

Friern Barnet & District Local History Society

INTERVIEW BETWEEN DAVID BERGUER AND BETTY INMAN AT 31 LIMES AVENUE, NORTH FINCHLEY, N12 8QN THURSDAY 21 JULY 2011

DB Can I ask you where you were born?

BI I was born in University College Hospital and I live in Stoke Newington until I was about six or seven at the beginning of the War. I was evacuated with my mother and my brother through the school to Llanelli and whilst we were in Wales my father was a fire warden and was still living in the house. A land mine on a parachute landed in the trees at the back of the garden and didn't go off immediately but they evacuated the whole of the road to the school; the bomb went off and the house was demolished

DB When did you come back from Wales?

BI We were there for one year, 1940-41. During that time my father bought another house in New Southgate, Union Road off Bowes Road.

DB When did you first start work?

BI I trained at Arnos Secondary Modern School as a secretary, shorthand, typing, English and maths. There were only eight of us in the class. Then I started work when I was seventeen and I worked at the National Union of Teachers and I also did evening classes at Clark's College. While I was at the NUT we did have a day off to do shorthand and typing. After being there for three months I got a job in Regent Street at a furriers and I stayed there for a year and took a fortnight's holiday, went for several interviews and towards the end of the second week I was giving up hope and on the last day I went to Chubb Safe and Lock Company and got the job. I was there for thirteen years.

DB So, why did you leave there?

BI I had my first child then, Catherine

DB So what year was that?

BI I left in 1964.

DB And when did you start at Friern?

BI Two years later I had David and I had about five or six years just looking after them and as soon as David went to nursery school I did a few part time jobs, a computer firm in North Finchley and an estate agents in Finchley Central for three years and then I saw the job advertised at Friern Hospital and I liked the look of it and it seemed more interesting and it was more money

DB So, what year was that?

BI It was mid-seventies

DB So what was your role?

BI I was a secretary at the Day Hospital which was right at the east end of the hospital. I was working for two psychiatrists, a nurse and a social worker and a sister. The patients were only day patients. I was there for one year and they decided to close it and put the patients out into the community. They then put me to work for three psychiatrists in the main hospital. There was an office as you went in on the right hand side, off the Records Office, near the Chapel. I worked there for nine years

DB Do you remember how many psychiatrists there were there?

BI In my section, three. The doctors worked for Boroughs. Friern came under Islington and I was employed by Friern Hospital

DB So there would be a team for Islington, another for Haringey and so on?

BI That's right. There were three secretaries for each group, so there were probably only about nine or ten

DB What was your job then?

BI Mainly to take down dictation from psychiatrist who admitted patients and type out a history of the patient – their life story and the predicament they were in and why they were admitted. They were admitted under a Section. This was Ward 16, a locked ward, before they had their medication

DB Ward 16 was an Admissions Ward?

BI Yes. Because some of them would harm themselves or other people until they had their medication and they were then transferred to other wards

DB How long would they have been in the Admissions Ward?

BI Not for long - it all happened pretty quickly

DB You must have found it strange at first with all the medical terminology...

BI I suppose I did. The psychiatrist's dictation wasn't 100 words a minute and they would be looking at their case notes and they wouldn't be speaking at a rapid pace

DB Did they use a Dictaphone?

BI Not at first – I took it all down in shorthand but after a few years they went to dictation

- DB Did you have any contact with the patients themselves?
- BI Yes. They were always roaming about the hospital and coming into the office. Another one of my jobs was to take telephone calls from the GPs, because it was the GP who first introduced the patient to the doctor. They would phone me – one patient had even locked himself into his bedroom with a machete under his bed – doctors still had to go and assess them and they were brought in by ambulance. I was the first person the GP spoke to and then I would phone my doctor to let him know
- DB So the psychiatrist would go out to visit the patient. With the GP?
- BI The GP might meet them at the house
- DB But would the psychiatrist go on their own?
- BI Yes. One of them had battered his wife to death and he had gone to trial and they had decided that he should be admitted and I met him many times. He seemed quite normal to me but when I read his notes and had seen what he had done....
- DB When the GP phoned up, the psychiatrist would do an initial report...
- BI Yes. An initial letter was always done, with a copy to the GP
- DB And then a decision would be made. What was the procedure for admitting people?
- BI They had to be Sectioned. I think it was three doctors, but it may have been two
- DB So three doctors could Section somebody and that was it – it didn't have to go before a magistrate or somebody like that?
- BI Not as far as I am aware
- DB Then the patient would be brought in by ambulance
- BI They could be quite dangerous. They were taken to the locked ward, Ward 16, and they would be assessed and they would have medication
- DB Going back to the Day Hospital bit, that was where people could voluntarily go, And they didn't go to the Admissions Ward?
- BI No. They didn't sleep on the ward. They would come in the morning and do Art Therapy or Occupational Therapy. There would be people there who would give them jobs to do. Sometimes they would all sound in a room and the sister on the ward, and a nurse and possibly a Social Worker. This was Group Therapy and the doctors, and the sister would be able to tell how they were getting on. There was a kitchen in this Day Hospital where they could learn to cook. The Day Hospital was right at the east end on the top floor. I think it was disbanded because of lack

- of funding. It was kind of a half way house because when people were discharged from the main hospital some of them would go there and there wear able to be rehabilitated
- DB You mentioned that there were padded cells in the basement
- BI Yes. I never actually saw them myself but the Records person saw them. A lot of the records were downstairs of the main block. The padded cells were never used. While I was working there the BBC were planning a new series called *Casualty* and they phoned up and asked if we had any strait jackets so I put them onto my boss, the psychiatrist
- DB Everything was controlled by medication....
- BI Yes. And they had ECT was well. Dr Richard Hunter did a lot of research and in 1966 he wrote an article on porphyria that George III had. He used to do a lot of research in the hospital. In the beginning the railway used to bring the patients in to the hospital. Was it primarily a Jewish hospital?
- DB It was initially a pauper asylum, so in the area it covered there were a lot of Jewish people
- BI I was talking to a former colleague and she said that at the back of the hospital there was a ha-ha, a ditch with a wall in it
- DB Yes. I've got a photograph of it
- BI There was an Art Therapy Department, but in the Day Hospital they also did a small amount of art therapy and occupational therapy
- DB What did the patients do all day?
- BI They did basket work and woodwork
- DB There was an orchard there wasn't there?
- BI Yes. And greenhouses. And they had dentistry there, where they dealt with patients' teeth. And a hairdresser.
- DB Was she a full time hairdresser?
- BI Yes nine to five. She had a lovely salon. Margaret Thatcher came in July 1977 and also Princess Alexandra came to visit the hospital and there was a great hullabaloo and all the toilets had to be decorated. She met us in the Reception area and shook hands with us all. Every year they had an Open Day with stalls and games and sideshows
- DB Was Spike Milligan ever a patient there?
- BI I think he went somewhere in South London. Mary Shelley was a patient there

- DB The one who wrote Frankenstein
- BI I think that Ruth Ellis was seen there as well
- DB Tell me about the staff there
- BI There were orderlies but they were qualified nurses. They were called male nurses
- DB Did the nurses live on site?
- BI Not as far as I know. But people would have been admitted at night, so someone would have been on duty
- DB If there were no locked wards, what was there to stop the patients wandering out at night?
- BI Well, they could, but they were on medication so much that they didn't. Anyone who was likely to do that was on Ward 16. They used to wander into my office and they would wander in the grounds. I think a few attacks but nobody was murdered. The main gates were manned and the wall was high. There were a lot of exposures, but we got used to that. People thought that it was a terrible building, but actually they were so good to the patients. In the elderly ladies' ward they looked after them, their hair was nicely combed, everyone was well looked after
- DB Where did you eat and where did the patients eat?
- BI They had kitchens and the food was taken round on trolleys. I do not remember if there was a staff canteen.
- DB When did you leave Friern?
- BI I must have left in the mid 1980s when talk was going on about the hospital closing down. The laundry was automated, with all the shirts going round and I think they used to do the laundry for other hospitals as well. I never had the chance to go round the whole place because I was so busy and I used to take sandwiches and work all through
- DB What were the names of the psychiatrists?
- BI Doctor Bruce and Dr Hollander, both ladies. Doctor Sergeant, he was the senior tutor and he had a Harley Street practice as well. I used to do some work for him and I remember that he had a patient who had been on a helicopter in New York that landed on one of the tall buildings and as the passengers were getting off, the undercarriage broke, the helicopter went on its side with the rotors still going and chopped a few people's heads off. She was safe but she was traumatised
- DB Were the psychiatrists based at the hospital full time?

BI Dr Bruce also used to visit the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital at Stanmore because she'd see people who had jumped off buildings out of a window. She used to go every week. They used to go between Friern and the Whittington and Dr Sergeant used to go to the Royal Free Hospital because sometimes people in an ordinary hospital needed to be seen

DB There was an education centre there?

BI No, but all the psychiatrists were in a rota, and educational programme. They also used to carry out lobotomies

DB Why did you leave?

BI For more money, and because they were closing down. I went to Coppetts Wood Hospital. I enjoyed the whole time I was there at Friern