

## My Memories of Bexley Hospital By Tony Kinson

Working (and living) at Bexley Hospital in the early 1980's was like being cut-off from the rest of the world. You could spend days on end without leaving the hospital grounds. Maybe popping to the shop outside the hospital to stock up on cigarettes and food, but otherwise evenings could be spent in the staff social club. You could even take "non-Nursing" friends to the club, to take advantage of the cheap alcohol, if you could find someone to sign them in! And when money was in short supply, there were plenty of friends scattered around Pinewood House, North House, Orchard House, Heath House, Bracken House, or Sycamore House to hang around with, play records with or cadge cigarettes from.



My room at Pinewood House

I spent my 1st year as a student nurse living on the ground floor of Pinewood House. There was a communal TV lounge, kitchen and bathroom / showers. The room was tiny – just a bed, sink, table & chair, plus loud clunking radiator to keep you warm (and awake) during the long winter months. Even though the room was very small, I once managed to fit a full drum kit into the space, lent to me by a nurse called Romero, and I spent a whole day learning to play along to the whole of Iggy Pop's album "Lust For Life". My poor neighbours!

There was a pay-phone inside the main entrance of Pinewood House, and this was most residents only contact with friends and relatives "on the outside". Remember, these were the days before mobile phones and email, so students were really cut-off from the rest of the world. Mrs Cloke and Daphne (the wardens) had an office by the entrance to the ground floor, and further on were pigeon-holes, where personal letters and hospital memos were posted.

Even though part of your meagre salary was taken directly from your wages to pay for your accommodation, you were still not allowed to have your chosen 'love interest' staying in your room. Lets just say it never actually stopped anyone, but not being treated as an adult did rile a little. As you progressed through training, and others moved on, accommodation in more independent settings, with larger rooms, often became available (I moved to North House for my final year).

As a student nurse, the time was divided between stints of around two weeks in school, followed by secondment to admission wards, medium-stay wards and long-stay wards, as well as secondments to Queen Mary's and Greenwich District hospitals. I'm sure we also had annual leave, which had to be arranged to fit into secondments, but I probably spent my leave in the hospital as well. My student group, who commenced training in March 1982, started off as a group of 12 and the numbers dropped off to 8 by the time we took our exams. I lost touch with around half of my nursing group when I left Bexley in 1984, and a couple of the group (Graham Walker & Mark Rutter) are sadly no longer with us.



Graham Walker, Guy Morgan & my guitar

The boredom that eventually set in was often punctuated by "new blood" in the form of fresh new, unjaded (and naïve to the ways of Bexley!) students starting in the school of nursing, but especially (certainly in my case) by the arrival of seconded General Nurses from the local hospitals - Queen Mary's, Lewisham Hospital, the Brook Hospital (Woolwich) and the Memorial (Shooters Hill). One of the QMH students I met whilst working on N2 ward is still seconded to me as my wife!

There were tunnels running underneath the whole length of the hospital, and during my 1st year at Bexley, I remember getting into the tunnels via one of the wards. I remember they were very dark and claustrophobic, lit only by lights in the ceiling. Me and my long-forgotten partner in crime ran under Pinewood House, banging on the roof of the tunnel to try and scare the people above us. I'm sure no-one noticed. Either that, or it wasn't Pinewood House, and we were disturbing some poor

patients trying to catch a peaceful night's sleep.

Night-duty was difficult, as it was often just one trained member of staff and a student. The staff canteen was not open all night, so you had to ring the night-chef and ask him to cook your meal, and letting him know what time you would come to eat it at the locked canteen. The wards were locked at night, and you felt very isolated on the ward, surrounded by silence and the occasional interruption of a restless soul. Some wards would only have one member of staff at night, so even as a student, at times I would have to go across from Woodlands (where I did my night-duty stint) to one of the other wards to cover breaks. This was the only time I was ever on my own on a ward, and it was very nerve-wracking.



7 of my nursing group, towards the end of our training, at our farewell meal in Crayford.

Left to right: Dai, Mark, Laura, me, Wendy, Brenda Skeath (our tutor), Guy & Thomas

Living in the hospital meant you could roll out of bed minutes before starting work on the wards or in the School of Nursing. It proved more difficult when seconded to Queen Mary's Hospital in Sidcup, for the three months General Nursing experience, or when working at GDH (Greenwich District Hospital).

I think most of my group dreaded the secondment to "the other nursing", and I'm not sure that I actually learnt much from my time at QMH. As a Student Psychiatric Nurse, you were definitely treated differently, and I seemed to spend most of my time making beds and talking to patients, as I clearly did not have the same skills as the other General students. Handover was always interesting, I never understood half of the things that were being talked about, and work was mostly allocated to the general students first, and the less complicated tasks given to the Psyche students. I didn't complain though, as on the rare occasion that something complicated was given to me (basically anything beyond blood-pressure, temperatures and bed-pans), I used to panic and get help from one of the "real" nurses! I knew my place, and didn't want to hurt anyone.

Greenwich District Hospital was a much more enjoyable experience, and although the Psychiatric Wards felt a bit cut-off from the rest of the hospital, it felt more progressive than Bexley Hospital. I suppose as most of the patients were short-stay, the institutionalisation found at Bexley, of both patients and staff, wasn't such an issue.

I have vivid memories of the wards and corridors of Bexley Hospital. The corridors seemed to stretch for miles, and it was easy to get lost in the first few months working there. At night, the corridors seemed to become darker and more sombre, as you shared the space with the huge cockroaches that scuttled along the floor. The quality of the nursing wards varied. Some of the more short-stay / rehabilitation wards (such as Ferndale & Woodlands) were more homely, and more active, with patients able to move away from the ward during the day. The longer-stay wards often had a feel of decay and stagnation, both in the actual surroundings and the general mood. The psycho-geriatric wards that I worked in were mostly just plain depressing and demoralising. Going from the school of nursing, where you were filled with ideas on how you might make changes and improve things, you were soon hit by a brick-wall of indifference and apathy. I'm not sure how I would have coped with students armed with new ideas after working on the same ward day in, day out, for years on end, but I'm glad I never had to find out.

There was a sense of dread about the locked ward, E1, but on working there in my last year, it did not match the negative stories I had heard, and I enjoyed working there. I'm sure it wasn't the same

for the patients who were detained in E1, but as a student nurse, there seemed to be more time to spend talking with patients, and there was certainly a much better staff to patient ratio, which helped to facilitate this.



Richard Howe & Tony Kinson by the Doomsday tree

At the time of writing this, it is 23 years since I last worked at Bexley Hospital, yet I can still picture many of the patients I used to see on a daily basis, on the wards or in the corridors or scattered around the hospital grounds. I can't remember many of the names, but I can remember their faces, their personalities and their mannerisms. I often wonder how they coped with the changes from long-term hospital care to care in the community.

I have vivid memories of how a lot of the long-term patients used to dress, which marked them out from the newer arrivals to the hospital. Trousers were sometimes too short and clothes were often ill-fitting. Many of the long-term patients were by now very institutionalised, and had to rely on staff getting their clothes organised. Sometimes it was clear that either not enough care had been taken helping patients with this, or that matching clothes were in short supply. I remember the clothes stores on the wards, and trying to match the odd socks.

I will always remember preparing patients for ECT (Electro Convulsive Therapy), which was always shocking to watch (no pun intended), although it did seem to have some positive effects in some cases, the payoff was often some

short-term memory loss. I also remember the lop-sided, awkward gait that some patients were left with as a consequence of some of the medical treatment of the time (such as moderate injections).

On a lighter note, I played in a couple of bands whilst at Bexley Hospital, and played live for the first time as part of a pop duo (very much in the style of Tears for Fears, pop-pickers) in the communal sitting room of Pinewood House. The 30 minute gig, that we secretly planned for weeks in advance, was advertised by a poster placed on the door in Pinewood House, once Mrs Cloke and Daphne had left for the weekend. We played to an audience of hundreds and the performance is still talked about to this day. Ok, we actually played to about 20 people, and no-one remembers it at all.

It was a strange feeling returning to Pinewood House in 2005, when I met with Russell Cartwright from Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust, to scan some of the pictures contained in this website. On leaving Pinewood House, I expected to look out onto the tennis courts and the main admin block, but now the view is a staff car park and rows of residential houses.

On visiting the site since starting work on this website, it is striking how very little remains of the original hospital – only Pinewood House (now Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust HQ), the staff social club, the old chapel building (now a sports club) and a few of the original trees (including the remains of the tree mentioned in the Doomsday book) still stand. Yet something of the spirit of Bexley hospital and the many thousands of people who lived and worked in the “village on the Heath” still hangs in the air.

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<http://www.bexleyhospital.co.uk>