

## My Memories of Bexley Hospital By Richard Howe

In 1983, I qualified as an Enrolled Nurse at Kingsway Hospital, Derby, and despite the offer of a post, I decided to explore pastures new. I wanted a change from familiarity and being 23 with no ties, was excited by the prospect of 'upping sticks' and seeing something of life that wasn't Derby. Looking through the Nursing press I wasn't stuck for choice. I attended an interview in Liverpool, turned down another two interviews elsewhere in the country, and then there was Bexley Hospital. I remember my first impressions – the hospital wasn't as close to London as I'd envisaged and it was a bit tatty or faded compared to the hospital I'd come from, but I decided to accept the post as it felt right for me.



After selling up in Derby and having a good old leaving party, I rented a van, and with the help of a friend, moved to Bexley Hospital. One prize possession onboard was a large Organ – one of those things with beats, pedal board, and built into a cabinet the size of a sideboard.

We arrived at Bexley Hospital on a hot summer's day, a quick call into reception to pick up my keys which were waiting for me in a brown envelope, then on to Bracken House which was situated at the far end of the site (near the Bracton Centre). Bracken House was one of a few modern additions to the nursing accommodation at Bexley Hospital. I recall some of the other nursing homes as being Orchard House, Heath House, North House, Pinewood House (now Oxleas Trust HQ). I'd already got a name for myself among the domestics as 'Dick the organ' as I'd had to phone the home warden in advance to ascertain whether my organ could fit into the residence.

Hence my time at Bexley Hospital had begun, a stay that was to last 3 years and encapsulates some treasured memories. As mentioned, I initially came to the hospital as an Enrolled nurse, my post being on L3 ward. L3 was one of four 20 bedded inter-connecting wards (2 up, 2 down) which specialised in the care of the elderly, L3 being a male ward. The four wards had originally been two large wards catering for patients with physical health problems ('sick' wards), but this was way before my time. During the latter two years I was training to be a Staff Nurse.



Bexley Hospital was a very large place and was sited on Dartford Heath, approximately 2 miles from Bexley village and 2 miles from Dartford town centre. For me, not having any roots in the area meant that the hospital was very much my home for the 3 years I spent there. Whilst I used to visit local places for shopping etc. and spent a short time working behind the bar at the White Swan, in nearby Crayford, it was very easy to spend most of one's time at the hospital, which was not only where I lived and worked, but also the hospital canteen was so handy and there was (and still is) a thriving social club on site.

A lot of staff lived at the hospital, accommodation being very expensive locally, so much of my social contact was with fellow staff. It could become very easy not to leave the hospital at all, my most frequent trips out being to the local Chinese Takeaway or Off-Licence or over to the shop/post office across the road. Bexley Hospital was very much a community in itself.

Music - I can't recall a time that I wasn't involved in some way or another with music, and this continued throughout my time at Bexley hospital. Bracken house though very nice, eventually felt a bit isolated, and I'd met some colleagues who had a band that practiced in the lounge of Pinewood house. Being impractical to move my keyboard to them I approached the home warden and was given a room in Pinewood house, on the ground floor. Pinewood house (now Oxleas Trust HQ) was a large nursing home with a long corridor on each



floor lined with rooms. Its accommodation was basic compared to that of Bracken House, I remember well the clanking old cast iron radiators. Pinewood housed a lot of people, and could get a bit noisy at times with the occasional late night parties and music bellowing down its corridors.

It was also centre of operations for Ms. Cloke, the home warden, and Daphne, her assistant, referred to affectionately amongst the residents as 'Cloak and Dagger'.

The band used to practice in Pinewood's lounge at weekends and was made up of a few nurses from the hospital, these being Bruce who I worked with on L3, Romero who also lived in Pinewood House, and Franklin who lived in Orchard House. I met up for a couple of practises but didn't stay with them for long. By this time I'd become interested in home recording and bought a 'porta studio'. Many hours were spent in my room in Pinewood, recording and re-recording over and over again. It was about this time that I started to record songs with Tony who was a student nurse. We wrote and recorded quite a few songs together from my room in Pinewood, and later on, the Sub Office flats. We've kept in touch over the years and are now working on this website together.



Occasionally, I used to collect the keys from reception and practice on the chapel organ. The old chapel still stands, and is to the right of Pinewood house, don't know what it is used for now or whether the pipe organ is still there.

I remember the hospital could be quite spooky at night, particularly the long rear-curved corridor that formed a semi circle from one side of the main building to the other. Because of its curve you couldn't see that far ahead. At equal intervals were the entrances to wards, which were all named by letters of the Alphabet. I remember one such entrance had nothing behind it (I think it was M ward) this was because a bomb was said to have fell on it during the war and it was never rebuilt. A lot of staff used to say that this area was haunted.

Cedars (rehab dept), now that was a place I'll not forget, a world in itself, devotedly run by Dudley (Charge Nurse), and his staff - Sheila and Olive to name a few. I frequently used to drop in for a chat and always felt welcome. Often you would end up helping with something or other. Walking in to the Cedars was like entering an Aladdin's cave and there was always something happening. The atmosphere was relaxed and once in the Cedars you could easily forget that you were in the middle of a hospital. The hospital was always requiring maintenance. I remember it was always being painted in one part or another to keep it looking presentable. The building was always susceptible to the occasional leak after heavy rain and the occasional puddle in a corridor wasn't uncommon. After one storm, I remember a big chunk of ceiling actually caved in on T corridor exposing the lathes underneath. There were a few unused wards whilst I was there, and Maplehurst ward had also closed, its redundant building standing empty and I think without its roof. The farm had long since been disused and the sun houses that dotted the grounds were falling into disrepair.

During my last year at the hospital, I lived at the Sub Office flat, which was deep within the main hospital and accessed from a door in one of its long corridors. It was pretty spacious and had the luxury of a private phone. Recording music continued to be a major interest and I also remember on one occasion wheeling my keyboard on a porter's trolley to the Heather Club (patients social club) to play a few songs for the patients. By the summer of 1986 I'd begun writing songs with a friend called Peter who lived on the estate at the back of the hospital, we also recorded several of the songs, which I still have. With the help of Dudley's van (Cedars) we hired a PA system and in August '86 played a gig for the patients at the Heather Club, I still have this recording too, but sadly no photos of the event which was a lot of fun. I qualified as a staff nurse shortly after this, and left for a new post in Central London. At the time, I felt pleased to be moving, as I remember feeling quite isolated.

RICHARD HOWE 2005

Photo of the local Chinese take away (at the bottom of Dartford Road) taken by Tony Kinson Summer 2005  
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