

## Exeter man tells how he rebuilt his life after 10 year crisis



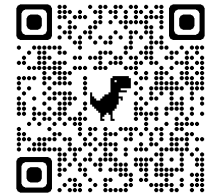
Photo: Ben Cookson  
outside St Petrock's

AN EXETER MAN who rebuilt his life after reaching rock bottom has spoken for the first time about how it felt, and how he is now working to support young people in difficult circumstances.

In the first episode of '[Word on the Street](#)' – a new St Petrock's website blog for existing and former homeless clients to express themselves - Ben Cookson tells of how he lost his home, business and family, eventually attempting suicide, which was the turning point from which he turned his life around.



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A report published last week reveals that rough sleeping is up by 26 per cent in one year and government targets for ending rough sleeping by the end of 2024, will be missed.

Ben, who spent a decade addicted to drug and alcohol after unresolved trauma from his childhood caught up with him, is now speaking out in the hope that his experiences will provide inspiration to others in similarly desperate circumstances.

He said: "The recession came in my mid thirties. In 2008, I lost my business, my family, my house and everything I had worked for. I was able to rent for most of this time, but ran out of money in 2019 and spent a year sleeping on friends' floors and sofas.

"Living with an addiction is extremely difficult. The shame and guilt I carried from taking drugs were unbearable and led me further and deeper into the grip of addiction. I just couldn't comprehend how my life had turned out the way it had."

[continued overleaf]

In 2020 Ben hit rock bottom and decided to take his own life. Although he came close to suicide, fortunately someone intervened just in time and it was at this point St Petrock's stepped in and Ben's life started to change for the better.

Ben added: "In short, I honestly do not think that I would be here today if it was not for all that St Petrock's did for me and all I have now, including peace of mind, beautiful relationships with my children, hope for the future and so much more would not have been possible. Words cannot express my gratitude, thank you so much to all at St Petrock's."

## Our shop needs volunteers!

IF YOU HAVE some spare time and would like to support our work with homeless people on a regular basis, please do consider putting in a few hours a week in our vintage charity shop, based in Paris Street. We're currently very short of volunteers and need a bit more help!

The shop sells vintage clothing not practical for rough sleepers, with any items that are needed for our clients sent over to our centre in Cathedral Yard. Please see <https://stpetrocks.org.uk/give-help/volunteer/> for full details and an application form. Thank you so much.



Photo: Petrock's Place, Paris Street

## We're still running out of clothing and survival gear!

WE'RE SEEING a growing number of rough sleepers as homelessness rises in Exeter and across the country, sadly.

People rely on us to provide them with survival gear, clothes and footwear, which are given out daily from our homelessness centre in Cathedral Yard.

If you're planning to have a clear out, please think of us! (We generally welcome second-hand items, but please note we can only take new underwear).

**We urgently need the following men's items: trainers, jeans/joggers, coats, hoodies, belts, new boxer shorts. We always need sleeping bags & rucksacks.**

### Our clients always have first priority

When sorting donations, our clients will always be given first priority and all suitable items are given directly to them for free. Any items that are unsuitable for direct use by our clients may instead be sold in our charity shop, where all funds go directly to support our frontline homelessness services.

If you're donating items, it is best to deliver them via our shop, Petrock's Place, in Paris Street (open 11am – 5.30pm Tues – Sat) as you can easily park at the rear. Thank you so much.

## SPOTLIGHT ON: Our kitchen and how it supports rough sleepers



THIS IS THE first 'SPOTLIGHT ON' in a series highlighting the various services we provide for homeless people in the city.

### Becoming homeless is a huge physical and psychological shock

A team of 10 volunteers, led by Linda Sillifant, our kitchen manager, caters for around 30 rough sleepers five days a week.

Last year a total of 11,754 meals were prepared in our kitchen by Linda and her team of volunteers.

**Photo: Linda, our kitchen manager, proudly sporting her 2023 five star food hygiene certificate**

Providing nutritious home cooked food is an essential part of what we do, largely because rough sleeping takes its toll on people's health and we want to do what we can to support good physical and emotional health.

Being evicted and realising you have no choice but to sleep on the streets is an enormous physical and psychological shock. And those who have been sleeping rough for some time are often unwell with numerous health complaints, especially in the winter.

The kitchen is a warm and welcoming place and Linda, our catering manager, who has been with St Petrock's for almost 28 years, when it was founded, cares very much about our homeless clients.

### Hot food makes people feel cared about

She said: "If I was homeless and had a terrible night in the cold and wet, being offered a hot cup of tea and bacon sandwich, or a home cooked curry and pudding, would make me feel cared about.

"Food is very important for connecting with people and building trust. It's the first step and it's how I look after people."

She said: "St Petrock's is fortunate in that many local businesses, schools and churches support our work. We often receive cooked meals for our clients and ingredients.

"We even have regular food donations from local individuals, who take the time to cook for rough sleepers and deliver to our centre. It's wonderful to know that our community cares so much about people who are forced to sleep rough."

Earlier this month, Linda and her team of volunteers were, once again, awarded a five star food hygiene certificate by the Food Standards Agency. It represents the highest accolade an organisation can achieve.

### Food hygiene is even more essential when you're catering for homeless people

Linda added: "People who live on the streets have little or no resistance to bugs, nor do they have access to any home comforts if they do become unwell, so it is even more vital that we maintain the highest cleanliness and kitchen management we possibly can."

## How we help our clients. Real life stories



Photo: A member of the team talking to one of our homeless clients.

**Our outreach team have provided some examples below of how they're helping people sleeping rough:**

### Working alongside a nurse provides urgent healthcare

Working closely with a dedicated nurse from the Clock Tower Surgery twice a week, we're able to support rough sleepers with healthcare. During one encounter, we met \*John, a middle-aged man with multiple health issues, including diabetes and an infected wound on his foot. New to Exeter, John had been homeless for months without proper medical attention and it was unlikely he was going to seek help himself.

This is where our outreach approach made all the difference. Instead of waiting for John to come to us, we brought the nurse directly to him. She provided immediate wound care and advised John to seek follow-up treatment at the surgery by calling a taxi.

Working with healthcare professionals not only improved John's health, but also demonstrated how actively finding rough sleepers on the streets makes a huge difference.

### Warning of an impending storm

Often, we find ourselves warning of potential dangers while on outreach. Recently we visited a riverside encampment, ahead of a storm. The tents were sited on a flood plain and with the amount of rain forecast we had concerns about the welfare of the people rough sleeping. When we arrived, we found several rough sleepers sheltering so we gave them warnings on the weather as well as the risks of flooding and falling trees from the high winds. With our encouragement they moved from the area and found shelter in a safer spot.

We regularly give weather warnings for all conditions. During the summer months we offer sun lotion and water bottles for extreme heat and offer practical advice for sleeping safely in freezing conditions. We give sleeping bags and extra clothing to those in need when they're unable to access our centre.

Weather conditions are often not prioritised by those on the streets, however, adverse weather can be life threatening to those with little or no shelter.

## St Petrock's Opening Times

Survival Services and Specialist Support in St Petrock's centre: Monday - Friday, 8.30am - 3pm

Mobile Rough Sleeper Support around the city:

Monday - Friday, 8.30am - 1pm

Petrock's Place Shop:

Tuesday - Saturday, 10am - 4.30pm

### Ways to Support St Petrock's

- **Direct bank transfer:**  
Acc No: **00032302** Sort Code: **40-5240** CAF Bank Ltd
- **Debit/credit card:** <https://stpetrocks.org.uk/give/>
- **Cheque:** Payable to **St Petrock's (Exeter) Ltd** & posted to **10 Cathedral Yard, Exeter, EX1 1HJ**

Thank you

