Arctic Monkeys, whatever you say he is, that’s what he’s not. Bird can describe himself perfectly well, thanks, and does: “The only guiding principle I’ve ever had, the only controlling factor in my life, is that I’m incredibly unstable. Instability is often the breeding ground of change and development.”

It was this instability, this creative chaos, that brought The Big Issue to life in the early autumn of 1991. Today, the magazine is sold by up to 2,000 vendors across the UK. This year saw the 200 millionth sale in Britain. It has won several national journalism awards, and inspired a network of 120 similar street magazines and newspapers set up around the world. Yet the story of how the The Big Issue came into being is much more complicated, and far less pretty, than is often assumed.

It was Gordon Roddick’s brainchild; his money was the midwife. The Scottish multi-millionaire was co-founder of The Body Shop with his wife Anita. In 1990, on a trip to New York, Roddick encountered a homeless man outside Grand Central Station. He was selling the world’s first homeless paper, Street News. The businessman bought a copy and they chatted. “He told me it wasn’t so much the cash, which was great. It was the human contact,” Roddick explained to Tessa Swithinbank in her history of The Big Issue, *Coming Up From the Streets*. “He felt he was part of the throbbing race of life and not a bit of garbage sitting on a corner asking for someone’s indulgence.”

Roddick, who is now 74, decided to import the idea to Britain. He would start a magazine that homeless people could buy cheap and sell at a mark-up, pocketing the difference. They would be earning, not begging. It was ethical capitalism; red in tooth, green in claw. But who should he approach to make it happen? The obvious thing would have been to recruit an experienced magazine editor, but Roddick’s thoughts turned instead to a man he had first met in an Edinburgh pub in 1967. “John represented pure anarchy,” he says. “And if you can harness anarchy into

something more positive, it will go somewhere... He was also pretty hard-nosed and tough, and you need that quality if you are dealing with a whole load of the homeless, who are sometimes incredibly aggressive. John was the man to handle that.” The two men came from very different backgrounds. Roddick had been a public schoolboy. Bird, who was 45 in 1991, had grown up in poverty, spent time in an orphanage, a detention centre for young offenders, and on the streets.

It was by no means certain that Bird would agree to become The Big Issue’s founder editor. For a start, he didn’t want the job. He had grafted his way to a kind of middle-class stability. He was married with two teenagers and had a printing business; he had no desire to revisit the world of the poor. But Roddick offered him a daily wage to run a feasibility study, and by the time that was done, Bird believed that The Big Issue would work. He also needed the magazine just as much as the homeless did – although his needs were more psychological rather than economic. It would, he felt, somehow give meaning to, and justify, the difficulties of his early life. “I was really desirous of something that would make sense of all the rough sleeping and the fights in the street and the drunkenness and the prisons and the orphanage and the homelessness. I was looking to turn that into a product.”

A date was set for the launch: September 11, 1991. This gave Bird just three months to build a team and put together the first issue. This lack of time suited his addiction to crises. “If we didn’t rush and sweat then it wouldn’t work for me. I needed to feel that I was at war with everything.”

His way of finding staff was unorthodox. The recruitment policy seemed modelled, in some cases, on Human League lyrics: “You were working as a waitress in a cocktail bar when I met you.” The team was young, keen and deeply inexperienced; one section editor was, according to Bird, “a rent boy”. It was, he says, “a team of freaks and misfits”. They felt embattled, exhausted, alive.

Phil Ryan was a musician whom Bird had met through a mutual actor friend. Ryan was well-spoken and mannered, and he owned a blazer, so was given the job of negotiating with the Metropolitan Police over the right of vendors to sell the magazine on London’s streets.

“My official title was deputy editor. In fact, I ran the magazine,” Ryan explains. The editorial team was based in a basement office between two pubs in Richmond. It was crowded, noisy, a mess. On the spectrum between chaos and creativity – where did the needle tend to hover? “Chaos.” He tells a story about the time the computers crashed on Sunday night, losing the entire magazine, and they had to rewrite the whole thing from scratch so it could be printed on Monday morning. “I could fill a book with things we did wrong and mistakes we made. But we learned very quickly.”

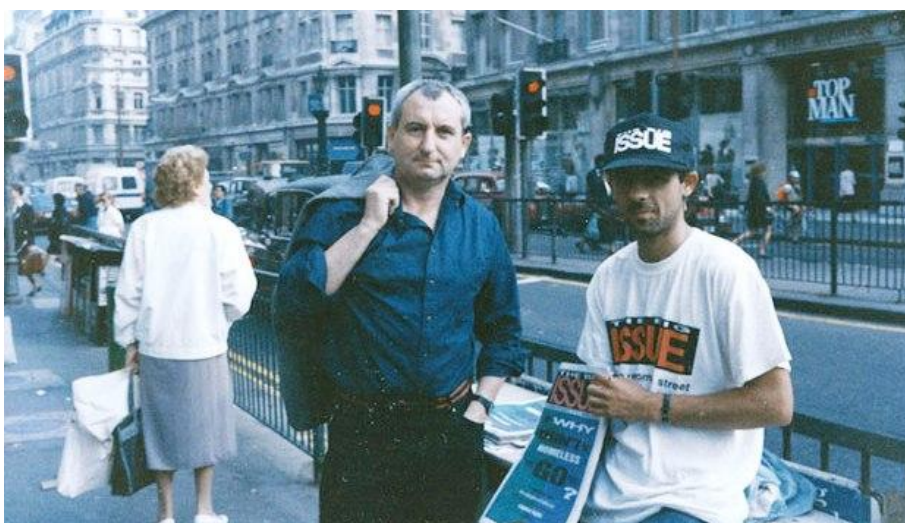
The newsreader Sophie Raworth (right) is probably the best-known veteran of those early days. Studying for a postgrad in broadcast journalism, she would pop into The Big Issue on her way home from university, and work for free. “A tiny little office with no room to move,” she laughs. “I loved it. There was a real buzz



and camaraderie, with John Bird – this charismatic leader – at the centre of it all. I’m sure there were a lot of people who doubted what he was doing and questioned whether it would work. I never thought it would be as big as it has become now.”

What about Bird? Wasn’t he difficult and aggressive? “He was impossible,” Phil Ryan recalls, fondly. “John is mercurial and angry and shouty and swears. And some days I wanted to kill him. I wanted to hit him with a chair until he stopped moving. But I can’t remember a time in my life I laughed so much. I think what got us through was laughter. I’m not some apologist for John when he’s being a complete arse. He would have a million ideas, and sometimes that was annoying when you only wanted one, but once you learned to filter it, then it became completely tolerable.”

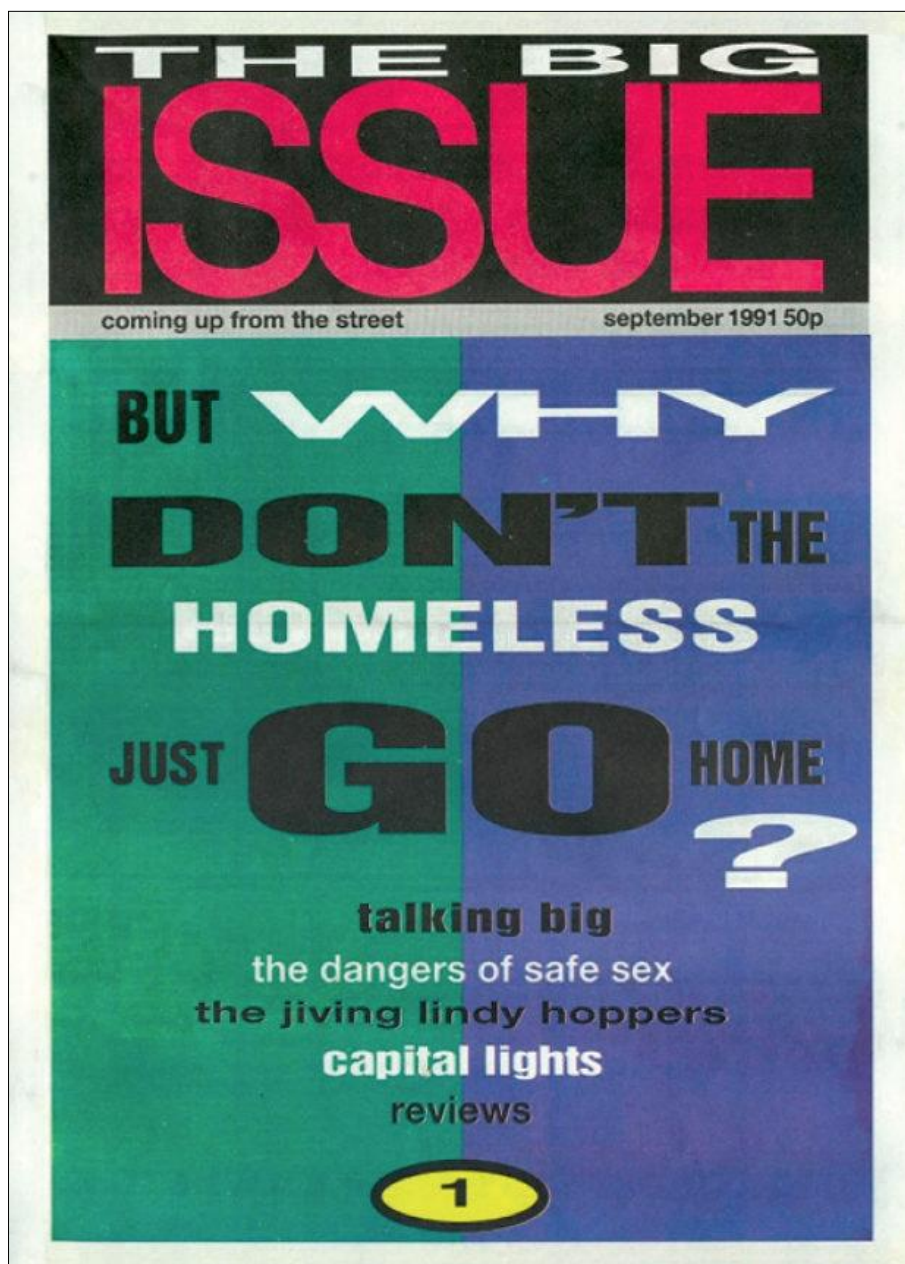
Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive but to be young was very heaven. Wordsworth’s recollections of the French Revolution are never far from mind when talking to Big Issue staffers from those early days. There is sometimes a whiff of hedonism: the distribution office in Victoria that became an impromptu warehouse rave; the “mad Latvian typesetter” laid out by vodka; the times John Bird would go out boozing and sleep the night in a park before coming into the office, as normal, the following day. But this shouldn’t be overstated. “It wasn’t rock ’n’ roll, it was just a bunch of young, determined people busting their bollocks to get out the best product we could for the vendors,” says Paul Minett, the designer of the magazine in its first six months. “I don’t mean to be pretentious but in a little way we made history, didn’t we?”



John Bird in September 1991 with the first issue of the Big Issue.

There was an urgency about The Big Issue, a sense of mission. In 1991, between 2,000 and 3,000 people were sleeping rough on London’s streets alone, and thousands more across the whole of Britain. Within the magazine there was a belief, fair or not, that the government didn’t care and that homeless charities – with their soup kitchens and hostels – were merely treating the symptoms but not helping people to turn their lives around. The difficulty came, however, when this idealism met the lived reality of the streets. Rough sleeping in London was a subculture, complete with traditions and hierarchies and a belief system in which suspicion of ‘do-gooders’ was an important tenet. To walk into one of the main homeless areas –

Lincoln's Inn Fields, Victoria Street, the pedestrian underpasses at Waterloo known as the Bullring – and try to recruit magazine vendors was to invite hostility and genuine physical threat. Peter Bird, John's youngest brother, is now national distribution director. In those early days, he took to carrying a baseball bat around in his van.



The first issue of the Big Issue, above, was published in September 1991.

“It was like Mad Max,” he says. “Horrible. There would be bonfires at night. A lot of aggression. We’d pull up at the church where we had a distribution point, and the people hanging around on the steps would kick and spit at the van. They didn’t want to know us. The people living there had their own ways of making money and dealing with things. It was a violent time. But to win people over you had to prove yourself. So we’d turn up every day and say, ‘Magazines?’. And they’d say, ‘No, fuck off’. But gradually they realised they could make money without having to beg and steal. It worked because we never gave up. I think we survived through stubbornness more than anything.”

They expanded through the city block by block, winning over homeless men and women to their cause, facing down the menaces of those who ran organised gangs of beggars. Liverpool Street, Oxford Street, Covent Garden, Victoria, Waterloo; Peter Bird makes it sound like a high-stakes game of Monopoly. His brother, however, in reflective mode, sounds more like an elderly gangster. John Bird loves to paint himself in a bad light whenever possible.

We'd pull up at the church where we had a distribution point, and the people hanging around on the steps would kick and spit at the van

"I had a kind of criminal attitude," he says. "I believed that if somebody threatened you, and you couldn't do anything about it because they were bigger and stronger, you'd either use a blunt instrument to equalise it, or you'd pay somebody bigger than them. I'd seen that work very well in the prison system. It was part of my life that you didn't allow people to intimidate you. And if they did, you would get somebody to intimidate them." He used Gordon Roddick's money to bribe some of the real hardmen – Scots, mainly, some of them ex-soldiers – to stick up for The Big Issue against the thuggish element who were causing trouble. "So we built a kind of police force... The brown envelope was very important."

Fifty quid here and there was nothing, though, when set against the significant losses the magazine began to make. By June 1992 it was losing £25,000 a month, despite selling 150,000 copies. Roddick kept the faith and did not pull the plug: "But in the end I had to bring John in and give him a deadline: if he didn't break even within three months, I would simply close up shop. Incredibly, he managed it."

The Body Shop invested £500,000 in the first three years. Roddick is proud that The Big Issue has become an established part of British-ness. Orwell, if he were writing now, might list it with his red pillar-boxes and old maids biking to Holy Communion through autumn morning mists. Henry Mayhew would certainly rank the vendors alongside his costermongers and mud-larks in London Labour and the London Poor. But the success of the magazine has not come easily. There has been some personal cost.

"Our marriage went up the spout, that was the first thing," says Tessa Swithinbank, who separated from John Bird in 1992 after almost 20 years. "The Big Issue was all-consuming. There wasn't really any discussion about what would happen if this took off. Eventually it was 24 hours a day. He was sleeping in the office. It wasn't a good time." Bird's take: "She wanted a quiet life and I wanted to change the world."

There are no regrets. But it must have been tough in that moment. It is a small human story, a rarely turned page within the history of the magazine itself. But that's what makes The Big Issue different from a regular magazine – the stories of those who make or, more often, sell it are often as compelling as any of the articles within. Take William Herbert, one of the very first vendors (pictured below). When asked how he came to start selling The Big Issue, Herbert points to the scar looped like a watch-chain between his left ear and the corner of his mouth. "I got that from racist Millwall supporters," he says. "It was like a nightmare." He had stopped into

a pub for a quick half, and a football fan, seeing his dreadlocks, walked over and, leaning in as if to speak in his ear, opened his face with a Stanley blade.

He required 24 stitches, almost as many as he'd had birthdays. For a young man, this was a disaster. He became paranoid, isolated, lost all his confidence. His face and demeanour made him unemployable. Loving relationships with women seemed no longer a possibility. Tennent's Super brought a necessary numbness. "I had to have a beer just to walk out the house, and in the end I couldn't even live in the house, I was in such a state." He was out on the streets: sleeping rough, begging, shoplifting, drinking heavily; booze, and the vents outside the Empire, Leicester Square, brought the only warmth in his life. Looking back, he understands what was going on: "I was committing suicide slowly."

In the midst of this darkness, Herbert began to sell The Big Issue. A young woman in his little group of rough sleepers had told him about it. If you were homeless you could buy it for 10 pence, sell it for 50, and keep the profit. "That was my drink money and I knew I wasn't going to get nicked for it." He found that it felt better to earn money this way. His pitch was in Covent Garden. Having to talk to the public, making eye contact, started to give him his confidence back. And it was honest work. You could take a pride in it. "A life-changer," he says.

His path through life since 1991 has not been straight. There have been stumbles and reverses. He has tried other jobs but they haven't worked out. Some prison time. One might regard a man who has sold The Big Issue off and on for a quarter of a century as a failure, and a demonstrable failure of the whole concept of helping the homeless help themselves.

"No, that would be a misunderstanding," he explains. The magazine has given him stability, routine and dignity. He has a flat now. Pays his bills. Rarely drinks. He is back in touch with his family.

A quick flash of a knife in a pub and a life was laid waste; that sort of wound can take years to heal. The Big Issue was, in its way, a 25th stitch, one that has helped hold his life together. "I don't make a lot of money selling the papers," he says. "I'm never going to be no millionaire. But it has helped me move on."

His pitch, these days, is on Upper Street in Islington. Outside Budgens supermarket. If you're passing, why not say hello and buy one? Wish him – and The Big Issue – a very happy anniversary.

Poverty

John Bird wrote the following column in the Big Issue at the time of its 25th birthday in October 2016.

Twenty-five years ago we struggled, and for many years after, with the enormity of our task. Starting on the double yellow lines of the West End of London, kindly ignored by friendly coppers and traffic wardens, we began.

To say that we knew precisely what we were doing was our first big whopper. That knowing what you are doing only comes from doing. And quickly we learned that we loved and loathed our work because it was so madly engaging and intense.

“John Bird, you scumbag, you’re exploiting us” was said at one of the memorable confrontations with a group of distraught vendors rough-sleeping in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. “You’re charging us for this paper when homeless people have always been given things free.” My reply, “Well, maybe that’s one of the reasons you are still homeless” was greeted with derision of a loud declamatory kind.

Out of this confrontation and other confrontations with angered and left-behind and patronised homeless people we built a system of goodwill. At times it got strained but we did our best to play honest broker in this appalling reality where thousands had faced decades of slaps, kicks, punches and pats on the back; so to speak.

An amazing array of contradictory encouragements and rejections had added to homeless distress.

What we brought into the argument was the chance to make honest money, and the chance to begin to control your life; if falling had kept you down.

From the double yellow lines we expanded to Europe, Scotland, Russia, the North of England rapidly. We built an international network wherever the blight of homelessness occurred. We cut our teeth on homelessness locally and universalised this system of giving the homeless “a hand up not a handout”.

Twenty-five years is a frigging long time to try and keep up the passion, and at times we sagged, got lost, and titivated rather than innovated. But eventually I believe we turned into something that smacked of usefulness. I think we have got somewhere very special.

It would be impossible if it were not for the thousands of homeless people who took us on this forced march of knowledge-gathering. This continuous assault course, demonstrating how much damage had been done to them that they needed our aid in alleviating; or managing. Unfortunately sometimes the damage of their plight was so deep it could be terminal.

We always said: if you pay for the magazine you should always take it. Vendors are working for a hand up, not a handout.

I wonder where Ray, for instance, is now? Caught in a world of lies, cheats, beatings, neglect and yet rising to aid not just himself but others. Or Bungalow Bill, who the last time I saw him was dressed as a large tomato raising money for a children’s hospital charity. Alas one of the downs of our work has been to see people go when they feel they need us not. Goodbyes often left unsaid.

It’s a wonder of a world that seems to enrich our work and understanding; and it’s with this feeling we face the future.

Recently I have been working in the House of Lords on issues of literacy and the around 30 per cent of our children who pass through school and come out ill-

prepared for life. This is one area that we could put useful energies into because many of the people we work with have not done well at school.

Cutting off homelessness and social neglect and need, at source, is where I want to take our work. To look upon our 25 years as a vast, at times sharp, learning curve that leads us to now passionately want to struggle to dismantle poverty. Not to simply bleat about how poor poor people are; but to find the mechanisms for breaking the machines that create poverty. To dismantle poverty.

Our Let's Dismantle Poverty conference next March will rally many bodies and individuals who want to help us to do that. And to begin what I believe is the greatest of all challenges: to create a SCIENCE OF NEW GOVERNMENT!

For that is what I went into the House of Lords to do: to stop government policy creating poverty; or policy that is not preventing poverty happening in the first instance.

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For all of our efforts outside of government we need to change many of the dumb practices that have grown up over the years that stop people dismantling poverty in their own lives. That impede the poor.

Literacy is one of the most useful fights we can enter. But planning new ways of spending our money on dismantling poverty – our tax money – is a true David versus the big fella kind of struggle.
