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# Lancashire

## & North West magazine

★ Homelessness and The Ashley Foundation ★

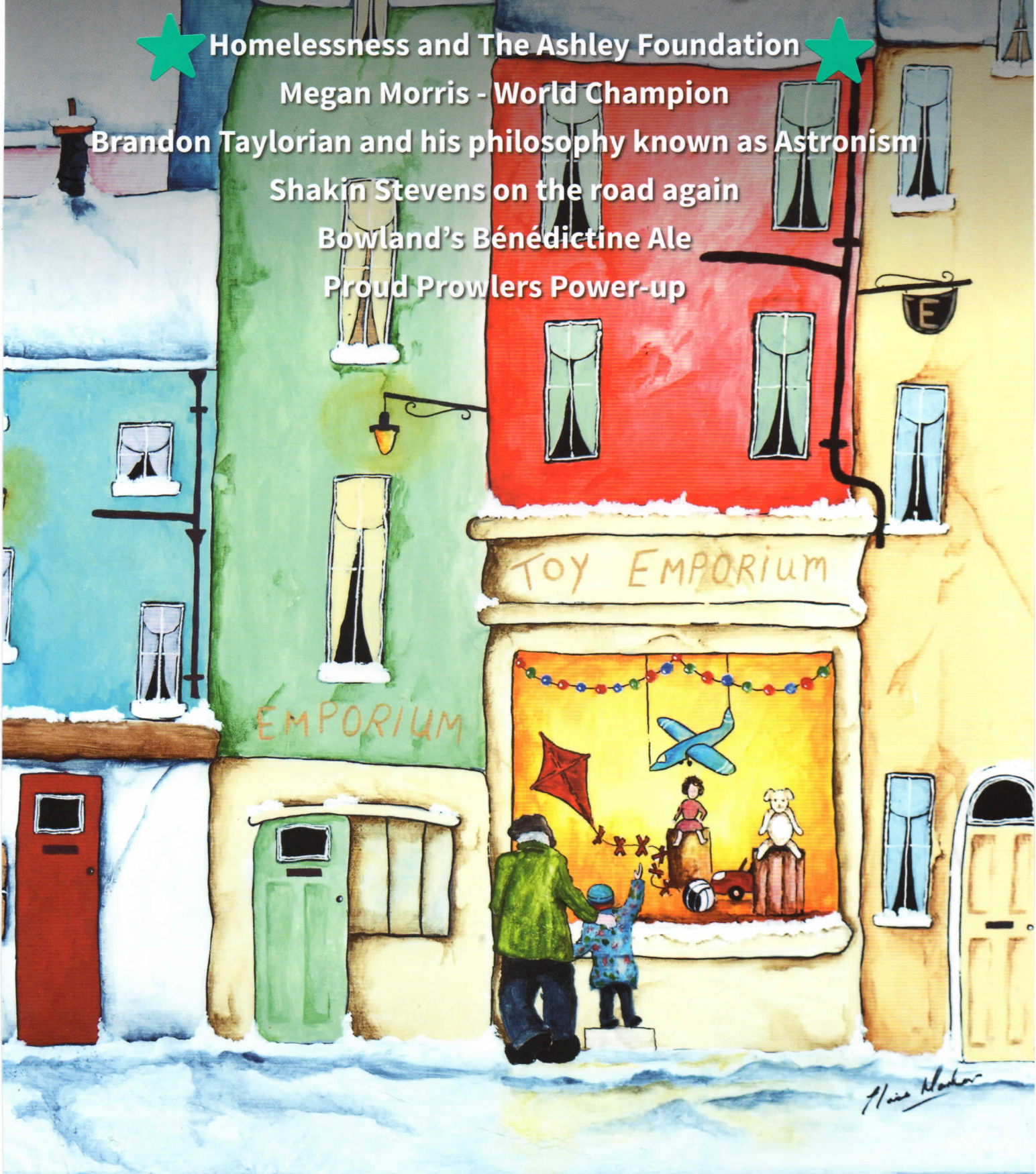
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# Homelessness and The Ashley Foundation

by Andrew Harris



**Life should not be like this. Telli and Janet Afrik and their children Beatrice and Bridget are homeless. Picture courtesy of Shelter.**

Homelessness is devastating, dangerous and isolating. Alarming, it's increasing at more than 10% a year in our region. According to the latest available figures for the north west there are at least 434 people living rough, 2,471 in hostels and 7,759 in temporary accommodation of one sort or another. That's 10,664 people – or one person in 684 - who have no home of their own! So what does it mean for those affected?

It has been said that homelessness is a simple problem with complex causes. In 1948 the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights said *'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care, necessary social services and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control'*. Yet 70 years later people in the UK are increasingly likely to become homeless due to some combination of poverty, mental illness, alcohol and drugs,

relationship breakdown, domestic violence, reduced support from public services, discharge from the armed forces or prison – or the way Universal Credit is paid.

Homelessness is devastating. Homeless people are less likely to complete education and training, less likely to secure a reasonable job and more likely to die young. A report commissioned by the homeless charity Crisis in 2011 found that homeless people in the UK have an average life expectancy of 47 years – 30 years less than the rest of the population. Some forms of homelessness are especially disturbing –

- Rough sleeping - This is increasingly visible in all the major cities and towns in the north west but the 'hotspot' is Manchester with an estimated 94 people sleeping rough at the last count. Of all local authority areas in England, Manchester ranks number 4 for rough sleeping – after Westminster, Brighton & Hove and Camden in London. A further 340 people are estimated to be sleeping rough in our



**TOP: The Ashley Foundation hostels are pleasant and friendly. LEFT: Shelter and little Charlotte are both appealing. ABOVE: A sign of optimism or irony.**

region – the highest figure in modern times. The threats of hypothermia, bad health and violence are obvious but don't be fooled by some who beg by appearing to be homeless.

- Homeless children – Although the number of homeless children is greatest in London, the south east and the west midlands, the year on year increase in homeless children is - at 33% - worst in the north west. We now have an estimated 3,111 children living in temporary accommodation out of a population of 1,543,276 who are aged 0-17. That is one



child in 496! Hotspots for homeless children in our region are Manchester – with more than 2,000 – followed by Salford, other Greater Manchester Boroughs, Liverpool, Blackpool and Warrington. Comments from the homeless are very telling:

- *“As a parent I should be able to protect my children and keep them safe but I can’t. I feel hopeless. There is no joy or happiness in this family. All is frustration, arguments and pain. We are just so tired. For the last six and a half years we have tried to move to a suitable property but without any success.”* Samira, 34

- *“I didn’t feel safe at all because there were other people living there. They would smoke a lot and it wasn’t good. I felt pretty scared because you never knew what would happen next. Also for my little sister and Mum I felt pretty worried as you would never know if we’d run out of money”* Angel, 9

- *“It’s not a way of living for kids. They can’t do their homework as they have no internet unless they go to the library but they often don’t know where that is. It’s horrible, an absolute nightmare and not something you’d want your worst enemy to go through.”* Michelle, 41, Teacher.

The Director of the homeless charity Shelter says *“No child should be homeless but for the generation growing up in the housing crisis this is the grim reality for many. The number of children hidden away in hostels and B & Bs is enough to make your heart sink. These are not places for children. We hear about cold and damp and even rats. Young children are sharing beds with multiple family members, trying to play in dirty corridors and having to leave their block in the middle of the night to use the bathroom. It doesn’t have to be this way. If we act now we can change tomorrow to ensure that every child has somewhere they can call home.”*

A bewildering variety of organisations are working to alleviate or eliminate homelessness. Shelter and Crisis do wonderful work to campaign, advise and help the homeless in many ways but they don’t provide accommodation. The Salvation Army and emergency night shelters help to meet short-term needs and provide fairly utilitarian accommodation.

Local authorities and housing associations meet some statutory needs – often using B & Bs for families with children – but little social housing is available. The supply of new private housing has increased greatly using the provisions of the National Planning Policy Framework. Even with the Government’s Help to Buy offer the cost is beyond the reach of many. We just don’t build modest accommodation which can be afforded by those most in need. So is there an alternative to rough sleeping for adults of any age who are probably unemployed – and possibly unemployable – and may have a history involving mental illness, alcohol, drugs, prison, relationship breakdown or just lost and disturbed after military service?

The Emmaus movement – founded by the French Priest Abbe Pierre in 1949 - combats poverty and homelessness with a unique combination of work and accommodation for some. In our region there are Emmaus ‘communities’ in Bolton, Burnley, Merseyside, Mossley in Tameside, Preston and Salford. They repair and renovate furniture and electrical goods which they sell at attractive prices. By this trading Emmaus supports homeless people – usually those sleeping rough – to become ‘companions’ and find themselves through meaningful work and good living accommodation. But it isn’t for everyone.

The remaining need is to help less-skilled adults with hostel accommodation then a stepping stone to their own homes. After many years of contact with many organisations which aim to meet this need your columnist is convinced that The Ashley Foundation based in Blackpool is the best example of how to do it. The Ashley Foundation is a not-for-profit company and charity which has just celebrated 21 years of helping the homeless since it was founded in 1997. It combines hostel accommodation and ‘move-on’ flats with support and education for their ‘clients’ to empower them to develop the necessary skills to enable them to live independently.

The objective of their staff and volunteers is to encourage clients to take control of their lives by increasing their self-esteem, improving their motivation and levels of confidence by offering practical support, advice, assistance, advocacy, representation and counselling. They work especially closely with clients who have high support needs due to drug and alcohol dependence, mental health issues and learning difficulties and who may have been entrenched rough sleepers or ex-offenders.

The Ashley Foundation has 3 hostels in Blackpool with 62 bedrooms plus 49 'move-on' flats and more being prepared. In Blackburn it has 3 hostels with 125 bedrooms. In Sunderland in the north east it has a 26-bed hostel and 40 move-on flats. It has used these assets to support more than 8,000 clients over the last 21 years. That is some achievement!

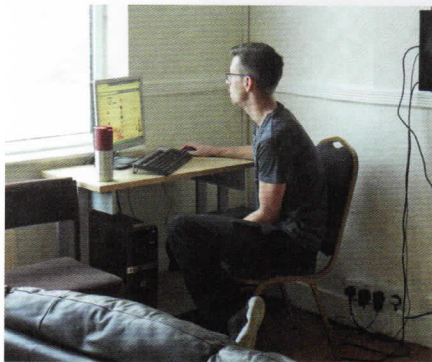
A previous chairman of the Foundation made a telling observation. He said 'Current laws rightly ensure that vulnerable people – such as care leavers, under 18s, those with children and men and women fleeing domestic violence – are prioritised for support. The law does not preclude support being given to people outside these categories but in practice there is simply not enough money left in the system for local authorities to go much beyond their legal duties which means that some (other) vulnerable groups are not guaranteed support.' This is the task that The Ashley Foundation and other organisations like them are trying to fulfil.

The Board of Trustees of the Ashley Foundation is chaired



**Inside an Ashley Foundation move-on flat.**

Many volunteers help The Ashley Foundation. Bernice McKintyre, Keshani Peiris and John Fraser are three of them.



**ABOVE: Ashley Foundation residents are empowered.**



**ABOVE: Mark Baigrie is caring but firm. He manages an Ashley Foundation hostel and has been with the Foundation 5 years this month.**

by David Kam and the 60 staff are led by chief executive Lee Dribben. Staff include hostel managers, chefs, support manager Denise Boeme and support officers in Blackpool and Blackburn. Dispersed housing officers guide clients to independence via the Foundation's 'move-on' flats.

The Ashley Foundation has three distinguishing features –

- It takes an holistic approach to the needs of clients. Many others provide accommodation or advice but the Foundation does both in a very practical way.
- Its hostel managers and dispersed housing officers combine care and control most effectively. One without the other results in a brutal uncaring regime or chaos.
- The standard of accommodation is very high. Too many places for the homeless are utilitarian and basic on the basis that it is all the homeless need or deserve. The Ashley Foundation reject that view and provide warm, dry elegant accommodation which any of

us would be happy to occupy.

As homelessness increases – partly due to the current Universal Credit regime – there is an urgent need to do more – and do it better – to help those affected. The Ashley Foundation is an excellent example of how to do it.

**Andrew Harris – [www.andrewharris.co.uk](http://www.andrewharris.co.uk) - gratefully acknowledges the help provided by Shelter, Crisis and David Kam of The Ashley Foundation in the**



**preparation of this article. Unless otherwise attributed the images are by Debbie**

**Parr of the Ashley Foundation and illustrate the hostel and flat accommodation they provide. To help the Foundation call 01253 297200 or visit [www.theashleyfoundation.org.uk](http://www.theashleyfoundation.org.uk)**