

## Recollections of Bexley Hospital by John Exell.

I was first admitted to Bexley Hospital in the summer of 1970, when I was 21 years old, with the diagnosis, I presume, of schizophrenia. I had been seeing things and hearing voices, I believed that I was Jesus Christ. I believe my trouble started early 1969, at University, where I had a breakdown and lost touch with reality, but it wasn't traced by the medical authorities until I was admitted. I had also flirted with LSD, and had some bad experiences. Some friends suggested I see a psychiatrist, which I did. I told them that I had visions. They didn't believe they were visions. I said that people had had visions in the Bible. They said but that was in that day and age. This brief conversation did not exactly convince me of the wisdom of psychiatrists, so I decided to say no more. I was invited to be a patient at Bexley. I said I didn't want to go, but they said if I didn't go voluntarily, they would section me, so I went in voluntarily. I was no threat to anyone or myself. This was my first encounter with psychiatry.

When I arrived, they took away my clothes, put me in pyjamas and dressing gown, put me on, I presume, anti-psychotic medication and I sat all day in the easy chair, listening to music. I got depressed. Before I went in, I was not depressed. Whether my depression was due to my illness or the tablets and my incarceration, I do not know. I remember friends coming to visit me, we were all sitting on the lawn outside, and I went through rapid cycles of highs and lows. I remember another dear friend visiting me, but I was lost in my head, unable to talk to her, peering at her through layers of cobwebs in my mind. My psychiatrist, not the one I saw initially, and of whom I can only remember the back of his head, said that my only cure was ECT, this I refused to have. I wrote a letter to Dr R D Laing to help me and received a very negative reply. In hindsight, he was no doubt, deluded by similar letters, and being a professional man, was in a very difficult situation. I got angry, reacted, marched into the office, and agreed to have ECT. I was prescribed a course of twelve.

It was nice being put to sleep. After the first one, I woke up and heard the birds singing for the first time that I could remember. I was treated to a bacon and eggs breakfast. I waited outside the ECT suite each morning with a friend who was also prescribed it. On waiting for the twelfth and last, I suddenly noticed that each morning he was getting dozier and dozier. I promptly marched into the office and stated that I didn't want anymore. This they agreed, saying that I was better now and didn't need anymore. Whether I was magically better after the eleventh, I do not know. Nothing was said to me earlier. My treatment wasn't stopped before. Perhaps I was well enough after the first for the treatment to be discontinued, but it wasn't. No warnings of the side effects were given to me.

I remember later seeing a psychologist there who asked me some questions, then said gardening would be a suitable career for me as I liked being out of doors. I have since gained a degree and postgraduate diploma, not in gardening I hasten to add, though in hindsight, perhaps she was right.

After two months there, I got extremely bored, and asked if I could leave. The nurse said that as I was a voluntary patient they couldn't stop me, but they advised me not to. I left the next day, again in hindsight perhaps I should have stayed a while longer. I went home to my parents, got an office job which I couldn't understand, and went back on the sick which I stayed on for quite a while. No after care was offered to me, except seeing the doctor when I needed and the psychiatrist for five minutes once a month. My parents, other relatives and friends were great, but they were all busy with their work and lives.

Before going into hospital, being put on anti-psychotic medicine and given ECT, I got depressed but not suicidal. Since leaving hospital, I have thought of suicide many times, the first time I thought of doing it frightened the life out of me. I have attempted once. The last act of violence I did was at the age of twelve in the school playground. Since coming out of hospital, I have had violent rows with my parents and others. Shortly before going into hospital, I may have been deluded and not productive in the accepted sense of the word, but I was lively, jokey, quick, doing no harm to myself or others. When I came out of hospital, I just sat in the easy chair at home, doing nothing, or just wandered around the streets of my home town, depressed, talking to no one, still deluded, still hearing voices, a broken man. Of necessity, I now not only see myself as a survivor of mental illness, but as a survivor of the mental health system.

The second and last time I was in Bexley Hospital, the only mental hospital I have been a guest at, was in the summer of 1974, when I was twenty five. Between my times in hospital, I lived mostly with my parents, had the odd employment, which never seemed to last that long, and was constantly trying to come off my anti-psychotics, due to the side effects. Shortly before admission for the second time, I had been living in Scotland for six months on my own, had been off my medication for almost as long, had flirted with alcoholism, was enamoured by a devout Christian woman and so read the Bible avidly, and believed it, including the Book of Revelations, which finally tipped me off balance. I ran out of money and returned home, and was then committed to Bexley.

The psychiatrist asked me if I'd like to stay, I said, okay, as long as they would let me keep my clothes and not give me ECT. This they agreed with, and stuck to their word. I stayed for four months. The length of time was mainly due to me not wanting to return home, and waiting for suitable accommodation.

My stay this time was happier, I can remember more about it, I mixed with my fellow patients more, I had a very good relationship with my psychiatrist, Dr Zibulska, an attractive Polish woman, I had a girl friend there for a while, and I was older and wiser.

Streaking was all the rage in the outside world, and when I was brought in, the nurses were undressing me, I can't remember why. I rushed out the room and ran through the crowded ward naked. I felt a great sense of freedom. I was grabbed by the nurses, given an injection, and slept for about 24 hours, I think. This was the only time I was manhandled by the nurses. I came round, got dressed, went into the ward, and laughed and joked about it with my fellow patients and nurses. I stated that I had wanted to streak in the outside world for some time, but didn't want to get arrested. As I was in mental hospital, there wasn't much else they could do to me, so I streaked there. Everyone said, there was not much wrong with me. Apparently it was all the rage at that time in Bexley too. I heard a report of three streaking grannies on a Bexley lawn in the sun. The mind boggles.

I was put again on my anti-psychotics and I sunk into the womb of the admission ward. After a while I began to explore my further surroundings, wandering the corridors on my own. I encountered one of the lifers, his limbs and face contorted with large doses of anti-psychotics, walking in jerky movements. He was frightening. I scurried back to the safety of the ward. I ventured forth later and discovered the art therapy unit, with Britta and Denise. That was to become my home and my haven for a while. I started painting, for the first time since the age of seventeen at school, and rediscovered its joys. This has never left me for long since. The concentration of painting. I copied a picture by El Greco, this cured me more than anything else. I could think rationally again. I stayed in the unit, drawing and painting. I did no art therapy, just art, which I found amazingly therapeutic.

I met a mild mannered man in the unit, who every now & again would go into fits of rage, shouting incomprehensibly. He used to draw strange marks on paper. He told me that he was writing in the language of Saturn. I got him to write English translations under each "picture". On one he wrote, God bless all little furry animals. I had further conversations with him about Greek Mythology. Apparently he used to be a teacher once upon a time.

Then there was the very good artist I met who couldn't cope with the outside world, but was otherwise completely sane, who was always in the art therapy unit, painting away. Then there was my friend there, the two of us used to wander the corridors, singing songs together.

I went to the carpentry workshop to make a frame for my picture, and made other things. I met a man who believed he was the fourth one. He explained to me that there was the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and himself. He had quite a following of other patients, who all went round, himself leading, in a group. I made him and his disciples all large wooden crosses in the workshop, which they all wore.

I used to visit the other wards. Especially the hard drug ward, which was full of young people recovering from their addiction, and the alcohol unit, which was very gentle. They kept rabbits.

After four months, my place at a Richmond Fellowship Hostel, Denbridge House, turned up and I went to stay there for three years, which were among the happiest times of my life. From there I went onto University and later, work. I kept more or less in work until the age of forty, when the recession knocked me for six. Due to my present age, 51, and illness, I am probably on sickness benefit for life. I see myself as prematurely retired and do voluntary work, write and paint.

About ten years ago, I did an exercise which asked me to draw a graph of my life, with all its up and downs, plateau's and troughs. I noticed from this graph, that whenever I took a rational risk in my life, my life went up to a peak. When I was on a peak I also noticed that I attempted to either cut down or stop my anti-psychotics. After a while, one or two months, my life then dipped right down, and stayed down for about two years. After drawing that graph, I no longer attempted to cut down or stop my anti-psychotics, and would not do so without my doctors advice.

About two years ago, I consulted a Nutritionist from the Institute of Optimum Nutrition in Putney, London SW. She put me on large doses of selected Vitamins and Minerals, and strongly advised me to give up all stimulants, including caffeine. She has helped me no end, and I would strongly advise any to get in contact with them.

About a month ago, I realised that the voices that I heard, I actually create them myself. They are part of my mind that I am not fully conscious of. I am still exploring this realisation, and so far it is bringing about profound realisations about myself, my life, my delusions etc. I have heard no further voices since this profound realisation. I realised this while I was just sitting quietly on my own.

Addenda: I am now 56. Last year, I was admitted to Woodlands, the psychiatric suite at Queen Mary's Hospital, Sidcup, for two and a half months. I was helped greatly by the doctors and nurses there. I am not hostile to them any more, or at least, try not to be. Many of the things I saw and heard, I now see as delusions, hallucinations, etc. Though some were a genuine religious experience, the nice ones, the ones that brought me joy, and didn't confound me. Comparing the two hospitals, Bexley and Queen Mary's, I much preferred Bexley, mainly because you could go on long walks around the grounds, which was very therapeutic. But I did like having my own room in woodlands, rather than sleeping in a ward, and I do prefer community care, to being incarcerated in Bexley. I accept that I do suffer from Schizophrenia.

THE END