

# An Afternoon In Portland

Dec 2023

by Nicola Jenner, Steph Molligoda and Susannah Baker MBE



“IT FELT IMPORTANT TO DO THIS AT THIS POINT WHILE THINGS ARE STILL NEW AND THEY ARE SETTling IN, TO SHOW THEM THAT AS THEY MOVE ON FROM PLACE TO PLACE, CONNECTIONS AREN'T SEVERED, AND RELATIONSHIPS STILL MATTER.”

Over the weekend, some of the Foundation team, accompanied by a couple of beloved volunteers, travelled down to Portland, Dorset, to meet with three former guests of the asylum hotel we were supporting in North Devon.

The day was bleak, the weather was wet and grey and as we came through the peninsular, there was an immediate sense that this would be a very isolating place. With milder weather and sunshine, that feeling may have been different, but not on this day. Initially, we were all surprised that the Bibby Stockholm barge wasn't in a more prominent position in the Port. It is so hidden you can't actually see it from the gated harbour. However, after being there for a while it was more of an obvious “out of sight, out of mind” sentiment.

When we arrived at the **Beehive café**, a lovely warm venue who had kindly reserved some space for us (Trustee Susannah chose this meeting point as she had been told that the café owners and staff have been supportive to anyone involved with the Bibby). Our Iranian friend arrived first, after having visited a church in Weymouth. But when we called the other two chaps (we had got to know them well when they were here with us, through their roles in the advocacy group, 'Unity in Diversity'), we were told they were struggling to leave the port and the security team were not allowing them to leave.

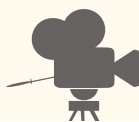
The Port's restrictions on public access and the challenges faced by those on the barge painted a complex picture. Whilst we appreciated the practicalities of a busy port and understood that the safety of those onboard was paramount, it felt purposefully difficult and segregating, with only a sporadic bus service providing a link to the outside world, which went as far as Weymouth. No-one is permitted to come and go on foot. With the bus not being due for another hour, Susannah and Steph, our asylum lead, jumped straight in the car to see if they could persuade the security team to bend the rules and allow them to leave by car, which was finally agreed after some heavy negotiations and being told explicitly this could not happen again.

Welcoming them into the café was a moment of relief, an opportunity to assess the conditions and their wellbeing. Despite the positive reactions about the food, other aspects were far from the tabloid descriptions. Cramped living conditions, long queues for food, and an overwhelming three hundred men to one television in the limited social spaces. The fitness equipment and size of the space barely qualified as a gym, and the small prayer room primarily served those of Muslim faith. Every departure and return involved a meticulous body search and airport-type security scan – even if just popping out for a cigarette. While the staff showed no hostility, the limited support and the absence of charities or NGOs onboard creates a hostile and cold environment.

It painted an oppressive picture. Essentially it is a floating prison with an occasional bus service. We were all desperately hoping that we'd be surprised to hear of a more comfortable welcome. Hearing about their fears of the barge undocking and sailing to an unknown location whilst they slept, was deeply distressing. It is the biggest reason for the refusals to board and it results in people losing any rights to any accommodation as a result. Being together that afternoon to share stories, talk about family, their faith and the community that supported them whilst in North Devon, reminded the men that they are not alone. We offered support, signposted resources, and assured them that Steph remains available to contact throughout their ongoing asylum process. Laughter and smiles, reminiscent of happier times we all shared, filled the air and topped up all our hearts. As the time came for us to travel home, emotions were high, hugs tighter, and goodbyes became more poignant. We were obviously unable to accompany them back to the barge, so we watched them leave with waves and a few shared tears. Together, we all reaffirmed our commitment in supporting them and the other men we know, soon to join them on the barge, in the coming weeks.



“IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO WALK AWAY UNCHANGED. ALL WE CAN DO IS TELL THEM THAT WE CARE.”



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Steph shared her mixed feelings following our visit to Portland. "I loved seeing our three former guests, reconnecting them, sharing stories and showing them that we still care. It felt important to do this at this point while things are still new and they are settling in, to show them that as they move on from place to place, connections aren't severed, and relationships still matter. However, I feel a deep rage that these three people who we know and care about are being treated in such a hostile manner. Living on a floating prison where they are not free to come and go as they please and where they have anxiety as to whether it may set sail and take them across the world somewhere. These three men have stories, they have loved ones, they have endured terrible hardship and suffering and yet they all show resilience and are just looking for glimmers of hope. These are the ones we know personally but that boat currently has another 297 people each with their own story, each with their own trauma and each with their own dreams for their future. I just wish our country would show a greater level of humanity to every single one of them."

Susannah reflected "As we sat with our three amazing friends, in the cafe at Portland, with the hail sheeting down outside, what struck me was their fragility, their tenderness and their core-deep sadness. Occasionally you could see small tendrils of levity. The glimmer of hope coming back in their eyes when thinking about the possibility of one day reuniting with their family, or getting their papers, or describing meeting a local church pastor who speaks Persian.... but then it was gone again. This is what the system was designed to do, right? This is what shutting people away, exiling them from society, forcing them into a floating, claustrophobic nightmare does. We have watched our friends - from arrival until now. Watched them being nibbled, bit by bit, soul by soul, like a deathly virus with an easy cure that no one is willing to give them.

It's impossible to walk away unchanged.

All we can do is tell them that we care."

Nic shared, "I went home and embraced my family, tighter than I had ever before. There were moments where I felt utterly helpless in their company that afternoon, but on reflection their reaction to seeing a friendly, familiar face will never be lost on me. They spoke of North Devon feeling like home to them, here in the UK. One of my proudest achievements in life is that I am a part of a group of compassionate folk, who continuously come together in welcoming those who have sought safety on our shores. To be given the opportunity to form connections and learn valuable life lessons from some of the planet's most resilient and inspiring humans.

Whilst I have lost all faith in this government's ability to provide safety, fairness and a sense of home to those in need, I have a deep sense of hope that our communities will come together in providing the love, compassion and welcome that is needed. I get to see that in action every single day working with the Foundation team."



We are always looking for volunteers to support the work we do, here in Northern Devon. If you would like to learn more, you can [watch this film](#) (have tissues ready) about the impact volunteers and community connection can make to those seeking safety and sanctuary and [register your support here](#).

**Ways in which you can help;**

**Write to your MP calling for the expansion of safe and legal routes**

**[Join Refugee Councils campaign for a fair and humane asylum system here](#)**

**"I REALLY APPRECIATE YOU SPENDING TIME WITH US. YOU DROVE ABOUT 4 HOURS TO JUST SEE US AND SAY TO US, WE ARE NOT ALONE. YOU ARE INCREDIBLE BECAUSE YOU GIVE ME HOPE."**

**- THE TEXT WE RECEIVED WHEN WE WERE DRIVING BACK.**

