"We give 'em plums all right!" Insider stories from the Royal Albert

Nigel Ingham, Visiting Research Fellow, The Open University

INTRODUCTION

With its foundation stone laid in 1868, 'The Royal Albert Asylum for Idiots and Imbeciles of the Northern Counties'[1] opened in December 1870 on the southern edge of Lancaster. It retained its voluntary status until 1948, when it became absorbed into the embryonic National Health Service (NHS). From that time, until its closure in 1996, it was called the Royal Albert Hospital.[2]

During its existence of just over 135 years 'the Albert' touched the lives of thousands of people. In the 1970s estimated to have upwards of 1000 people living there, with almost equal numbers of staff, it reflected a nationwide picture. In England and Wales, for instance, during this period there were nearly 50,000 people with learning difficulties resident in congregate NHS establishments. Well over half of these hospitals, of which there were around 80, had in excess of 500 residents, with a significant number housing a 1000 or more individuals.[3] However, starting in 1986 with the demise of Starcross in Exeter,[4] by the 2010s in England and Wales almost all these NHS edifices had ceased to exist. It is claimed that the huge and highly complex closure programme was driven by a cocktail of political economic imperatives, the efforts of campaigning groups, changing ideas and ideology as well as a series of hospital scandals.[5] The latter, which gathered momentum during the 1970s, began with a 1969 News of the World exposé of conditions in Ely Hospital, Cardiff.[6] As evidenced by unwelcome headlines in recent years, sadly the abusive treatment of people with learning disabilities in smaller-scale institutional settings continues to persist.[7, 8]

How do we know about the history of the Albert? As with other institutions, and reflecting the pervasive culture of these places, we have a plethora of publicly archived *official* documents dominated by the institutional and medical gaze of policy makers, administrators, doctors and nursing staff. Admittedly, these provide valuable and necessary insights into the discourses and practices which impacted upon the lives of people labelled now as having learning disabilities. However, largely missing from these data are the direct personal testimonies or voices of these so-called 'patients'; those with first-hand experience of the 'three Rs' of rules, regulations and routines.[9] In the last 30 to 40 years this state of affairs has begun to be rectified, in many ways reflecting the burgeoning self-advocacy movement, with its rallying cry of 'Nothing about us, without us!'.[10] The reclaiming of an institutional heritage by those who resided in the Albert and similar establishments has been a key feature of oral history work.[11] Furthermore, increasingly these recollections have been fortified, and enriched, by recollections emanating from former staff and relatives.[12]

'IT STILL MAKES ME WEEP'

The airbrushing of some of the most vulnerable members of society out of their own history was encapsulated in an interview with a former employee of the Royal Albert Hospital, Lancaster. During the rundown process of this large-long-stay institution for people with learning disabilities in the early 1990s, Bernadette Hobson, a former staff member, recalled a visit to the main hospital office:

> *"An old woman had died and her possessions were on the desk. And it was a black plastic bin liner and in it – oh and it still makes me weep – and there was a plastic flower and a plastic hand bag and about three little jewels, and that was the end of her life, she'd been there all that time – terrible."*

At this point in her interview Bernadette was tearful, but equally determined to make the point that this experience was instrumental in her wanting to do something to rectify this sense of a life without meaning.

> *"I thought they can't all leave this hospital and actually say, 'My life's wiped out.' 'Cause a seventy, eighty-year-old and say, 'That's what I've got. I've come out of this and people are saying to me, 'You're in a rotten place and you've to go out into the community.' Because what it's actually saying is your life is negated. So I thought, 'Can't have this. We need to do something to give people histories here, to recognise it and say, 'You have done this and you have done that.' Particularly the old ones who had been there quite a time."*[13]

Triggering these sentiments was the sense of someone's life being reduced to paltry items in a black plastic disposable *rubbish* bag. As a result of this experience, Bernadette Hobson set up an oral history project, involving both residents, staff and volunteers.

Bernadette's work complemented an earlier initiative, originating in 1987. In that year the Lancaster College of Adult Education, based at St Leonard's Gate, instigated Friday morning reminiscence sessions with elderly men and women who had spent years living in the Royal Albert. Led by myself, an Adult Education Tutor, these two-hour long meetings were a response to a request from two members of Royal Albert staff. Dave Spencer, a Charge Nurse, and Sue Cowgill, a Social Worker, identified the value, need and enthusiasm of individuals in telling their own stories. This was especially important as many of the individuals were ether moving or were about to move out of the institution. It was an opportunity to reflect upon and share their life-time experiences. Recognising the value of the recollections, from the onset these sessions were recorded on audio cassettes. In addition, the Workers Education Association supported similar groups, again involving myself, in a community setting in Morecambe and on the older people's wards, Siviour and Brunton, at the Albert. Over a period of two years, between 20 to 30 people with lived experience of the hospital participated in this reminiscence work. A small Lancaster Library exhibition was created, and we engaged with Lancaster City Museum, as well as local history classes. With financial help from the Royal Albert itself, a number of lantern slides held in their own museum were transposed to transparencies. On a personal level, these two years were invigorating, a steep learning curve, never quite sure about the direction, but willing to embrace the surprises and uncertainty of a journey involving some lovely people.

By the summer of 1989 when this phase of the work finished, hours of recordings had been generated. In subsequent years the number of recorded testimonies has grown considerably. Along with odd interviews here and there, further oral histories were created by a Community Service Volunteers (CSV) Heritage Lottery Fund oral history project between 2005 and 2007;[14] and by postgraduate oral history research with the Open University from 2008 to 2011.[15]

A tangible outcome of all this oral history work is an archive of hundreds of hours of recordings of those who lived, worked or had relatives at the Royal Albert. Memories reach back to the 1910s. Most of the testimonies were recorded in outdated analogue or digital formats. In 2006, the North-West Sound Archive made audio cassette and CD copies of all the 1980s' as well as a selection of 2005-7 material. When this long-standing sound archive was closed in 2014 due to government cuts, these recordings were transferred to Lancashire Archives. In 2022, under the National Sound Archive's *Unlocking Our Sound Heritage* (UOSH) initiative, the original material was converted into an up-to-date digital format (.wav files). In addition, liaison between myself and the UOSH project resulted in an improved, although still incomplete, catalogue of the archive (British Library Reference UAP032). Although the original audio tapes still exist, the National Sound Archive, as well as Lancashire Archives hold technically accessible digital collections of a selection of first-hand accounts of life at the Royal Albert. At the time of writing, selected extracts from these recordings, as well as those relating to other former large long-stay institutions in Lancashire, can be found online.[16] Although there is more archiving work to be done, including the addition of numerous interviews carried out since 2008, The Royal Albert Hospital Oral History Archive, as it stands, bears testimony to the lives of those who lived and worked at the former large long-stay institution.

'WE GIVE 'EM PLUMS ALL RIGHT!'

In their recorded recollections, former residents, some of whom arrived at the institution in the 1910s and 20s, provided information about the hospital's life as a charitable institution prior to its absorption into NHS in 1948. So-called ordinary routines were remembered in detail. In an interview recorded in the late 1980s, for example, Harry Oldham and Frank Cochrane recalled taking a bath as young men during the 1930s:

> *"Harry: They did all the bathing on the basement (of the Main Hospital Building) …*
>
> *Frank: Six patients in one bath of water…*
>
> So you said six patients … used the same water one after the other presumably, is that right?
>
> *Frank: Yes, yes…*
>
> How many people – was it a huge great bath house or what…?
>
> *Harry: Yes, it was a big bathroom.*
>
> *Frank: About six baths in weren't there?*
>
> *Harry: … six baths: three on each side, I think…*
>
> Could you take as long as you wanted over a bath or were you told to get out after a certain time?
>
> *Frank: No, you were told to get out after you had been in for so long. And then another lad'd get in.*
>
> And the water would be the same?
>
> *Frank: In the same water. There would be about six in one lot of water.*
>
> *Harry: They never used to change the water.*
>
> *Frank: There was many a time when it was right – dirty*
>
> *Harry: Same water.*
>
> *Frank: Smell (grimaces)."*[17]

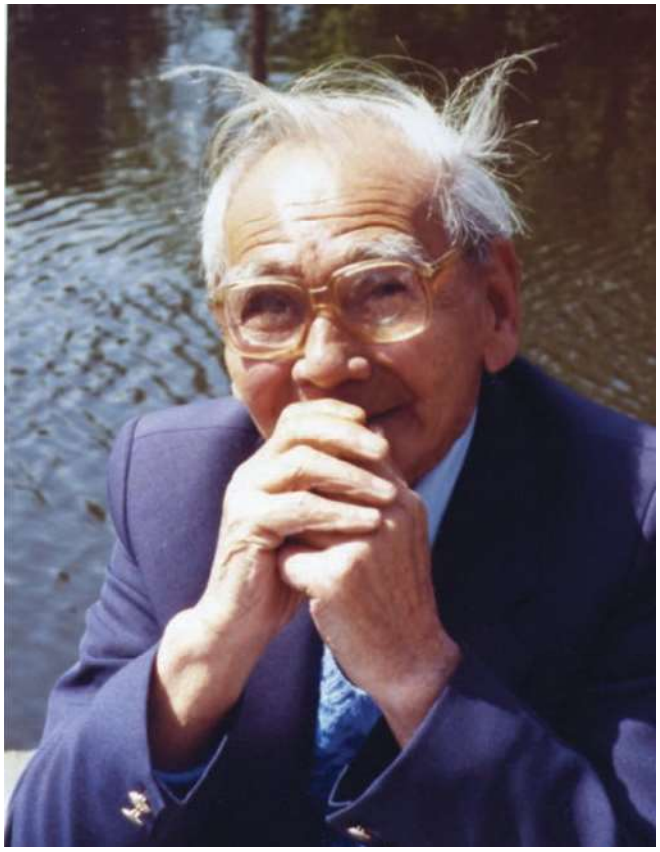
Even into the 1970s and 1980s, when across the institution more humane practices were being introduced, former staff recall the pressure of undignified daily routines around washing, dressing, getting up, going to bed which echo these reminiscences of Harry and Frank.

However, testimonies also reveal a history in which individual residents did not passively acquiesce to an all encompassing institutional regime. Frank Cochrane (with James Leach), in another interview, talking probably about the 1940s, recalled how former residents appropriated hospital resources for their own profit:

> *"Frank: Where the gym is now it used to be a big orchard. There was apples, pears, plums. And we give 'em plums all right!…*
>
> *James: Aye we did.*
>
> *Frank: We've been copped a few times.*
>
> What used to happen Frank when you got caught?
>
> *Frank: Oh we got a belting… Pillow cases, we used to fill pillow cases.*
>
> Did you?
>
> *Frank: Oh aye, enough to last us.*
>
> Where did you hide the fruit?
>
> *Frank: Oh all over. Sometimes Winmarleigh bushes*[18]*… Oh we've been beggars you know.*
>
> *James: Aye we have…*
>
> This fruit that you'd taken did, did you share that with other people or –
>
> *Frank: Share it round – wards. Go round w – (Laughs)*
>
> … Was it given away or sold?
>
> *Frank: Tuppence an apple. A penny a pear! (Laughs)*[19]

James Leach's affirmation, alongside the use of the collective pronoun, suggest communal acts of resistance. Tales such as this *may* be construed mythically, and have importance primarily as an indicator of meaning, not historical accuracy. However, those who knew Frank did not doubt the essential authenticity of such narratives. Such belief was often corroborated by the accounts of others, as well as considerable consistency within his own testimonies.

Frank Cochrane's own life story provides an added poignancy to these recorded testimonies. Nursing staff, who knew him, commented that it was a source of great regret to Frank that he was denied the opportunity to be a grandfather. He lived through a time when residents were denied even the most basic rights concerning relationships. This reflects a key strand of the eugenicist philosophy underpinning the incarceration of thousands of individuals in institutions such as the Royal Albert in the wake of the Mental Deficiency Acts of the early twentieth century.[20] Ensuring that the so-called 'feeble-minded' were not allowed to have children was translated into tight controls relating to contact between the sexes.[21]



Frank Cochrane in 1989. Photo courtesy of Author's collection

Another former resident, for instance, remembered how female residents were sent to the punishment ward for trying to communicate with boyfriends. Recorded early in 2007, it was the first time in many, many years that Mary Andrews (nee Thompson) had re-visited the former hospital. She gazed across at Coupland Ward, the old punishment lock-up ward, and reminisced:

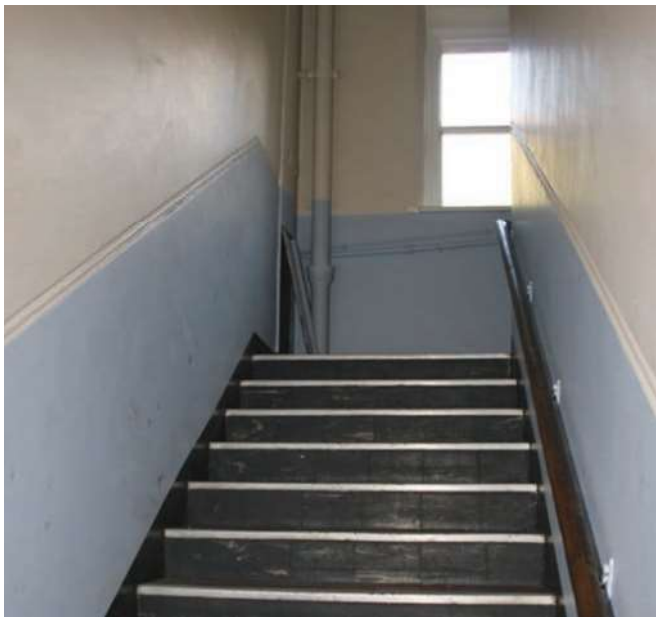
> *"I only went up when I had any messages. They used to write letters to boys did the girls. And they used to be put up there for doing that. Poor buggers… Just for writing a letter to a boyfriend. Eeh there was some bonny girls… I remember them all. They'll never have them days now will they. (Sighs) Eeh nearly all old 'uns have gone haven't they? Oh not many of us left…*
>
> And how long would they get put in Coupland Ward for writing a letter to a boyfriend?
>
> *They weren't in a long time. They were only in for about a week."*[22]

Ironically, and testimony to the resilience of former residents, after leaving hospital Mary herself married a man who spent many years of his life living in the Royal Albert.

'IT WAS MY LIFE.' STAFF VIEWPOINTS

Recordings of interviews with former staff of the Royal Albert provide further invaluable insights into its twentieth century history, and the lives of those who lived and worked within its bounds. Testimonies reveal contrasting, and contested, notions of care. Mrs Creed, who worked as a nurse at the Royal Albert from the late 1940s through to the 1990s, believed that:

Coupland Ward as it looked in 2006 – the imposing gable end with chimney to the right of the arches. Photo from Author's collection



Coupland Ward – 2006 image of the lower part of the stairs leading to the ward. Photo courtesy of Mandy Cody

> *"the Royal Albert… was such a happy place, I don't think any patient was unhappy there. They had everything. They had the cinema, the concert… We took them out in town, we took them on holidays… I mean it was a lovely place and the staff were fantastic, you know it was one big, big family. And I don't care who you talk to who worked there they will tell you same. Everybody gelled. And I loved it. I loved it. To me it was my life."*[23]

Such a nostalgic perspective contrasts radically with the memory of a nurse who started working there during the late 1970s:

> *"The clients used to have what was called provisions. They had spending money but it was never given to them, the staff bought things for them. We had a hospital shop so you ordered the basket of provisions, and it was massive baskets of sweets. And I remember walking on (the ward) and the charge nurse throwing the sweets all over the day*

room, where the clients were, half of them in the nude, there was faeces everywhere, and the clients running to get them like animals actually, they were treated like animals. And the staff laughing about who was going to get something and who wasn't. But only about a third of the basket was given out, the rest of it went to the staff and they put it in their lockers and they took it home."[24]

Mrs Creed at the Royal Albert c. 1950s. Photo courtey of Mrs Creed

Such diametrically opposed testimonies symbolise differing identities around the place. The latter former member of staff saw the institution as an oppressive *therapeutic* environment, which constituted a system of harm towards people with learning disabilities. This worker's own identity, as revealed in a broader personal testimony, was bound up with bringing about the demise of the hospital, as an act of justice. On the other hand, Mrs Creed's overall testimony, although not without critical comments, constituted one of an identification with the *workplace*. She, along with many others (e.g. nurses, porters, engineers, trades staff, domestic staff) lamented its eventual closure, in ways similar to those who lost their jobs in factories, mines and industrial plants during the late twentieth century.[25] In these terms, institutions like the Royal Albert can be viewed as being inexorably bound up with a local working class historical narrative. As these contrasting accounts reveal, the strength of oral history, its 'peculiarity', may lie in its subjectivity: oral historical accounts provide a window into what the past (and present) has *meant* to those who have lived it.[26] However, especially when triangulated with a range of accounts and sources, it can also add to our understanding of what actually happened.

CONCLUSION

The oral historical extracts quoted here provide traces of the lived heritage of one former institution. Most of these emanate from a newly created digital archive, access to which is either via the National Sound Archive or Lancashire Archives. Understandably such material on occasion will demand the navigation of ethical and legal sensitivities.

In a whistle-stop tour, this paper merely touches upon what is a deeply nuanced Royal Albert history. Years of research, for instance, indicate that the comment made by a former nurse at another Lancashire institution applies equally to the Albert:

"we talked about one institution but it was lots of institutions. And the experience of individuals at Calderstones would have been very different depending which ward they were on. And it was very different for some of the people who lived there depending which shift was on – they would be a completely different culture. And they used to know what the Red Shift would expect – I mean the fact the residents were constantly saying, Who's on tomorrow? Are you on? Cause they knew the day would be different depending who was on. So it was lots of different institutions. within the one."[27]

Furthermore, as highlighted earlier, recorded memories from former residents and staff are not the only historical sources of value. However, if available, they need to be included if we wish to construct a *human*, multi-dimensional history of the Royal Albert.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Occasionally, purely for the sake of historical accuracy, this paper uses terms now quite rightly considered to be inappropriate. We are sorry if any offence is caused
2. Alston J, Roberts E. The Royal Albert Hospital: chronicles of an era. Centre for North-West Regional Studies, University of Lancaster. 1992
3. Ryan J, Thomas F. The politics of mental handicap. London: Free Association Books. 1998
4. Radford JP, Tipper A. Starcross: out of the mainstream. Toronto: G. Allan Roeher Institute. 1988
5. Ingham N. Organisational Change and Resistance: An Oral History of the Rundown of a Long-Stay Institution for People with Learning Difficulties. PhD (unpublished). Open University. Milton Keynes. 2011
6. Butler I, Drakeford M. Scandal, social policy and social welfare. Bristol: Palgrave MacMillan. 2005
7. Flynn M. Safeguarding Adults Review: Joanna, Jon & Ben. Norfolk Safeguarding Adults Board. 2021. Available at: SAR-Rpt-Joanna-JonBen_FINAL-PUBLICATION02-June2021.pdf (norfolksafeguardingadultsboard.info) (accessed 15 December 2022)
8. Department of Health. Transforming care: a national response to Winterbourne View Hospital. Department of Health. 2012
9. Potts M, Fido R. A fit person to be removed. Plymouth: Northcote House. 1991
10. Atkinson, D. and Walmsley, J. History from the inside: towards an inclusive history of intellectual disability. Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 2010; 12 (4): 273-286
11. Cooper M. (1997). Mabel Cooper's life story. In: Atkinson D, Jackson M, Walmsley J. (eds). Forgotten lives: Exploring the history of learning disability. Kidderminster: BILD, 1997; pp:21-34
12. Finding Out Group (supported by Jan Walmsley). A modern hospital: Memories of Princess Marina Hospital, Northampton 1972-1995. Sheffield: Centre for Welfare Reform. 2015. Available at: https://citizen-network.org/uploads/attachment/452/a-modern-hospital.pdf (accessed 15 December 2022)
13. Interview with Bernadette Hobson, August 26th, 2009
14. Dennison T. Unlocking the past: what students can learn from a digital archive. Learning Disability Practice, 2013;16(7):36. Available from: https://doi.org/10.7748/ldp2013.09.16.7.36.s18
15. Ingham, N. 2011. Op. cit
16. Lancashire Learning Disability Institutions. A people's history of institutional life. Available from: https://www.lancslearningdisabilityinstitutions.org.uk/ (accessed 15 December 2022)
17. Interview with Frank Cochrane and Harry Oldham, October 16th, 1987
18. Situated near the institution's social centre
19. Interview with Frank Cochrane and James Leach, March 25th, 1988
20. Jarrett S. Those they called idiots. The idea of the disabled mind from 1700 to the present day. London: Reaktion Books. 2020
21. Mee S. You're not to dance with the girls: oral history, changing perception and practice. Journal of Intellectual Disabilities. 2010;14(1): 33-42. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/1744629510373053
22. Interview with Mary Andrews (nee Thompson), January 5th 2007
23. Interview with Mrs Creed, June 17th 2009
24. Anonymised extract from a research interview with a former Royal Albert staff member
25. Ingham, N. 2011. Op. cit
26. Portelli A. What makes oral history different. In: Perks R, Thomson A. The oral history reader. London: Routledge 1998. pp:63-74
27. Interview with Duncan Mitchell, November 24th, 2015