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DESIGNING UTOPIA

JOHN HARGRAVE AND THE KIBBO KIFT

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CATHY ROSS WITH OLIVER BENNETT

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Authorship

Chapters 1–5 are by Cathy Ross, Chapter 6 is by Oliver Bennett. Each author accepts full responsibility for any errors that appear in their texts.

Attributions

All designs and artworks are by John Hargrave, unless otherwise attributed.

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FOREWORD

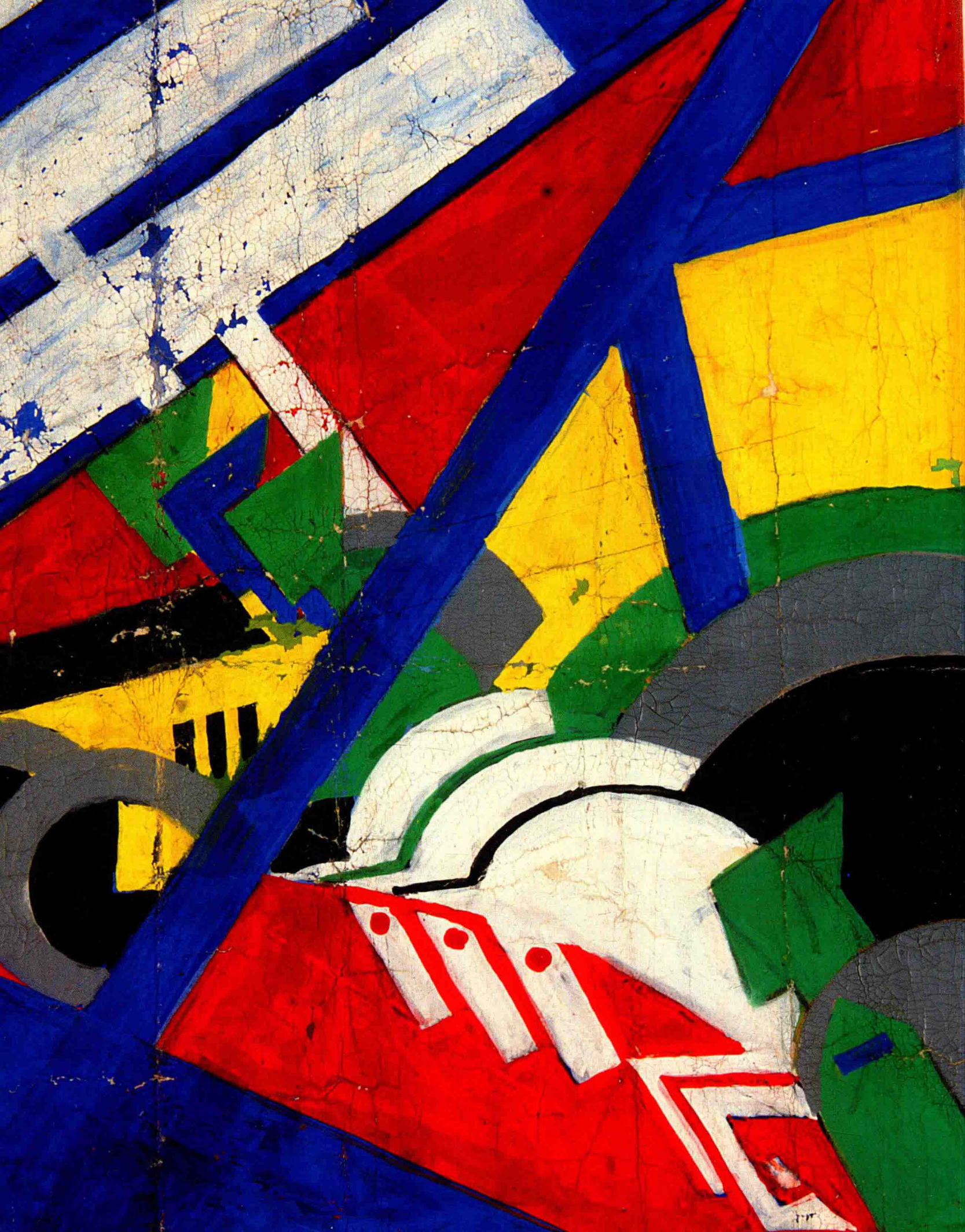
I am extremely delighted to see the Museum's Kibbo Kift collection emerge more fully into the public gaze through this book. The collection has been living in the Museum of London's stores since the 1980s, but under the status of 'loan' which has limited the amount of staff time and resources we have been able to devote to it. It is only within the last two years, when the collection was transferred to public ownership, that we have been able to start doing it justice.

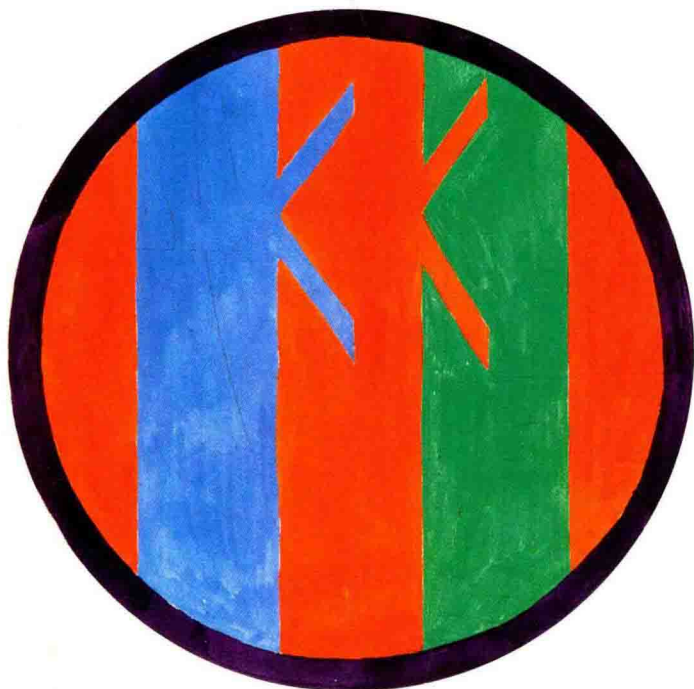
And what an incredible collection it is. These colourful and striking artefacts tell an extraordinary story: not just of one remarkable man, but also of a generation of young people trying to make sense of the world after the First World War; crucially, fixing their gaze on the future and trying to imagine a better world to come. Today, visions of the future can be tempered by cynicism, but it is difficult not to still feel stirred by the Kibbo Kift's beliefs that war, poverty and hunger should and could be abolished, if only the human race focused its energies more productively.

The publication of *Designing Utopia* coincides with the launch of online access to many hundreds of items from the Kibbo Kift collection through the Museum of London's website. Over the next few years, the Museum will move to a bigger building, one that enables us to be more adventurous in the way we use our extraordinarily rich collections. I feel sure that the Kibbo Kift will be physically visible in this new Museum of London, but in the meantime, do enjoy discovering this thought-provoking story of English art, politics and creativity.

Sharon Ament

Director, Museum of London





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INTRODUCTION

A remarkable Englishman has just died at the age of 88. Most people, probably, have never heard of him. It was not always so, and should not be now. His name was John Hargrave ... A crank? A man whose life and work will be forgotten? So much the worse. John Hargrave was no crank. History brings strange reversals. A time may come when this extraordinary man will have the fame and esteem he deserves.

Peter Simple, *Daily Telegraph*, 1 December 1982

At the time of John Hargrave's death, obituary-writers fell back on lists as the best way of conveying who exactly he was. To Peter Simple in the *Daily Telegraph*, Hargrave (1894–1982) was first and foremost a political leader, but also 'a novelist, an aeronautical engineer, a lexicographer, artist, psychic healer and authority on Paracelsus'. The *Guardian* put 'artist' first in their list, adding that he was a 'writer and inventor'. The *Times* gave him the longest obituary. In their list he was an 'author, cartoonist, inventor, lexicographer, artist and psychic healer'. However, 'he was best known as "White Fox" the founder and leader of the Kibbo Kift and Green Shirt movements that were active between the wars'. The *Times* paid tribute to his 'great personal magnetism, powerful enthusiasms and penetrating though unorthodox intellect'.

Since Hargrave's death, his unorthodox intellect and idiosyncratically named movements have rather disappeared from the public understanding of Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. Just as the obituary-writers found it difficult to sum Hargrave up concisely, so too with historians. He is at best an awkward fit with mainstream narratives about the twentieth century, and at worst a confusingly ambiguous figure. Was Hargrave a modernist or an anti-modernist? Politically right or left? A romantic dreamer or a ruthless social engineer? One academic text suggests that he was 'probably the nearest England had to a Hitler'; another casts him as the possible model for Mellors, the sexually charged gamekeeper in D. H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Hargrave didn't make life easy for those wanting to pin him down. He revelled in mysterious pronouncements, strings of words where the meaning, although very clear to him, was thoroughly opaque to others. His legacy to historians is an exasperating one. Was

he a prophet of twenty-first-century individualism or a peddler of nineteenth-century received ideas about social order? And what exactly did his 'youth movements', so very different in appearance and apparent concerns, signify?

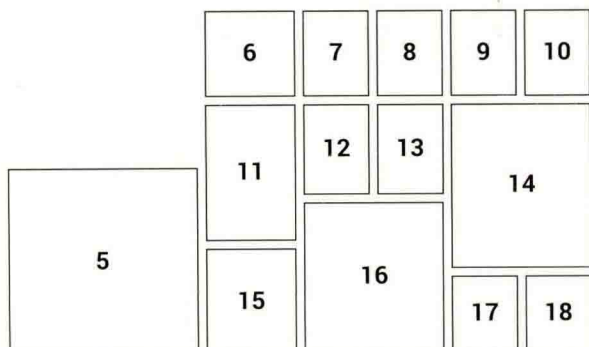
The sequence of the three movements Hargrave led in the 1920s and 1930s is at least clear. The first was the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, founded in 1920. This was the most exotically attired of his groups. As Head Man, Hargrave required his Kinsfolk to wear a green uniform with a cowl or hood when hiking in the countryside, but gloriously coloured Saxon-style surcoats for the ceremonies and rituals that took place at the yearly gatherings. The focus of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift was self-development of the individual, and their significant places were in the countryside, although many members lived in the residential suburbs springing up around Britain's towns and cities. In 1931, in response to political crisis and trade depression, Hargrave evolved the Kindred into the Green Shirt movement. The Green Shirts' aim was to abolish poverty, hunger and unemployment through implementing a 'sane economic system' based on the theory of Social Credit, believed by its followers to be an impeccably scientific solution to the problems of money supply. He designed a new futuristic tunic for the Kindred, and a cheaper, military-style green shirt for unemployed members.

Finally, in 1935, the Green Shirt movement shed another skin and became the Social Credit Party of Great Britain, marking Hargrave's reconciliation with parliamentary democracy as a way of implementing change. All Party members now wore uniforms as they marched with disciplined precision through city streets carrying drums and banners. In London, they performed protest rituals outside the Bank of England and shouted Social Credit slogans in the House of Commons. The aim of the Social Credit Party was the withering-away of the United Kingdom as a nation state in favour of the USCK – the United Social Credit Kingdom of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The imagined King of the new Kingdom was the Duke of Windsor.

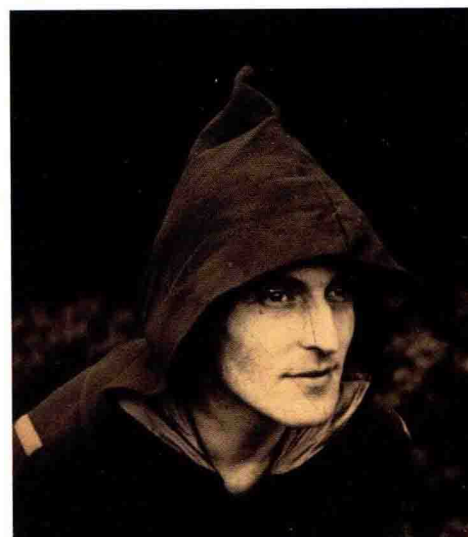
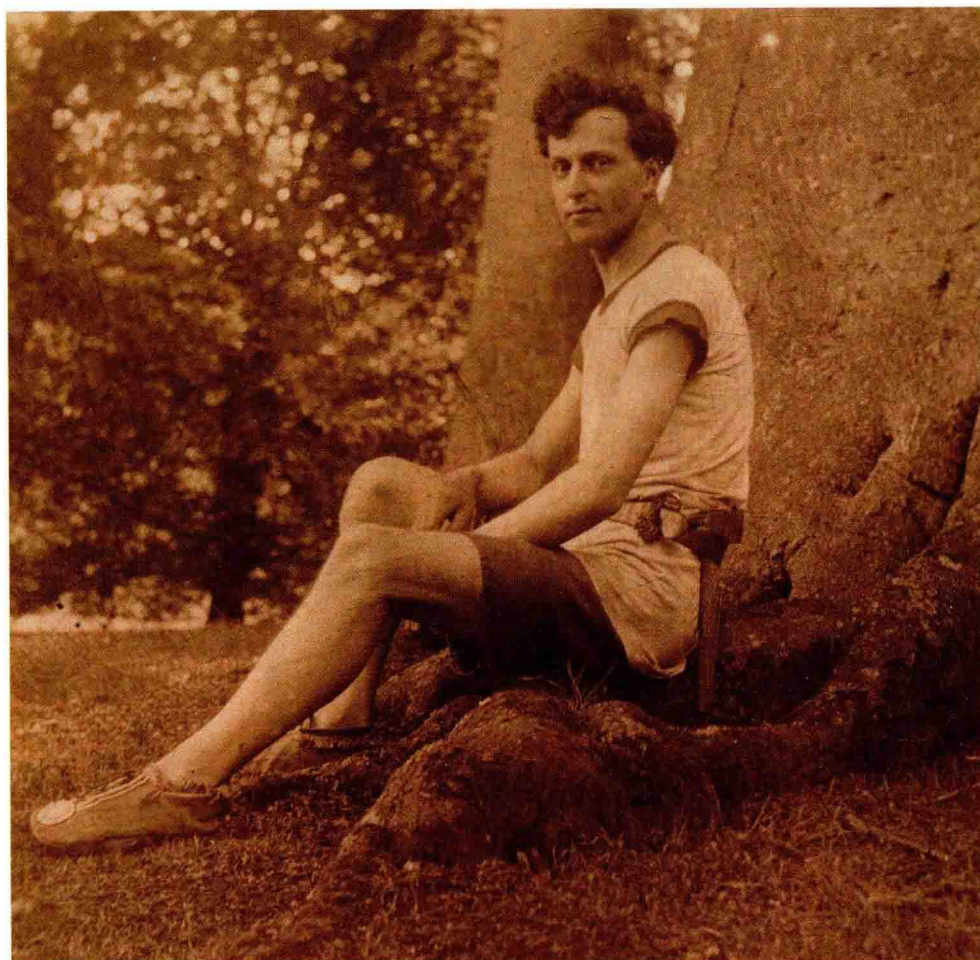
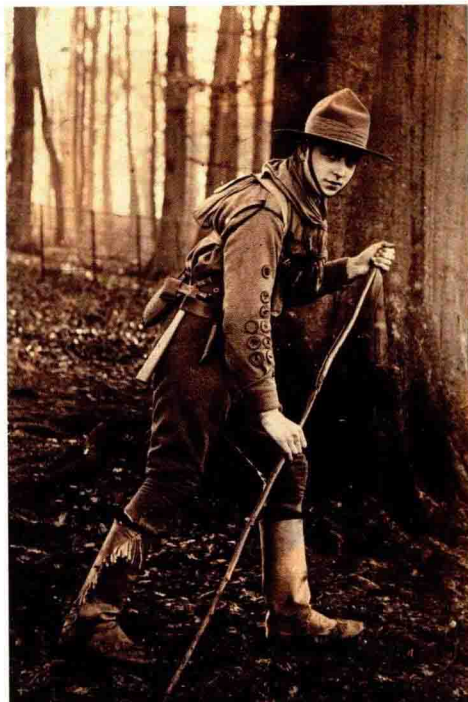
Opposite: 3 Banner design [detail]: 'Kin Transport' by John Hargrave, dated 24 June 1929. Gouache.

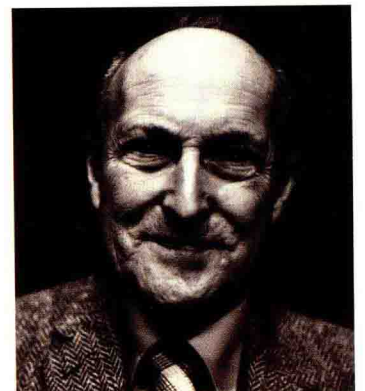
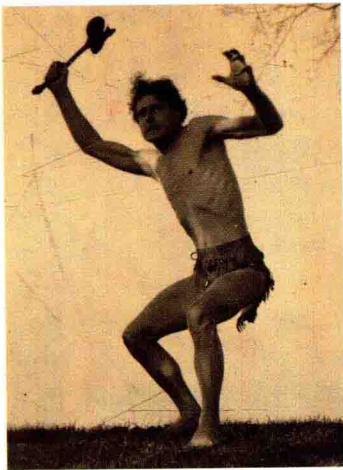
Above: 4 Sigil of the Redesman, 1928. Gouache.

JOHN HARGRAVE



5 In camp at Berkhamstead 1917; **6** Aged three, Brighton 1897; **7** Aged seven, Kendal 1901; **8, 9** Aged eight, Windermere 1902; **10** As a 'Junior Adjutant, Baden Powell's Boy Scouts', Latimer 1910; **11** As a Scout, Latimer 1909; **12** As a prehistoric man, c.1922; **13** At the Dexter Fam training camp for children, 1927; **14** At home in Kings Langley, painting a portrait of Millican Dalton, 1922; **15** At the Autumn Gleemote, photographed by E. Wilson, 1927; **16** A publicity image for the novel *Summer Time Ends*, 1935; **17** Aged 62 in 1956; **18** Aged 86 in 1980.





Altogether the three movements present a rolling response to the unfolding events of the 1920s and 1930s, all fuelled by Hargrave's 'resolute imagination', a phrase of which he was fond. This book is an attempt to make sense of John Hargrave and his resolute imagination by providing an overview that at least maps the territory over which he roamed. It is neither a detailed history of the movements, nor a full biography of the man. The starting point for this book was simply the desire to try and make fuller sense of the Kibbo Kift collections at the Museum of London, which arrived on loan in 1980 but which only began to be seriously catalogued from 2012, when ownership was transferred to the Museum. These collections comprise the visual archive of the three movements and include artwork and designs, photographs, ceremonial artefacts and vestments, publications, posters, manuscripts and log books, together with Hargrave's own artistic and literary works. The holdings at the Museum complement the more organisationally orientated papers held in the Youth Movement Archive at the London School of Economics. The LSE also holds the bulk of Hargrave's personal papers, an important source for this book.

Where the Kibbo Kift story has already been told, for example in Mark Drakeford's 1997 book *Social Movements and their Supporters*, it has tended to be from the evidence of the LSE papers alone; plus, in Drakeford's case, from the memories of members who survived into the 1980s. Mark Drakeford's book remains the pioneering text about the Kibbo Kift and is an essential foundation for any subsequent account of the group. However, its focus on the Kindred as an archetypal youth movement springing from Baden Powell's Boy Scouts meant that other aspects of the story took a back seat. The focus of this present book is more directly on Hargrave himself – as a writer, an artist, a graphic designer and a lightning-conductor for the extraordinary intellectual turbulence of between-the-wars Britain. The Kibbo Kift was often accused of being a 'one-man movement', and this was substantially true. The members were by no means passive followers, but Hargrave set the tone and defined the vision. As one of his loyalists, Stanley Dixon, wrote in 1980: 'Most of the ideas within these movements were Hargrave's, but his tremendous enthusiasm touched off unsuspected depths of talent within his followers.'

Taking Hargrave as the focus means that this present book takes a broadly biographical approach. Taking the visual material as the main source also means engaging with the ideas and beliefs he embedded in the images and artefacts that the movements produced. Hargrave's creative

production reflected his commitment to 'symbolology', a word loosely used in the 1920s to describe the use of symbols in mysticism and anthropology, but also in advertising and mass communication. The new road signs of the 1920s, with their red triangles and circles to signify warnings or commands, were said to be examples of modern symbolology. 'Symbolology' implied a science rather than an art, and Hargrave held that the language of symbols was a modern and scientific method of communication. Symbols could be an international language for the modern world, like Esperanto; but they also tapped into the deep past of the human race, expressing archetypal desires or occult forces. This symbolological bent led Hargrave to the parallel belief that all forms of art, whether literary, visual or performance, should be highly stylised. Realism was taboo in the Kindred, as he instructed his mumming performers in 1924:

The modern realistic play shall not be performed. Kin-Drama relies upon symbolism and masking. Example: in Kin-Drama 'wickedness' is not put forward as a wicked man ('the villain of the piece'), but as a man called 'Wickedness', and acting as 'Wickedness'.

One of his many complaints about the visual art of his day was that artists persisted in creating pictures empty of any solid symbolic meaning, or so he saw it. Even worse, modern artists could unwittingly conjure up the forces of evil through ignorance of the language of symbols. Even the act of imagining such irresponsible pictures in the artist's mind posed unforeseen dangers, he warned.

The ideas that passed through Hargrave's mind during his intellectually omnivorous life were many and various. As outlined in Chapter 1, Hargrave was a great appropriator of ideas, a hungry product of the 'Home University Library' age: someone who processed the art, science and philosophy he read about in mass-market books through the prism of his own experiences, to emerge with his own idiosyncratic conclusions. It is worth making the point early on that beneath all the intellectual comings and goings, what remained constant was Hargrave's sense of mission and duty – 'World Service', in his words. Throughout his life Hargrave retained an unshakeable faith in himself as a figure bound by duty and self-discipline to the task of bettering the human race, a task made urgent by the shocking events of the early twentieth century. He was both pilgrim and priest, the protagonist of 'a modern *Pilgrim's Progress* from this world to that which is to come', as the subtitle to his 1924 novel *Harbottle* put it.

19 'Vision', page from the *Lodge of Instruction*, 1924. Watercolour.

Harbottle told the fable of an Everyman figure, Christian Harbottle, rediscovering his sense of self in a world shattered by the First World War. In the novel Harbottle finds his guiding vision in an ordinary school atlas, which he comes across discarded in a pile of rubbish. For John Hargrave, no less than for his protagonist Christian Harbottle, an atlas was a highly charged magic object. The Mercator Projection, on which the atlas depended, was a potent image that had come down through the centuries, expressing the world as a single entity, undivided by states, races or religions, as his hero muses:

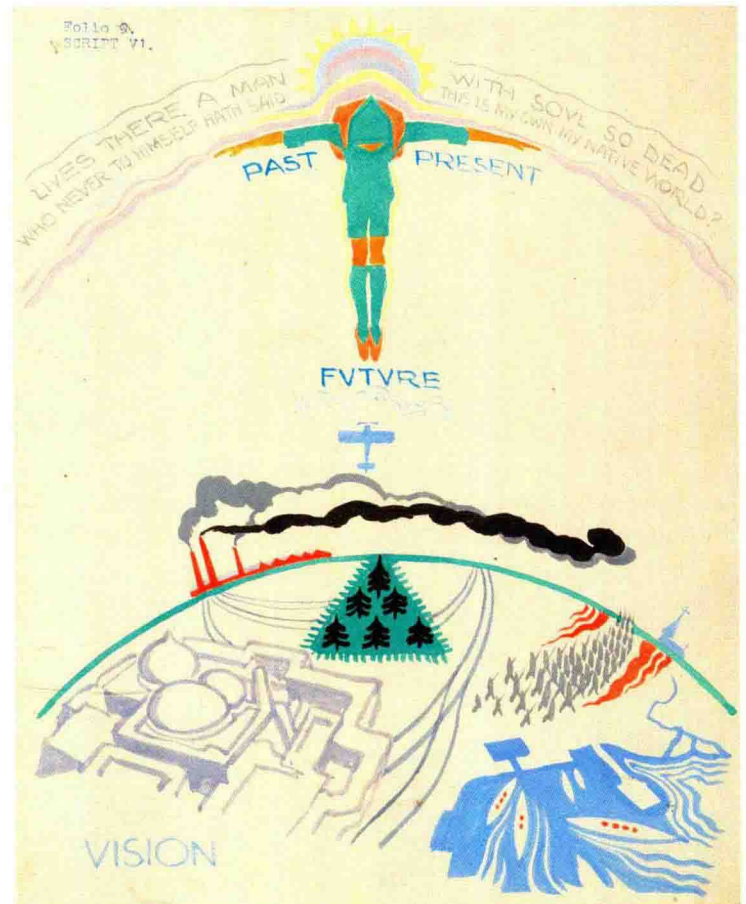
Harbottle gloated on every page of it ... it's all symbolised as one whole; one whole thing. That's valuable ... It unifies the crust of the Earth for me. It shows it all fitted together with its blue seas and mountain ranges. It doesn't show any Right or Wrong. It doesn't say this is Good and that's Bad. It doesn't pretend to have faked up some new religious stunt. It just states in good plain diagrams how things are.

The atlas was also a testament to human achievement, and therefore an inspiration for the future:

It makes me feel that there is just a ray of hope somewhere. If the human mind year after year can search out and fit together, with almost super-human patience and toil, the unthinkable multitude of details in the mapping and charting of every ocean and every continent, of every stream and river, of every island and isthmus and peninsula, of every town and village throughout the length and breadth of the earth – if it can do this (as it has done), if it can overcome that sin of innate inertia and sluggishness of mind to accomplish this Atlas – may it not be able to go a step further ... towards the mapping out clearly of the future progress of the human race? Stupendous task. Staggering. Is it possible?

Harbottle ends with a half-asleep hero floating high above the world to come and looking down on the earth. The bird's-eye view was a favourite view-point for John Hargrave, whose drawing for the Kindred's *Lodge of Instruction* (fig. 19) mirrors the passage describing Harbottle's vision of a future Utopia:

He saw the whole world laid out map-like below him in a Mercator's Projection ... There's a great ship down there flying the World Flag in the Pacific, but she's carrying foodstuffs to India where there's a shortage owing to failure



of crops ... There's an aeroplane just left, her white decks carrying a load of food ... Most of the towns seem to have been cleared away and the population is smaller. No great crowds. Look! There's a school in the New Forest. There's another near Epping, with huts and tents. Children being trained for World Service. There's a flag staff with the World Flag flying ... Hullo – no railways – all gone. There seems to be a silver thread running right across Europe and right across Siberia to the Behring Straits. That'll be a mono-rail ... Anyhow they're clearing things up. There's no smoke to be seen. It'll go on because the kids are being trained for World Service as they used to train cadets for Empires. Yes – it'll go on. And he fell asleep.

As these passages suggest, Hargrave's story was a supremely twentieth-century quest for a better society. The quest was shaped by his individual imagination, made more urgent by the experience of the First World War, but quickened by absolute faith in the powers of science and the scientific method, which to him did not exclude a belief in ritual and magic as tools for harnessing the forces of nature. It was a mix that probably seems more eccentric now than it did in the first half of the twentieth century. However, the Kibbo Kift vision was not that dissimilar to other, more famous, imagination-driven quests

(3)(c)

"Age of Plenty" New Economic Cartoons.

3. A DWELLING HOUSE OF THE FUTURE.



THE DWELLING CENTRES WILL BE AWAY FROM THE CENTRES OF PRODUCTION AND LEARNING,

and every house will be different in shape and size and equipment.

"Age of Plenty" New Economic Cartoons.

6. THE OLD ^{WORLD} ~~FASHION~~ VILLAGES



AND ANCIENT LANDMARKS OF THE BRITISH ISLES WILL BE KEPT FOR THE SAKE OF THEIR BEAUTY AND QUIET.

Get a good photo or something to copy for this

of the period – *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Lord of the Rings*, for example. Nor was a belief in Social Credit as the unified theory of everything, which would allow mankind to build Jerusalem here on earth, that far removed from the faith placed in the other unifying political ideologies at large in the twentieth century. Hargrave is a good example of the twentieth century's enchantment with big visions.

If there is an underlying argument in this book, it is probably that the Kibbo Kift and Hargrave should not be seen as exceptional oddities in interwar Britain. Rather, the suggestion is that in their odd, eclectic way they represent something quite fundamental about the way the English came to terms with the post-First World War world. It certainly seems fair to see the movement as a form of English modernism even though it had nothing to do with literary salons and art galleries; neither was it 'of the masses' any more than it was 'of the highbrows'. What the example of the Kibbo Kift underlines is that radical change – overturning the banking system, for example – could be, and was, imagined in a full-blooded way in the suburbs, and specifically from a bungalow at Kings Langley in the Home Counties. 'The English,' as George Orwell said in 1947, 'are probably more capable than most peoples of making revolutionary change without bloodshed.' Hargrave's 1929 cartoons for the Social Credit journal *The Age of Plenty*

(figs 20, 21) illustrate what might be called a typically English vision of the future, revolutionary architecture imagined alongside thatched cottages, but both buildings standing in a world of truly revolutionised social and economic relationships. The modernist frame of mind that Hargrave could be said to represent was no less diluted for drawing on religion, the romance of nature and fantasy, alongside rationality, reason and a desire for order.

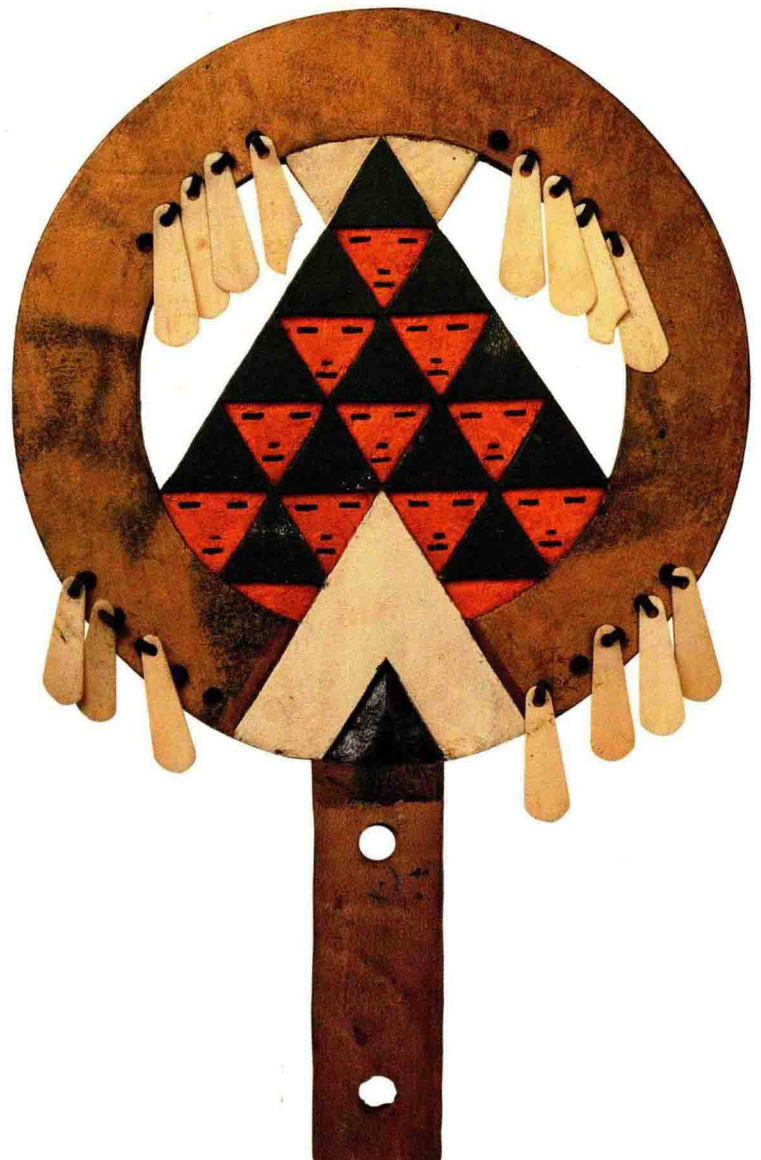
The final chapter of this book is an essay by Oliver Bennett musing on the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift as seen from the twenty-first century. It is tempting to trace resonance between the Kibbo Kift and various youth cultures and art movements that came later: through the youthquake of the 1960s, a similarly impatient mix of culture, individualism and politics, up to the conceptual and performance art of the present day. Contemporary art seems a particularly telling parallel, given the anti-capitalist and 'green' feelings that underpin the work of many young artists today. Stylistically, the Kibbo Kift can feel rather more post-modern than modern, with Hargrave's work as both writer and artist harvesting fragments, symbols and words from a variety of sources to build imagery that packs a visual and literary punch. The experience of the men and women who joined the movement also has parallels with today, when creating an avatar to carry your preferred identity into your



Opposite left: 20 'A Dwelling House of the Future', one of a set of cartoons envisioning the future, drawn for the Social Credit magazine, *The Age of Plenty*, September 1929. Pencil. Also see pages 118–19.


Opposite right: 21 'The Old World Villages', another cartoon from the set for *The Age of Plenty*, September 1929. Pencil.

22, 23 Two 'Token Standards of In-bringer', from a set of four awarded at the 10th Althing to 'those who had brought most folk into the Kindred', 1929. Painted wood.



own personal network is not such an unusual experience. The 26-year-old woman from Coventry calling herself 'Blue Falcon' and designing her own clothes to underline her sense of identity as a proud 'daughter of the Vikings' seems a relatively modern figure, even though she chose her avatar in 1923. It is quite easy to imagine the Kindred flourishing in the social media age.

These parallels with the present day are certainly resonant, but they do have their limits. The story of John Hargrave and the Kibbo Kift is fundamentally a story of the twentieth century. In 1894, the year of his birth, bird's-eye views were still a matter of hot-air balloons. By the time of his death in 1982, the collective efforts of the human race had created a supersonic aircraft, and the bird's-eye view now encompassed the whole globe. It was an astonishing achievement, and one in which Hargrave felt he had played a part. One of the last crusades of his life was against the British government and the manufacturers of Concorde, whom he accused of appropriating his invention of an automated moving map device and using it, unacknowledged, in the new wonder-aircraft. His resolute imagination had had a lot to feed on during the twentieth century.



The man alternates between idealism, pure and simple, and then a sort of mummery and then a compromise with practicality. What he wants is all right – I agree with him on the whole and respect him as a straightforward fighter. But he knows there's no hope his way.

D. H. Lawrence, 1928



Hargrave seems terribly lower middle-class, with that lack of humour which all half-baked culture-addicts have ... He realises that something is up with our civilisation. Who does not; he diagnoses what class of emotions are starved and distorted in our time but wishes to satisfy them at an infantile level.

W. H. Auden, 1932



Hargrave's weekly message is a crack of light in the mental black-out.

Compton Mackenzie, 1943



One voice alone is heard to ring out with the accent of authority. It is the voice of John Hargrave. Turning neither to the 'Right' nor to the 'Left', he offers a clear-cut programme of national recovery.

Augustus John, 1943