

My memories of the Maypole by Kim Button

I grew up during the 1950s and 60s on the little housing estate situated close to Bexley Hospital, called Maypole Estate. During that time I became friends with both sets of brothers who lived in the gatehouses of Bexley Hospital, the East and West Lodges. Paul, David and Christopher Richardson were the Chief Fireman's sons and they lived in West Lodge. Alan, Ian and Stewart MacLean lived opposite in east Lodge and were the sons of the Chief Engineer.

Growing up in the shadow of the hospital was a unique experience. There were something like up to 2500 patients then. At any time on any day there would be several patients roaming the heath, the estate or just going to the local shops. Some, sadly, were identifiable only by their ill fitting clothes and others by their behaviour. Some passed by and blended in without notice. I do not believe I was frightened at any stage by some of the bizarre conduct we children witnessed over the years. Suffice to say, I have been more alarmed when dealing with those who proclaim to be without issue. The unique experience of growing up where I did - linked with my experience as a kitchen porter at the Hospital has allowed me to deal appropriately with many in our society who have shown signs of anger, sadness, depression, violence, self harm or silence and withdrawal.

My first recollection as a child of the hospital was the vision of the locked, high green painted gates. At that time it was classed as an asylum. My second, was the ominous sound of the very loud steam driven hooter which wailed once a week. It was a rather frightening noise which could be heard for hundreds of yards around and sounded to us kids like a monster howling with pain. We later discovered it was the fire alarm test. Both gates were 'guarded' by a man who sat in the central office which stood between them. As kids we saw large bunches of keys passing to and fro and much nodding and 'obliging' as staff and visitors would come and go. Sunday was the busiest day for visiting and double decker London Transport buses would ferry them in from London - I think it was the 124 ? They would park two or three at a time on the heath and we kids would ask to scramble in and over them. We were enthralled to see red London buses. All we ever knew was the green 401 which ran from Belvedere to Sevenoaks.

Patients and visitors would often go to the Maypole Café or just go on the heath for somewhere to sit or walk. Little did I know at the time how beautiful the hospital grounds were themselves, as at the time we were not allowed to enter. Then, in 1966 when I made friends with David Richardson from West Lodge, the hospital became our own very private playground. There were haystacks and barns on the farm, apples pears and plums to be gorged in the Gardens attached to the 'Mansion' and trees to climb in the woods. Most exciting had to be climbing the tower and going down the 'ducts' which cobwebbed under the entire hospital. I never did the tower, though both the MacLean's and Richardson's did.

The ducts were a subterranean mirror of the wards and houses above. They spread for what seemed miles. There were only one or two places whereby one could enter which weren't locked. These were secret entrances and we thought only us kids knew where they were. We didn't have torches to hand in those days so we took candles. When we entered the very dry and incredibly dusty tunnels some were already lit and some had shafts of light coming down from air vents above. Some were extremely tiny and could only be squeezed through whilst others were wide enough to walk three / four abreast. We would occasionally hear the voices of engineers / plumbers / workers echoing from somewhere ahead and would scurry out of sight - just like proverbial rats in the sewer. The overriding sensations when entering the ducts was the smell of cat wee, the heat and the dust.. There were generations of feral cats that lived down there. After all, it was warm all year round - the tunnels being heated by the hot pipes carrying the water to radiators on the wards from the boiler house. Miles and miles of pipes, there seemed.

The farm was another place to play. In the summer / autumn we would make camps in the barns with the bales of hay. I believe the head farmer at the time was a Mr Reed or Reeder. We were caught several times and the boys from the gatehouses would be marched off to see Mr Stanton - the Chief Exec of the hospital at the time. They would then be grounded for a day or two by their parents. And so it would start all over again.

The gardens were an absolute adventure to us. The pleasure of eating a tomato or apple can never be matched to that of eating one after climbing 10 ft high walls, ducking down to avoid one of the gardeners working unexpectedly late or, alternatively, keeping lookout for one who may well be. The gardens were a very secret, silent and private place when locked. During the day patients and staff would work there and it was quietly busy. In the long hot summer evenings of 1966 it was irresistibly inviting, still and, best of all, full of booty. We used to take 'salt cellars' in our pockets in order to improve the taste of the tomatoes growing in abundance. Raspberries were another delight. We ate plums, rhubarb and horse radish - and quite possibly in that order!

During these halcyon days of youth we were aware, however, of some of the more tragic events that befell a few of the patients. Although quite rare - these events did shock the neighbourhood and any loss of life is regrettable. I can remember as a child the road to Bexley being closed several times and school children attending Maypole School being late because of various road accidents. I had the misfortune of being the first to come across one patient whose illness had consumed him. If I had walked down the road a minute before I could have done something to try and prevent it. That saddens me.

One patient I remember in particular was a very large white man who liked to be called 'Tex' and 'Yank'. This would have been 1966 / 1967. He spoke with an American drawl and was immensely strong and sported an 'all American crew cut'. He could pick two of us up at a time with one arm. He would occasionally sing and had a fantastic, gentle voice. Another thing I remember was that he could feel no pain down one side of his body. One of the tricks he played around the time of bonfire night was to hold 'bangers' in his hand and let them explode - without a flinch. Dangerous I realize now - but what a trick to us boys then. He was the only patient who frightened my mum when we told her about it. Of course, as kids we had no idea what he was being treated for or what his temperament was really like.

Broomhills (the annexe down the road) was another special place for us 'Estate kids' to play. There was the cow field at the front and the frog pools to the side and the Nissen Hut and old air raid shelter to the rear. As we were trespassing most of the time it was even more alluring.

I remember the sports days at the Hospital in the 1960s. Not keen about sport myself - but there were coconut shies, roundabouts, large boat swings and many 'fairground' type attractions. Some of the 'knockabout' type games were fun and I remember lots of buckets of water falling over heads or being thrown at playful combatants. The night before was even better because they would store drinks of pop and boxes of crisps under canvass ready for the fair. If a gang of boys could get down secure 'underground ducts' then a few ropes and a bit of cloth would have 'been a breeze' - wouldn't it ?

As the years went on the hospital became a favourite place for us 'learners' to begin our driving lessons, for the roads were not public roads. We started off on a small 'Solex' French moped in 1966 then progressed to scooters and motorcycles. The woods near the gardens was a favourite place to ride our 'off road' bikes. At the same time it was a favourite place to make camp fires, smoke cigarettes and consume the odd quart of cider between about 8 of us, purchased from the off licence down the 'Dip'.

I left school at 17 and took my first full time job as a kitchen porter in the immense kitchens. This paid well for my age (£13-15 shillings per week) and it provided me with enough to run my motorcycle and

other essentials, including house money to mum. Most days started at about 5.45. My uniform was blue dungarees (bib and brace style) and Wellington boots. The kitchens were cold from the night and there were cockroaches still scurrying as we turned the lights on. We would plug in and switch on the electric trolleys which took the food to the wards and then started up the ovens. The ovens were massive and it was not uncommon to have the capacity to burn 2000 rashers of bacon in one go!

The steam ovens were big enough to cook mushrooms, say, for several hundred patients. Porridge was made in huge steam vats. Bags the size of cwt coal sacks would be opened and the porridge flakes poured in. The vats were stirred with big wooden spoons the size of hockey sticks. Cleaning them was easy. Just turn the heat up and the porridge would dry and then crack away from the metal sides. We would then scrape the sides off like one would scrape wallpaper.

Peeling potatoes and other root vegetables was easy. Empty the contents of bags into a large cylinder and turn the water on. The bottom was like sand paper and it revolved with the water pressure, removing skins in a jiffy, complete fingers took just a bit longer ! After a while I could crack two eggs at a time when they were on the menu. The bake-house was a favourite place. Lovely smells and a warm environment. Any excess fresh bread, cakes, scones etc were not left hanging around for long.

Most of the food started off in good shape, was usually fresh and of a good quality, considering. However, after being cooked and left in a trolley for longer than preferable I am not sure how well it tasted on the plate. We never had them queuing at the door to compliment the chef!

After all the cooking came the washing up. This was, by far, the most unpleasant job in the kitchens. Normally reserved for those arriving late - and I did my share ! The water was luke warm and the detergent very, very weak. By the end of a couple of hours the skin became impregnated with grease - along with my (fashionable at the time) long locks of hair. Overalls would be soaked and uncomfortable well before the end of the shift. After a couple of days - and much scrubbing - one could still run the back of a comb down the forearm and create a line of poor quality cooking grease well before you got to the wrist.

At the end of the shift the kitchens would be hosed down and the water directed down the drains by huge squeejies attached to long broom handles. The kitchens normally closed about 3 p.m. - earlier on a Sunday.

Staff I remember by name from the time were John Hicks, Johnny Lambert, Phil Minns, Mick Starting, Mervyn Strugnel and John Waters. It was all such a long time ago now and I was only there about 8 months.

I stayed until May 1971 when I left to join the Civil Service. Overall I can't say I 'enjoyed' my time there as a porter, after all I was at the bottom of the food chain and got the worst jobs. However, the parties were good and the Hospital Staff Club provided cheap beer.

Like most people of that time, we on the estate never thought that the hospital would close. It employed masses of local labour and the whole institution and hierarchy of the place seemed impregnable to change. Where would 2500 patients ever go if they closed it down? Society was becoming more - not less - frenzied and surely the demand for a sanctuary was ever increasing. Now, it seems, there is no financial sense in pouring money into these old places. In my opinion the accountants in Whitehall are just as much to blame for bringing about social change as any political indoctrination. Yet, the instigators are not elected - just paid huge consultancy fees. I appreciate that not all the patients benefited from hospitalisation and there was need for modification as the treatments and drugs became more sophisticated and focussed. However - peace, tranquillity, protection and a sense of recovery away from the mad world in which we

sometimes suffer will never be found in a bottle. My love of the area and the dear old Bexley Hospital has spurred some of us to create our own website on the area - please visit it at any time. <http://maypolehistory.wetpaint.com>.

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