

Bexley Hospital - World within a world By Sarah Pat O'Brien

I never knew such a place existed. My mother had prepared me for the shock of it in her letters home to me in Dublin. 'Like a world with-in a world,' she said it was. It had its own farm, bakery, tailors, maintenance section, shop, hairdressers and of course, the Laundry, which could have been lifted from the pages of Dickens.



Like so many employed there in the 1950s and 60s, my mother was a migrant worker. There were staff from so many countries it might well have been a League of Nations in the Kentish countryside. And what a countryside it was around Bexley Hospital, before the Motorway sliced through it. Dartford Heath was one of the first open spaces outside of the sprawling London suburbs, full of wild

life and wild flowers dipping and delighting along every newly discovered footpath. I used to cross it regularly all the way to the top of Station Road in Crayford where I eventually lived, without setting eyes on a car.

When I first saw the Hospital in 1956, it was forbidding and frightening. Men at the Gatehouse checked comings and goings. The grounds were a maze of trees and buildings, all darkness and menace. All doors were locked, with master keys issued to staff. For a fourteen year old visiting my mother and sister, it was a scary experience. They both worked in the Laundry and lived in the Auxiliary Staff Quarters upstairs in one of the blocks. The women and girls living there were mainly immigrant workers providing essential domestic services to staff and patients.

Their rooms were little more than cells, with a single iron bed, armchair, dressing table and small wardrobe in each. There were two or three communal bathrooms and a kitchen for basics: making tea and toast. Though there was great camaraderie between the women, there was a palpable sadness along that corridor that stayed with me for weeks after my visit ended.



The Annual New Year's Eve Ball was a great affair. It was held in the huge Hall, nearly everyone in evening dress, with a big band playing into the early hours. Cosier affairs were held in the newly opened Social Club run by the workers for the workers.

The nurses, doctors clerical and auxiliary staff all mixed in the staff common rooms. These were also under lock and key and no matter how much fun was being enjoyed, there was always a sense of watchfulness and tension. Or perhaps it was only my perception.



It was an Industrial Hospital. Patients worked alongside the trades people and labourers, earning pocket money of mere shillings for a full days work. They wandered the corridors and grounds dressed in terrible clothes, often selected from a communal supply in the wards.

Along with 'losing their minds,' they lost their identity. Those who were allowed to go out into Bexley Village stood out from others and were generally shunned. It was a

sad existence for them. Some had social rather than mental problems: having babies out of wedlock or being a bit wild. Their stories were heartbreaking. It seemed a terrible injustice to me that they were there at all.

There were locked wards where patients considered dangerous were held. I know that some of them were a threat to the safety and security of others in society, but the majority were no threat at all, despite the public perception existing then. I had my own lovely friend, 'Ava' who was so timid, she was frightened of the rain against the windows.

During my early visits, I never dreamt I would work there myself. I too was recruited to the Laundry, given little choice in the matter by my mother and those managing it. I wrote of some of my experiences in my book, **Rooms of Dust**.

Photographs taken by me in 1991, show that it hadn't changed since my time there in 1958 to 61. It was a noisy, dirty, desperate place to be.

My best friend was a girl called Sheila Gray. We worked in the sorting room, checking in staff laundry from Sydenham and Beckenham hospitals and checking it out again. If anything had to be washed by hand or specially ironed, we had to do it. We were pretty much left to our own devices, with the help of a couple of patients. This was a bad move on managements part, because we were very high spirited and took ourselves off around the hospital on false errands at every opportunity. We had our favourite wards, where tea and biscuits were offered as well as a good laugh.

Mrs Pryor was the Manageress, aided by a supervisor called Doris. Mrs Pryor used to sit in her office all day in a crisp white coat, as immaculate at the end of the day as it was at the beginning. They were quite a double act. The arrival of Mr. MacGregor, a kind Scotsman, as overall Manager was welcomed by most of the staff.

Jim was the Washhouse Foreman, a small man with a loud voice, he used to yell at the patients who worked under him, mainly men and mainly terrified of him. Some of those men had been shell-shocked in the first world war as young men. Old and confused, they worked in rubber aprons and big clogs, pushing heavy trolleys of wet washing from tub to dryer all day long. I will never forget them.



The one consolation in the Laundry was the wireless. We'd have it on all day, but especially for Housewives Choice in the mornings and Workers' Playtime in the afternoons. We'd sing along, ironing and folding and sorting washing in time to the music as if we were pop stars.

At 4.30pm we stepped back out into the real world and left the confines of the one with-in it behind, glad to be free. Most of those we left behind never would be.

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Photos on this page taken by Sarah Pat O'Brien in 1991

For further reading, please see
Rooms of Dust -The Search For My Father by Sarah Pat O'Brien
Buy Rooms of Dust at <http://www.bexleyhospital.co.uk/links.html>

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