

John Groves by Rosemary Barcham

I am currently researching my family history, so was very pleased to find the Bexley Hospital website. I thought you might like to share my memories about my granddad, John Groves, who for 35 years was a patient there but who sadly passed away in 1968 whilst still in residence.

When my brother and I were children, we used to travel regularly with my dad and grandmother to visit my granddad and have very fond memories of him. We were always very excited about these visits because it meant a trip across the Thames on the Woolwich Ferry from the East End of London. I remember throwing the ferry tickets into the white froth that the ferry kicked up on the water, and the smell and intrigue of the engine room. We used to visit come rain or shine and used to meet my granddad in a little café next to Welling Football Ground. I seem to remember children weren't allowed to visit the hospital, so sometimes we went with him to see the football match there, or to go shopping in Welling or for a walk in Bexley Park. He always wore a flat cap and mac, and I can liken him to Dudley Moore in the Pete and Dudley sketch.

He was always calm, very kind and generous. Every time we visited he would give us a 10-bob note each. Sometimes he would have little gifts for my grandmother, things that maybe he had found in the street like a comb that he had lovingly taken back to the hospital for a clean-up before giving it to her. He was always very considerate to her, and to us. I remember he used to work in the hospital running a tobacco and newspaper trolley which I believe he used to take round the wards to sell to the patients and he used to give my grandmother a little money from his earnings there.

I remember wondering to myself why was my granddad living in a mental hospital when there was nothing wrong with him? In fact the only thing about him I found odd was that in the café he used to pour his tea into the saucer and drink from that rather than the cup, which I later found out was quite a natural habit amongst men from London's docklands.

I don't know what brought my granddad to the hospital or why he stayed so long as this was always a taboo subject. I know for sure that had the onset of his illness been now he would have been living back in the community within a very short time. He was a lovely, lovely man and one of the sanest people I have ever come across. We never knew any other members of his family, no brothers or sisters, aunts, uncles or cousins ever kept in touch with him or us although through my research I have now found out there were many. I have recently made contact with one of his nieces through my grandmother's side of the family and as a child she remembers my granddad saying he couldn't live at home as everyone there was mad. He was probably stigmatised, as an ex-docker probably couldn't get work, had no proper support, and with poor living conditions, with no money coming in and a young family to support found life just too stressful. He was probably right!

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