“A Home from Home” in the UK

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In an interview of 7 January 1967 with Tad Szulc of the New York Times, St Josemaría spoke about the work of Opus Dei in some Englishspeaking countries. He mentioned the work carried out by university halls of residence run by Opus Dei, providing “not only a place to stay but numerous activities to complete students’ human, and spiritual training”.

He went on to single out Netherhall House for special mention because of its international character: “students from more than fifty countries [close to a hundred, in fact] have lived there. Many of them are non-christian, since Opus Dei’s houses are open to all without any racial or religious discrimination”.


The 1960s projected expansion of Netherhall House, this international hall of residence for students in London, took place at a time when the British Government was particularly concerned with the formation of the intellectual and political elites of its colonies or former colonies. This was also one of the aims of Netherhall House, and the hall would attract official help for its expansion plans.

The history of Netherhall House from its foundation to the present might perhaps be conveniently divided into three periods. The first could cover from 1952, when the hall of residence for university students was set up, to the year 1960. In this latter year plans were set in motion to increase the capacity of the hall and develop its international dimension. The completion of this project, involving substantial building works, was to be carried out in two phases over a long period of time, and these can be used to define the second and third periods of Netherhall’s history.
The present article concentrates its attention on the second period of Netherhall House’s history (1960-1984) and in particular on its Commonwealth dimension. The historical context in which the development of Netherhall took place and the influence it had in defining the aims of the project are described in the first part of the article. This includes a section covering the contacts with the British Council and its involvement in the project. A second part studies how and to what an extent the hall of residence in the years 1966 to 1984 served the aims, both general and particular, inspiring the project.

4 August 1958: Saint Josemaría stepped onto UK for the first time
On Bank Holiday Monday, 4 August 1958, Saint Josemaría Escrivá—accompanied by Fr Álvaro del Portillo, Fr Javier Echevarría and Armando Serrano—stepped onto British soil for the first time. He was to stay in England till the middle of September. This was his first prolonged residence away from Rome since his arrival to the Eternal City in 1946, and part of the reason for his visit to England was to be able to work in a temperate climate, away from Rome’s oppressive August heat.

He would return the following summers, the last being that of 1962. At the time of his visit, there were only three centres of Opus Dei in the country. Netherhall House, a student hall of residence set up in 1952, and Rosecroft House, a residence for women started in 1956, were in Hampstead, northwest London. The house rented for his stay was near these two places, and the morning following his arrival the Founder paid short visits to both of them.

From the outset he encouraged the members of Opus Dei to expand their apostolate, reaching out of London to places like Cambridge, Oxford and Manchester. St Josemaría’s great interest in the apostolic work of his sons and daughters in Great Britain was long-standing. He was conscious of the importance and influence of the country’s metropolitan status as a centre for peoples from all over the world and also of the usefulness of the English language as a means of communication. Netherhall House had been from the first the result of his direct encouragement and he had expressed a hope that those students and trainees, who had come to take degrees and achieve professional qualifications in Great Britain, might also learn and take back with them to their own countries the true faith, and help spread the spirit of Opus Dei worldwide.

“Crossroads of the world”
His walks around London reinforced in him the impression of the cosmopolitan character of the city. The streets were thronged with people of all races and
customs, originating from the four corners of the world-wide British Empire and the Commonwealth: London was a “crossroads of the world”, he came to say from this moment onward. Those peoples were a constant reminder for St Josemaría of the many nations Opus Dei had not yet reached, and in his walks along the city he prayed that the people of those countries might find the true faith.

Already in August he could write to Michael Richards, a lawyer, the first English Numerary member of Opus Dei, then in Rome: “This England, you rascal, è una grande bella cosa [is a wonderful thing]. If you help us—you specially—we will do some solid work in this crossroads of the world. Pray and offer little mortifications with joy”4.

It was a theme that he would touch upon often in the following months, encouraging the members of Opus Dei to pray for the Work in Great Britain. As he wrote to his children in Spain, to do so was to pray for the Work in the whole world5. At the practical level, several projects were the result of his direct encouragement: the expansion of Netherhall House and a residence for students at Grandpont House, in Oxford, being the most representative.

The first was an obvious development: those in charge of Netherhall House already had considerable experience in running an international hall of residence for students; the second was facilitated by the finding of some convenient property in Oxford which the Catholic hierarchy had an option to buy, but which it had decided not to exercise.

Netherhall House had been set up in April 1952 in 18 Netherhall Gardens. The property had been recently renovated, and, together with 22 Netherhall Gardens, was going to be used as a hotel. It came onto the market at that time because of a disagreement between the owners.

There was no money
St Josemaría had been encouraging the members of Opus Dei in London to set up a hall of residence and this property was just right for the purpose; the only drawback was that there was no money to buy it. Michael Richards convinced Mr H. Neville, who with Mr Shaw owned both properties, that, in order to facilitate the purchase and speed it up, Mr Neville could obtain a mortgage on both 18 and 22 Netherhall Gardens. The hall of residence would undertake the repayment of the mortgage on both properties, and the freehold of n. 18 would be transferred to a charitable trust once the mortgage was finally repaid6. Mr Neville agreed to the proposal, and the Abbey National Building Society provided what amounted to a hundred-per-cent mortgage for the purchase of the property. They took
possession in April 1952, and started operating a students' hall in the summer term of the 1951-52 academic year.

**International character**
Netherhall House international character was evident from the outset. Among the first residents were Kinichiro Saito, from Japan, and Michael Britomotumayaga, a Christian Tamil from what was then Ceylon. In the first eight years of operation it offered accommodation to over three hundred students from nineteen countries. Almost two thirds of the residents were British; among the others there had been Irish (fifteen) and Spanish (twenty) students, as well as a good number of students coming from sub-Saharan Africa: Kenya (ten), Nigeria (ten) Ghana (twelve) and Uganda (six). The Far East was also well represented—Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and Japan—and there were smaller contingents from both South and North America, and from Australia.

**A place to live in a friendly community of students**
In 1958, and on subsequent visits, St Josemaría encouraged the members of Opus Dei in Great Britain to enlarge the hall of residence and to pay special attention to students coming from developing countries and from the new ones resulting from the process of decolonization. In the following years he was to send to Great Britain some people who had had experience in similar projects to help with the planning (architectural, economic, and so on) and with the negotiations necessary to get the project off the ground. The lawyer Dr Juan Masiá, who first came to Great Britain in 1960, had been involved in the setting up of the Residenza Universitaria Internazionale (RUI), which had opened in Rome in 1959. The RUI aspired to provide residents of all countries with a place to live in a friendly community of students, offering a programme of integral education that incorporated human, academic and professional formation. Masiá’s experience would play an important role in early approaches to the British Council and other government bodies.

Mgr Escrivá’s ideas were contemporary to important geopolitical events. In the late 1950s the process of decolonization was well advanced in South East Asia and West Africa. The general consensus, however, was that colonial rule in East Africa would continue into the 1970s and that European settler leadership would carry on for decades to come. Such predictions could hardly have been further off the mark.

**“A Home from Home”**
The efforts of the Directors’ Committee had been focused, from the start, on trying to create a family atmosphere, and integrating people from very diverse cultures,
races and religious beliefs. The remarkable success of Netherhall in so doing was due to many different factors.

The Management Committee, and visitors to the hall, noted and remarked upon the effect that sharing meals together and the care of the material conditions of the house played in bringing people together70.

Netherhall House provided a “home from home”, and the students from overseas were, perhaps, the ones to appreciate it best, as the most likely to experience isolation in Great Britain because of the separation from family, friends and habitual environment. The holiday periods made an important contribution to helping them feel particularly at home and to deepening cohesion in the diverse body of Netherhall residents. During the years under consideration, few overseas residents returned to their countries of origin for the Christmas or Easter holidays because of the high cost of air transport and their own economic situation. The result was that, at times, there were over fifty residents staying for the holidays, and the festive atmosphere and increased contact among them served as a very powerful integrating factor.

In a sense, although Netherhall did not provide directly academic teaching and training, it resembled more a traditional college in a collegiate university than a mere hall of residence offering sleeping accommodation for students, as tended to be the case elsewhere in London. St Josemaría insisted that from the first the residence should have an intense cultural life, and that adequate facilities for it—common rooms, auditorium and so on—should be provided72.

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