

# Food For All

*a totally vegetarian out-reach project*

By Matthew Badham

FROM THE OUTSIDE, FOOD FOR ALL in Camden could be mistaken for a health food shop or a trendy coffee bar. Appearances, however, can be deceptive. Food For All is a drop-in centre for homeless people; a place to access food and training opportunities. Oh, and there's one other thing about Food For All that will be of particular interest to Veg Soc members: all of the food that it provides is vegetarian.

Run entirely by volunteers, Food For All has provided food and support to homeless people six days a week for the last two years. Paul O'Grady, the project's founder, is justifiably proud of their record: 'There's a group of dedicated volunteers here on-site every day and, thanks to their hard work, we really do achieve a lot.'

To tell the full story behind Food For All, however, you have to go back over twenty years. The organisation is faith-based, many of its volunteers are Hare Krishna, and it has been working in the North London area since 1980. It began by distributing vegetarian food from the back of a van. 'This is where it all started,' says Paul as he shows me the Food For All van, which still distributes food daily to homeless people in Kentish Town, Camden Town and Kings Cross. 'The food is cooked at a separate site in Watford, where we have kitchens. From there we bring it to the centre and to the various sites around London,' he explains. 'Not only do we feed people, but we also try to show them that vegetarian food is good for you, tasty and filling. We're trying to give them eating habits that they can take with them when they get off the streets and into a more stable time in their lives.'

Paul goes on to explain that one of the most immediate requirements homeless people have of the food they eat is that it fills them up. Understandable really, when you consider that many don't know when and how they're going to come by their next meal. But Food For All tries to provide food that satisfies, rather than just fills, its users' stomachs. On the day I



visited the project the menu consisted of vegetable curry and rice, with cake to follow. The food is made, wherever possible, with organic ingredients, sourced from food donations or from Food For All's own organic garden in Watford.

I find myself asking Paul what happens if they run out of food. His answer is simple: 'Beans. We have an emergency supply and you know we're in trouble when the beans come out.' He laughs and then stresses that, in practice, this has rarely happened. Pretty impressive when you consider that Food For All serves about 200 users daily at the centre, plus a further 500 people through their outreach work.

However, Food For All isn't just about filling people's stomachs, the organisation's holistic approach is also about catering to their users' mental and spiritual needs. As a dyed-in-the-wool atheist, I have to admit that I was a bit concerned about this last part, but was reassured after speaking to Paul. 'We don't push any one religion,' he says. 'Here at Food For All, we believe that all religions have value.' They also believe that all religions should preach vegetarianism. 'Vegetarianism is central to the Krishna faith, but most religions in the world, whether they're Buddhist or Christian or whatever, have the same basic values,' says Paul, 'Tolerance, kindness and turning the other cheek. We strongly believe that these ideas go hand in hand with a vegetarian diet.'

The centre's holistic approach to user development can also be seen in some of the other services it provides, such as drug and alcohol counselling; homoeopathy;

music therapy; computer courses and meditation classes. There are computer facilities and a meditation and music room on site, and many of the classes are run by former users. Staff also find themselves writing grant applications with, or sometimes on behalf of, the centre's users. Over the years, they've helped obtain grants for projects including a bike-making business, a recording studio and, for one user, a film-making project.

If Food For All sounds like a busy place, then that's probably because it is. On the day I was there, it was a hive of activity; with users enjoying a late breakfast, accessing the computers, and meditation going on downstairs. But although the place was busy, it didn't feel frantic. Rather I had the sense of a community of people coming together in a safe place, to relax and to interact. It's an atmosphere that Paul and his staff do their best to encourage. They hope that the users will see Food For All as a place of harmony or even, in Paul's words, as a 'home'.

It's not only users that benefit from Food For All, though. The organisation also does its best to educate the world about the benefits of a vegetarian diet. It



operates an environmental park in Watford, which is also the site of its organic garden. The park serves both as an educational resource and as a sanctuary for several animals they have saved from slaughter. Over to Paul again: 'There are potbellied pigs at the site, and cows and oxen. All would have gone to the slaughterhouse if they hadn't come to us.' The animals who live in the park do sing for their supper, however. The oxen are working animals who plough the park's

fields, while the pigs and cows play a vital role in the educational work done there, helping children who visit to make the connection between animals in the fields and the meat on their plate. It would be wrong to suggest that Food For All is working completely in isolation. The work they do wouldn't be possible without the support of, amongst others, Sainsbury's and Fresh and Wild – one of London's leading health food stores – who both provide food donations. They've also worked in partnership with several healthy eating schemes, such as Healthy Eating for Camden, which tries to encourage Camden's residents to eat more fruit and vegetables, and to smoke less. Paul notes wryly that many of the nutritionists who work for the healthy eating schemes are vegetarian themselves for health reasons.

So, after my day there, how would I sum up the Food For All project? To be honest, I don't think I would (or could) give an adequate summation of everything they do. Better instead, I think, to leave the final word to one of their users, who made the following comments:

Food For All '...is very convenient. It's somewhere to have a warm meal, which also gives spiritual benefit. [it's]...needed in the area [and] provides social integration on a spiritual platform, and I think it represents the way forward.'

*More information about Food For All is available at [foodforall.org.uk](http://foodforall.org.uk). Thanks to Paul and all the staff at Food For All for making me feel so welcome during my time there.*