

Scenes from the tea house

Alexandra Moskalenko has captured the legendary Blackheath Tea Hut on celluloid. **Michael Parker** catches up with the Greenwich-based filmmaker to see what inspired her into this unlikely project

A HAVEN for drivers, clubbers, passing emergency services and night-owls of all description, the Blackheath Tea Hut is now celebrated on film.

Tea Time, by Greenwich-based filmmaker Alexandra Moskalenko, looks at a year in the life of the small cabin in the heart of the heath, which dispenses hot tea, food and goodwill 24 hours a day.

Especially at this time of year, the windswept heath can seem a daunting and dark place, but in a warm, funny and often surprising portrait we see the snack shack on Shooters Hill Road, there since 1924, as an oasis in the night.

First-time filmmaker Alexandra, 36, said: "I wanted to do a film about 24 hours at the hut, but there was so much going on I had to make it a year instead. It is so

important to so many people – it needed more time."

Having passed the hut many times, like the thousands of drivers who use the A2 every day, Alexandra saw it at night and was reminded of the Edward Hopper painting Nighthawks.

When she saw that the hut was under attack from the Blackheath Society, which views it as a blot on the landscape, Alexandra approached the hut's manager, Peter, about making a film.

"People were very reserved at the beginning," she recalled.

"They wondered what I was doing, but I kept going back, got to know the people and they really came out of themselves."

One hut regular, Nick, is quite philosophical about the hut, likening it to an extended family.

Alexandra said: "He's there almost every day — at one point he told

me it was the only stable element of his life, when everything else was falling apart around him."

Others, including doormen, clubbers, police and ambulance crews, salesmen and delivery drivers, a group of bikers that visit regularly, midnight kite flyers and even a passing nun, swap stories and share a laugh over a tea and a bacon sandwich.

Making Tea Time took four years because Alexandra spent a year filming the seasons change at the hut, and then taught herself to edit and create the final film after the funding she hoped for never emerged, although she received £500 from PG Tips, purveyor of hot tea to night owls everywhere.

You can see Tea Time at the Greenwich Picture House on February 3, and the DVD is available for £9.50 by visiting www.teatimemovie.com.



Alexandra's debut film, Tea Time, will be showing on February 3 in Greenwich. Below left: The Tea House gets a Christmas makeover

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