

“Other People’s Postcards”

a report on a
Building Community through Arts project
for the Richmond upon Thames Social Services

February 1995

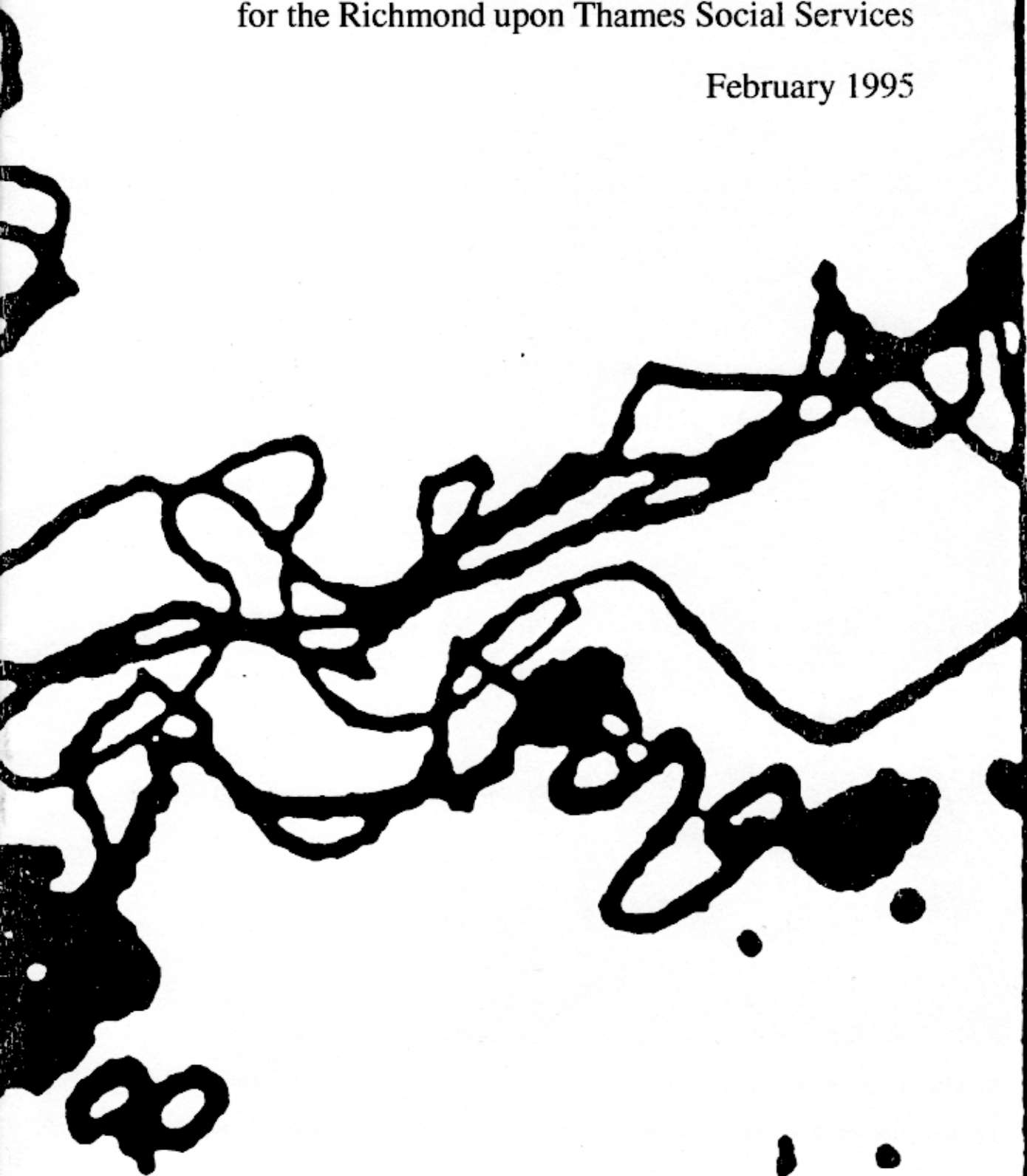


Illustration by Derek Burton



Building Community through Arts

© KLL Associates

19c Kew Gardens Road, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 3HD 0181 940 6290

Building Community through Arts

Building Community through Arts is a ground-breaking process which brings people together from different parts of any community by involving them in arts programmes in unusual ways, working across boundaries, learning from each other and together finding ways of making their world a better place to be in. The process, which may focus on painting, writing, drama, reminiscence or music, brings together artists; people with disabilities and older people and their families and friends; carers; social services planners and managers; business employees; school children and volunteers, and commercial sponsors.

Adopting art as the medium, individuals begin to realise their potential for self expression in a supportive but challenging atmosphere. Participants' sense of self worth and their place in the community unobtrusively flowers during the shared experience of creating art.

Building Community through Arts has been devised by KLL Associates, a multi-skilled professional team with experience in the creative arts, in management and training, and in social psychology. They include artists, teachers, a drama specialist, management trainer, psychologist, editor, photographer and PR specialist, supported by an administration team.

The following report charts the development and outcomes of a programme devised specially for the Social Services Department of the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames.

"Painting is an attempt to come to terms with life. There are as many solutions as there are human beings"

George Tooker

"To live a creative life,
we must lose our fear
of being wrong"

Joseph Chilton Pearce

The Design of the Project



Pam Walker

The purpose of the Building Community through Arts project devised for Richmond's Social Services Department, called *Other People's Postcards*, was to help people frustrated or isolated by physical disabilities to break out of confined circumstances through a release of their creativity. Creative activity is known to empower people rather than concentrate on their deficiencies and their perceived limitations, and the skilled performance of any task at the highest level attainable has demonstrably beneficial effects on people's well-being.

A BCA project has four parts. First, participants take part in a creative activity, such as working with brushes and ink; next they are prepared to take on the role of enabling others to take part. In the third part the creative activity is repeated with new people taking part, with the original participants acting as enablers, and the project ends with a debriefing and feedback discussion among all who have been involved in the activity, plus a professionally presented exhibition of their work.

The project devised for Richmond brought together people with multiple sclerosis and other disabilities, their carers and professional care staff, business people, school girls and volunteers.

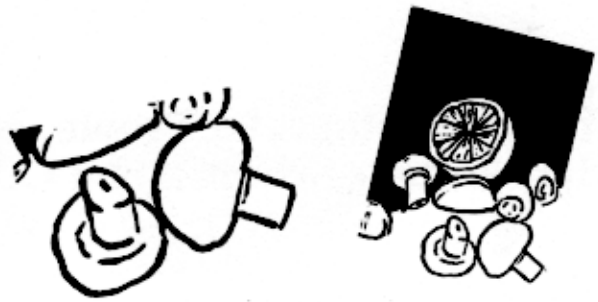
It began in the homes of individuals with disabilities and, as the project built up involving more people, moved to day centres where others were drawn into the workshop environment. In any community people are put into compartments, neatly labelled 'employed', 'unemployed', 'teenager', 'retired', 'disabled,' or defined by a title conferred on them by the job they do - labels which ensure they rarely, if ever, meet. BCA programmes, however, are tailored to introduce people to other members of the community and provide the opportunity to work and share with people in an atmosphere where labels are discarded, and the common language of art becomes both the medium of communication between people and the means of self expression.

"I believe that if it were left to artists to choose their own labels, most would choose none"

Ben Shahn

The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction both will be transformed"

C G Jung



Claudia Frey

The art workshops went through three phases: playing with the materials by trying them all out; drawing or composing an image and, finally, defining the meaning of the work produced by deciding what to do with it and how to present it.

This method gives a good introduction to people whose attitude may be that 'art is not for me.' It combines a childlike means of exploring, by integrating play into the process, with an adult attitude to focusing on pieces of work and using artistic judgement to produce high quality, speedy results.

The editing and presentation of work turns the raw material into what could become saleable notelets and cards of as good a quality as much sold in the commercial market place. The urgency and freshness of this 'art of the accident' offers opportunities for raising self esteem and pride in the participants, a method which allows and may actually use 'mistakes.' It offers a short cut to a finished product which may trigger the motivation to learn more and to continue with the work away from the workshop environment. Furthermore, the process of manipulating an image by editing engages directly with modern means of reproduction, in which copying segments of an art work, enlargement and reduction are readily available to everyone.

The enabling process, to which early participants are introduced in a training session, differs considerably from traditional teaching methods. The training is designed to bring out the value of working from the common ground of everyone's own experience, invoking a levelling-out dimension rather than the superimposing of skills from one to another.

"Did you ever observe
to whom the accidents happen?
Chance favours only the
prepared mind"

Louis Pasteur

"Look and you will find it —
what is unsought
will go undetected"

Sophocles

The Implications for People with Multiple Sclerosis and Other Disabilities

By initiating the project *Other People's Postcards* in the homes of people with disabilities, a new dimension was opened up in the field of providing positive activity for clients of Richmond's Social Services Department. In particular, this approach is attractive and rewarding for individuals inclined to shy away from what they perceive as the 'institutionalised' atmosphere of a day centre, which they regard as 'not for them.' This attitude has tended to intensify feelings of isolation, adding to the stress of people already constrained by the real limitations on choices imposed by the need to use a wheelchair.

One advantage of bringing an art project into the domestic environment of people with disability is the ease with which their carers, whose lives are often also constrained by their caring commitments, can be engaged in creative self expression on an equal footing. For some carers, their experience of day centres has been a sense of exclusion from the activities, their role not integrated, while the staff tend to take over, rather than enable, their clients' activities.

The reactions of the people who made their homes available to this innovative project were markedly positive. They described the work as challenging and interesting, finding that it provided social as well as creative opportunities and opened up the possibility of 'homework' in between workshop sessions. They also enjoyed the opportunity to work with people not affected by the same disability, when everyone has the feeling of 'being in the same boat;' just as people in general live lives of widely diverse interests and pursuits, so people experiencing disabilities have their own individual interests not defined by their physical condition. Participants felt they had been taken seriously and had been affirmed in tackling both the art work and the enabling training sessions. Some commented that "being artistic was good; to be told I was an artist was even better." "I liked the physical side of getting my fingers inky." "I was impressed that people took my work seriously." "I enjoyed helping others to do what they did not realise they could do."

"You made me realise that just because I am in a wheelchair it doesn't mean I can't do anything. I still have my hands and my mind. It is all in the mind. I told my GP this.

'How I wish more of my patients realised that!' came the reply."

Derek Burton, Other People's Postcards participant



Ken Young



John Ray



Jean Cooper

For the staff of local social services departments, recent years have seen dramatic and stressful changes in the methods and approaches they have been required to adopt in their work. To quite an extent, traditional academic social work qualifications have become less important than the ability to manage budgets to deliver services by defining client needs and identifying providers of services both within and outside the local authority department. Social services staff need to be able to network out into the community to reach people isolated by disability, unable or unwilling to be drawn into the traditional day centre style of support provision.

Involvement in the BCA project was therefore as exhilarating for staff as for their clients. For them the BCA experience emphasised the importance of the service concept in management style: moving from control to facilitation, to enabling rather than directing, listening to the needs of clients instead of channelling them into pre-determined activities. A BCA project is based on the concept of 'working with' a team gathered bit by bit from different strands in the community rather than offering a standard programme.

Richmond's experience is that the cases of need that emerge are only the tip of the iceberg. There are 600 known people with MS in the area. 300 people with disabilities, are registered in the borough yet only 30 places are provided at the disability day centre. The manager's role is to assess need and then purchase caring facilities: any service has to be evaluated by the measure of cost effectiveness. A project such as BCA which can capitalise on networking and voluntary involvement, especially of the client group, is extremely welcome. However, because funding is tight and tends to be polarised in separate departments, it is difficult to identify and bring into play finance for projects which bridge different areas of need.

For charitable bodies focusing on specific disabilities, such as the Multiple Sclerosis Society, the concept of networking is equally valuable as a way forward in both increasing public awareness of the needs of people with MS and generating new funding. The Society's funds are almost entirely spent on medical research; projects such as BCA cannot be readily defined as part of the medical field, with the result that the spread of ideas through local societies as well as the national Society is a much-needed networking task.

"In the middle of difficulty
lies opportunity"

Albert Einstein

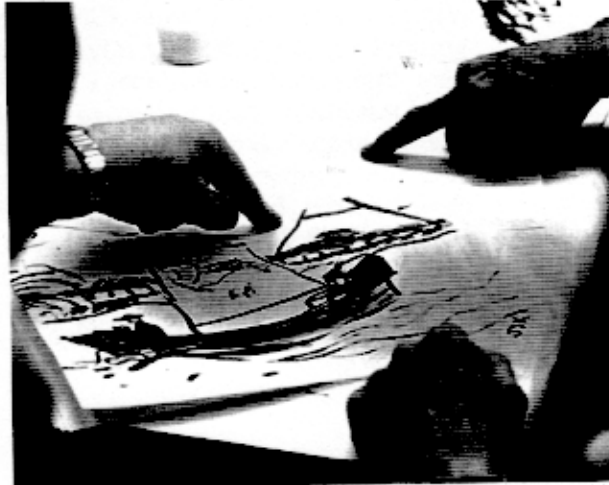
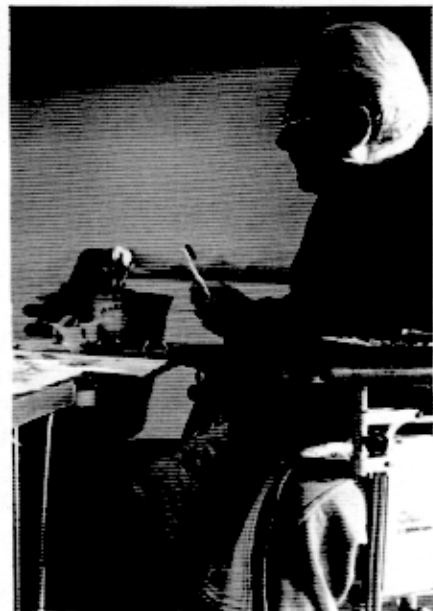
"Life shrinks or expands in proportion
to one's courage"

Anaïs Nin





Building
Community
through Arts...





John Pointer



Doug Russell



Satoshi Sonobe

A Partnership with Business

One of the most important aspects of the unique programmes within Building Community through Arts is the way in which the sponsorship funds put up by commercial organisations are used to create new experiences not only for the 'client group' but also for their own staff. A key part of the programme is the training session which precedes staff participation in the workshop at the host organisation, in which sponsors' staff learn the essentials of enabling others to achieve.

For staff from commercial organisations the experience of enabling others to do something may be entirely new. At work their time is usually proscribed, with very little space for independence or discretion. The effect of a BCA project has been to encourage the ability to identify even small amounts of time at work as discretionary, when taking the initiative has proved a rewarding expansion of the working day's activities. Some commented: "Since working on the project, my whole attitude towards myself and my work has changed. Where before I felt my job required little personal skill, I now see challenges and take them up." "It has enabled me to get my job established this year. It has helped me think I can make suggestions to my manager, how this can be done, the best way the marketing can be done and so on." "To be able to say, Why don't you try this? is a useful interactive tool." "It has made me more aware of the skills I have. It has helped to build my effectiveness because I am more confident and know more what I am good at. It has helped me to broaden my horizons and to cope with change." "I get a sense of empowerment in my ability to respond to people with disabilities. I see it as a two way process. Once we show our own humanity and our own weaknesses it becomes a very empowering relationship."

"Man can learn nothing
except by going from the known
to the unknown"

Claude Bernard

"It is not because things are difficult
that we do not dare;
it is because we do not dare
that they are difficult"

Seneca



Lisa McBain



Helen Gray



Naomi Vorley

Involving Schools

Building Community through Arts reaches out to everyone in the community, and for the project *Other People's Postcards*, pupils from Greycourt School at Ham volunteered their time to take part as helpers at the workshop. For most of them it was their first experience of working with people with disabilities and several were apprehensive at first, uncertain how people 'different' from themselves should be treated. The experience was a revelation to them. After the workshop they wrote with emotion and candour about discarding their prejudices about people with disabilities:

"My partner immediately had a feeling of incompetence and was insistent that her work was bad and awful and when I said it was good she looked at me in disbelief. But I gently kept on praising her work and then she started to convince herself that she *had* achieved something. Gradually we built up a feeling of enthusiasm and she became eager to experiment with the tools. I tried to find out her capabilities so that I did not patronise her in any way. Soon we were talking about all sorts of things, not just the artwork, things we had in common – personal. We were listening and communicating closely with each other. As I watched her being helped out of her chair I suddenly realised how helpless she was and how much she had to rely on others. The contrast astonished me."

"I had a few worries, these being how I would cope with dealing with disabled people. I had to make sure I wasn't too patronising or too eager to help. Most people just have an image in their heads of disabled people sitting around having nothing to do, but this project gave me the first-hand experience of realising that disabled people do still talk and react in the same way as many other people, sometimes just a little more slowly."

"This workshop was like a lesson with a very good moral to it. Before BCA I was never prejudiced against people with disabilities, just extremely uneducated. My image of a disabled person was of an elderly person in a wheelchair. Thankfully I have come out of the dark. Sometimes you will know a person is disabled because they are in a wheelchair or they talk slowly. But, interestingly, half the time you will be unaware that the person you are talking to, or looking at, has a disability of some sort. Before I did BCA I would have been prejudiced against someone who spoke slowly, immediately assuming they would not have anything worth listening to because they were not going to make sense. Now I can see that their only disability is that they speak slowly. Everything that they say makes perfect sense and is well worth waiting for! The moral, which I wish were more sacredly practised by the human race and kept as a commandment, is 'Never judge people by their appearance.' Many disabled people have more to offer in personality than most able-bodied people, but unfortunately it seems to be human nature to judge and discriminate against others who are different."

Collaborating on Coping with Change



A recurring theme to emerge during the workshops conducted in participants' own homes was the important issue of coping with the changes brought about by the onset of a debilitating condition like multiple sclerosis. At the same time, the obvious difficulties associated with MS need to be viewed alongside career changes, educational developments and other choices, phases of change common to everyone's life experience.

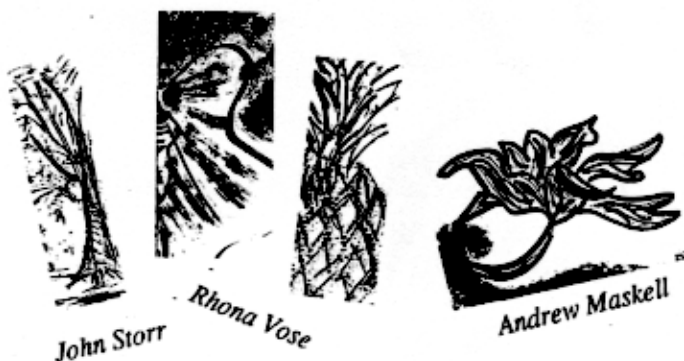
BCA's agenda includes responding to individual issues which emerge during the course of the work, and to meet the evident need for change to be aired, an 'off-shoot' project was introduced. A number of project participants, both business staff, school students and people with disabilities, were invited to join in a general exploration of the idea of change by making collages on Coping with Change. The intrinsic value of collage is that it does not depend on technical or artistic ability; there is no requirement to draw or compose in a representative way and the sudden juxtaposition of previously unrelated elements brings about new insights. Through this means, people can often reveal feelings and opinions to which they feel unable give verbal expression.

The outcome showed that everyone was almost unintentionally bringing to the fore thoughts and ambitions which would otherwise have remained unexpressed. One business employee had produced a collage containing all the elements familiar to his working life which he felt was a useful 'inventory' since he was shortly to move to a different job which could be a springboard to new activities. Another participant, used to working at a high academic and social level with foreign nationalities, had made a collage of past experiences and found that a strong issue for her was racism. For another, a review of a past career teaching biology revealed a strong love of plants and interest in the transformation to be observed in natural things. For one student looking ahead to an as yet unknown career was seen as intense pressure. The unfamiliar stresses of unexpectedly having to find work as a freelance were rooted in the collage of one of the carers working with the project. Another collage featured the hard road to accepting unwelcome but unavoidable changes at work.

The common ground which emerged among participants was the stages through which change impacts: shock and possible euphoria; searching for meaning; anger and guilt; depression, and finally acceptance.

"One does not discover new lands
without consenting to lose sight of
the shore for a very long time:

André Gide



Facing the Future

Staff of the Social Services Department which had commissioned the project, *Other People's Postcards*, found a new rapport emerging between them and their clients. The enabling training sessions were particularly valuable and in their view should be developed as part of continuing training for all staff, beyond those engaged specifically in social services. Local authority financial constraints and overstretched staff could all enjoy dramatic benefits through a policy shift in service delivery from the traditional model of meeting social need to a developmental one, working within the community as well as in the day centre. "The project should be the model for social services everywhere, and BCA's networking and training methods could be applied in any area," was the conclusion.

Thus, the future of this BCA project for Richmond's Social Services Department lies in building a bridge between current practice and a potential new approach to serving the needs of people with disabilities. The issues to be met in future developmental work would be:

Reaching more people with disabilities: Current provision is limited to people who make their own decision to take part in what is regarded by many as an 'institutional' facility. The BCA project, however, has illustrated the possibilities of an outreach approach – of involving many other people who initially reject 'institutionalised' activities.

A new approach might involve a number of developments:

- the need to allocate more staff time to working in the community, to identifying and responding to needs
- a member of staff assigned to work with volunteers and able to concentrate on building up relationships
- a continuous programme of staff training in enabling skills
- the development of the 'levelling' effect of role reversal between staff and people with disabilities, and of working together on common tasks
- the involvement of people with disabilities in decision-making about the content of provision for them, and in immediate management
- a Centre to serve as a nerve-centre controlling a network system in touch with those in the community in need of care and support; a Centre would also operate as a counselling/drop-in and support facility for people with disabilities.



Illustration by Margaret Ray

'Other People's Postcards'

**a project for Richmond upon Thames Social Services
has been sponsored by The National Westminster Bank
Bio Products Laboratory and the Richmond Parish Lands Charity
supporting the local MS Society**