

“Gee Ma, I want to go home”

Reminiscence and Resistance at The Royal Albert.

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In the late 1980s reminiscence groups involving former residents of the Royal Albert Hospital, Lancaster were funded by the Workers Educational Association and the Local Education Authority. This paper focuses mainly on the experiences of the members of one such group, comprising 6 to 8 men, which met in Morecambe during 1988 and '89. The weekly sessions aimed, with adult education tutor support, to enable participants 'to share their life experiences both with each other; and other members of the community'<sup>2</sup>. Although not an intended outcome the meetings, through being tape recorded, have become a valuable source for the history of the Royal Albert. These tapes offer a glimpse into what has largely been the 'hidden history' of life within long-stay institutions for people with learning disabilities.

The 'hidden history' of long-stay institutions.

The history of long-stay institutions has traditionally focused on the institution and the legislation. Occasionally the staff's views and experiences might be included, but never the patients. Segregated and stigmatised by society, the patients were considered to be unable to speak for themselves.<sup>3</sup> A number of developments over the last twenty years have led to the growth of interest in the experiences of those with learning disabilities. The move towards community care has led to questions about the values of different types of support for people with learning disabilities, and in doing so has caused a reassessment of the past. This has combined with developments in history; the move towards the history of hidden minorities who have not had a voice, often using oral history as a tool, as well as a growing interest in the history of learning disabilities as a whole within the field of the history of medicine.<sup>4</sup> Finally the increasing

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a Consultancy Research project done as part of a MA in History at Lancaster University.

<sup>2</sup> Nigel Ingham, Royal Albert Reminiscence Session Outlines (1989).

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Fido and Maggie Potts, '“It's not true what was written down!” Experiences of life in mental handicap institutions', *Oral History*, vol. 17.2 (1989), p.31.

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Atkinson, Mark Jackson and Jan Walmsley, 'Introduction: Methods and Themes' in Dorothy Atkinson, Mark Jackson and Jan Walmsley, *Forgotten Lives. Exploring the History of Learning Disability* (Kidderminster, British Institute of Learning Disabilities, 1997), pp.2-4.

activity of the self-advocacy movement, initially founded in the 1960s, has meant that people want to tell their side of the story;

‘I’d just like people to know so that they can realise what it was we’d to go through. It’s not true what was written down!’<sup>5</sup>

Reminiscence sessions and oral history offer a valuable tool to record this kind of history which is not found in official or documentary sources. It is especially important in working with former residents of long-stay institution as many do not have the confidence or ability to write down their experiences.<sup>6</sup> This had led to co-research or inclusive research, where the former resident’s research is facilitated by a professional researcher, One key example of this is Dorothy Atkinson’s work with Mabel Cooper.<sup>7</sup> Studies in this area have greatly illuminated the everyday experiences of life in long-stay institutions, and provided the former residents with a means of expressing their views and opinions.<sup>8</sup> In the search for ‘the voice’ of residents of long-stay institutions there is one area that seems understudied: songs of resistance composed and sung by the residents.<sup>9</sup>

### Protest Songs: Role and Meaning

Songs of resistance and protest have a long and varied history across different groups and minorities; from British agricultural labourers of the 1830s, to the slave songs of the American South, to the 1984-5 miners strike. Roy Palmer has shown that for these groups, isolated from the dominant narrative of society, resistance songs offered a voice to the voiceless. He argues that songs of resistance offer a perspective

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<sup>5</sup> Part of an oral interview quoted in Fido and Potts, ‘“It’s not true what was written down!”’, p.34.

<sup>6</sup> There are some exceptions for example David Barron, *A Price to Be Born* and Nigel Hunt, *The World of Nigel Hunt*, although both are co-authored.

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Atkinson, Michelle McCarthy, Jan Walmsley, Mabel Cooper, Sheena Rolph, Simone Aspis, Pam Barette, Mary Coventry and Gloria Ferris (eds.), *Good Times, Bad Times: Women with Learning Difficulties Telling their Stories* (Kidderminster, British Institute of Learning Disabilities, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Some of the main practitioners in this field are Dorothy Atkinson, Jan Walmsley, Rebecca Fido, Maggie Potts, Sheena Rolph and Joanna Bornat

<sup>9</sup> One exception to this trend is a recent chapter by Sue Ledger and Lindy Shufflebotham, ‘Songs of Resistance’ pp.68-90 in Duncan Mitchell, Rannveig Traustadottir, Rohss Chapman, Louise Townson, Nigel Ingham and Sue Ledger, (eds.), *Exploring Experience of Advocacy by People with Learning Disabilities. Testimonies of Resistance* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2006)

absent from orthodox histories.<sup>10</sup> Songs not only offer an outlet for protest, but also give an important insight into the mentalities and experiences of a group;

‘I shall not expatiate upon the importance of folk songs. They are a people’s history, vital, vivid, full of colour and truth, laying bare all the life of a people ... a historical inscription in nothing against this living, talking chronicle, resonant with the past.’<sup>11</sup>

In the search for self-advocacy and self-expression songs of protest from long-stay institutions, like the Royal Albert, are a vital element. Unlike the reminiscence sessions and oral history accounts, which are views of the past with the benefit of hindsight, the songs offer a contemporary view of what people felt and experienced. Ledger and Shufflebotham argue that these songs also have another role, as part of the history of the self-advocacy movement. They suggest that like the civil rights movement it is important for the movement to be aware of and understand its roots and heritage.<sup>12</sup> Songs of resistance are an important facet of this, especially as one of their major functions at the time was to build morale within the groups who sung them.

The 1988-9 reminiscence sessions with former residents from the Royal Albert brought to light four songs of resistance. One of the songs, *The Cocoa Song* was composed by the residents themselves, *Come to Barlow* is an adaptation of a common song to the singers’ situation. *A Hospital Song* was common to at least one other hospital, while *When This Lousy War is Over* is a variation on a popular song of the period. This fits in with other studies of protest songs which have found them to be combinations of specially composed songs, and others which use popular songs of the time either to support or to offer a parody of the situation of the singers.<sup>13</sup> These songs show that there was the base of a common culture of resistance within the residents of the Royal Albert. In addition an analysis of the text highlights important aspects of institutional life; the hierarchy of the institutions, rules, work and routines.

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<sup>10</sup> Roy Palmer, *The Sound of History. Songs and Social Comment* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Nikolai Gogol, ‘About Ukranian Songs’ quoted in Palmer, *The Sound of History*, frontispiece.

<sup>12</sup> Ledger and Shufflebotham, ‘Songs of Resistance’, pp.87-89.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Miller quoted in Ledger and Shufflebotham, ‘Songs of Resistance’, p.89.

Conditions and Pay; The Cocoa Song



From the late 1950s yearly camping excursions were held for some of the residents of the Royal Albert who were members of the Scout Troop. These were initially held on the hospital site, behind Derby Home, but they later moved to Silverdale, a village about 10 miles away from the hospital. It was on the camping expeditions, which took the residents away from the rules and regulations of the institution as well as the staff, that the two specially composed songs were invented. *The Cocoa Song* was created by four residents; Mick Heaton, Arthur Ramsden, Stan Byers and Andy Warriner. In the 1988-9 sessions it was sung by the last remaining member of the group, Stan Byers.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 1 - Stan Byers  
(© Helen Burrow)

**The Cocoa Song.**

Voice

The co-coa that they gave us, they say is might-y fine. It's  
 good for cuts and bruises, and tastes like i-o-dine. So I don't want no more of  
 Roy-al Al-bert life. Gee Ma I want to go home.

<sup>14</sup> Royal Albert Reminiscence Session, No.5 Morecambe, July 15<sup>th</sup> 1988, reel position 000-060 and Royal Albert Reminiscence Session, No.22 Morecambe, March 9<sup>th</sup> 1989, reel position 000-033.

The Cocoa that they gave us, they say is mighty fine.  
It's good for cuts and bruises, and tastes like iodine.  
So I don't want no more of Royal Albert life.  
Gee Ma I want to go home.

The stockings that they gave us, they say they're mighty sheer.<sup>15</sup>  
We put them on the clothes line, and watch them disappear.  
So I don't want no more of Royal Albert life.  
Gee Ma I want to go home.

The bacon that they gave us, they say is mighty fine.  
A leg fell of the table, and killed a pal of mine.  
So I don't want no more of Royal Albert life.  
Gee Ma I want to go home.

The Bacon that they gave us, they say is mighty fine.  
The staff get all the bacon, the patients get the rind.  
So I don't want no more of Royal Albert life.  
Gee Ma I want to go home.

The pullovers that they gave us, they say they're mighty fine.  
One of Betty Grable's<sup>16</sup> will fit in two of mine.  
So I don't want no more of Royal Albert life.  
Gee Ma I want to go home.

The money that they gave us, they say is mighty fine.  
They give a hundred shillings and take back ninety-nine.  
So I don't want no more of Royal Albert life.  
Gee Ma I want to go –  
Gee Ma I want to go –  
Gee Ma I want to go home.

This song highlights some of the main complaints of the residents of the Royal Albert; the quality of the food and the clothing. These were fairly common issues and are raised by songs from other institutions; one of the songs from Stoke Park calls for;

‘No more dirty cups of tea,  
No more cabbages full of slugs,  
No more treacle on our rice.’<sup>17</sup>

The other big issue of this song is about the question of payment for work, and the implication of exploitation. This was a long standing issue for patients, one of the oldest

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<sup>15</sup> There is some confusion over the exact wording of this line due to the quality of the tape recordings, the other possibility is ‘they say they're might appear’, which seems less likely.

<sup>16</sup> Betty Grable (1916-1973), a popular American film actress of the 1940s and 1950s.

<sup>17</sup> Song from Stoke Park quoted in Ledger and Shufflebotham, ‘Songs of Resistance’, pp. 82-3.

surviving former residents Harry Oldham, whose memories of the Royal Albert stretched back to the 1920s, recited this rhyme in the 1980s<sup>18</sup>;

‘God made the bees,  
Bees made the honey,  
The patients did the work,  
While the staff get the money’<sup>19</sup>

Before the Royal Albert was integrated into the National Health Service in 1948 the hospital had been, as much as possible, self-sufficient. This meant that the patients were responsible for the cleaning of the buildings, as there were no domestic staff. Patients also worked on the farm and in the workshops which aimed to provide all the



Figure 2 Royal Albert Tailor's Shop - early 20<sup>th</sup> century  
(© Lancashire County Museums Service)

essentials for the hospital, from food to clothes to brushes and baskets.<sup>20</sup> The production of all the clothes for the residents in the hospital workshops may also explain the complaints about the quality of the clothing in the song, with clothing being made to a uniform design rather than to fit the person. All the work in the institution was unpaid although there was a system of rewards and privileges.<sup>21</sup> When the N.H.S. took over some of the Royal Albert's methods of care were questioned. The appropriateness of patients in a hospital to be doing so much of the domestic and manual work was one area that was brought under scrutiny.<sup>22</sup> The former residents remembered the change, ‘Doctor Thomas started payment, started money ... it depended on the job you did, what kind of work.’<sup>23</sup> Dr. Thomas was the

<sup>18</sup> Harry Oldham attended a different set of reminiscence session but the aim and format was the same as the Morecambe ones.

<sup>19</sup> This is a variation of a traditional rhyme which has been adapted for various purposes.

<sup>20</sup> Joe Alston and Elizabeth Roberts (eds.), *The Royal Albert: Chronicle of an Era* (Lancaster, University of Lancaster, 1992), p.75.

<sup>21</sup> Alston and Roberts (eds.), *The Royal Albert*, p.75.

<sup>22</sup> Alston and Roberts (eds.), *The Royal Albert*, p.88.

<sup>23</sup> Royal Albert Reminiscence Session, No.3 Morecambe, July 1<sup>st</sup> 1988, reel position 319.

Medical Superintendent between 1947 and 1952 and oversaw the transition to the NHS. It is quite common for former residents to link events to a person rather than a specific date.<sup>24</sup> Under his direction the amount of work done by residents decreased, as domestic staff were taken on, although some of the lighter housework and farm work was still done by the residents. Most of the workshops also closed, although some continued to run as industrial therapy centres.<sup>25</sup> In addition a system of payments was set up on a weekly basis, which allowed the residents some money that could be spent in the new canteen and shop, although it was still more pocket money than a wage.<sup>26</sup>

*The Cocoa Song* was written in a situation away from the established routine of institutional life which perhaps made it easier for the residents to express their feelings.



Figure 3: Winmarleigh Hall (© Lancashire County Museums)

Along with the other protest songs it seems to have been sung at many of the Silverdale camping expeditions. However, the reminiscence session revealed that the song had been sung publicly. The Royal Albert held variety shows in Winmarleigh Hall (see Figure 3) where the residents and staff entertained each other. On one

occasion a group of residents sang *The Cocoa Song*, resulting in Dr Cunningham, the Medical Superintendent, and the Matron, Mrs Wareing, walking out during the final verse.<sup>27</sup> This event clearly shows the power that protest songs could hold. Denisoff has argued that in fact studies had showed that protests songs are more important in building morale within a movement than changing opinions outside, but both sides are

<sup>24</sup> Rebecca Fido and Maggie Potts, ‘Using Oral Histories’ in Dorothy Atkinson, Mark Jackson and Jan Walmsley, (eds.), *Forgotten Lives. Exploring the History of Learning Disability* (Kidderminster, British Institute of Learning Disabilities, 1997), p.36-7.

<sup>25</sup> Alston and Roberts (eds.), *The Royal Albert*, p.88.

<sup>26</sup> Reminiscence Session, No.3, reel position 316-342.

<sup>27</sup> Reminiscence Session, No.5, reel position 049-055 and Royal Albert Reminiscence Session, No.20 Morecambe, February 9<sup>th</sup> 1989, reel position 044-089.

still aware of the power that songs can have.<sup>28</sup> The residents made it clear in their remembrance of the events how important and positive a memory it was for them, as one of the few times they had been able to have any impact on the staff. As for the staff they were unable to do anything about the song as it is very difficult to complain about a song without appearing foolish and overbearing, as other have discovered before them.

Staff and Segregation; Come to Barlow and A Hospital Song.

The second of the composed songs *Come to Barlow*, sung to the tune of *My Darling Clementine*, was also associated by the residents with the excursions to Silverdale and singing round the campfire.



**Figure 4: Silverdale Camp, 1960s (Courtesy of Malcolm Alston)**

<sup>28</sup> R. Serge Denisoff, ‘Protest Songs’ in *American Quarterly*, Vol.22, No.4 (1970), pp.807-8.

## Come to Barlow.

Voice

Come to Bar - low, Come to Bar-low, we will find it ver - y nice. If it  
was - n't for the nur - ses, we would live in par - a - dise.

Come to Barlow, Come to Barlow,  
We will find it very nice.  
If it wasn't for the nurses,  
We would live in paradise.

Build a bonfire, Build a bonfire,  
Put the nurses on the top,  
Put the charge hands in the middle,  
And we'll burn the bloomin' lot.

Here the main issue is the treatment of the residents by the staff, which prevented the residents enjoying themselves. There is also a sense of betrayal, the Barlow referred to is Barlow Home which was established in 1932-4 as home for young boys. It was thus the first part of the hospital that many of the male residents would have had an experience of and thus would be directly connected with the experience of arriving in the hospital. The opening could, therefore, indicate a sense of betrayal of the residents by the people who left them there, telling them they would 'find it very nice', which turned out not to be the case. Many of the studies into life in long-stay residential institutions have found that for many the admission process was terrifying and traumatic, especially as many did not understand what was happening to them.<sup>29</sup>

*A Hospital Song* also covers some of the same issues as *Come to Barlow*. Unlike the first two songs discussed it was not written by the residents of the Royal Albert. The song was sung by Peggy Palmer (see Figure 5), who had learnt it at another institution, Laybourn Grange.<sup>30</sup> However, she also sung it at the Royal Albert, just changing the name in the first line.

<sup>29</sup> Fido and Potts, 'Using Oral Histories', pp.41-2, and Fido and Potts, '“It's not true what was written down!”', p.33.

<sup>30</sup> Peggy Palmer, similarly to Harry Oldham, attended a different set of reminiscence session but they had the same aim and format as the Morecambe ones

## A Hospital Song.

Voice

The musical score consists of five staves of music in a single system. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written on a single staff. The lyrics are printed below the notes. The second staff continues the melody and lyrics. The third staff continues the melody and lyrics. The fourth staff continues the melody and lyrics. The fifth staff concludes the melody and lyrics with a double bar line.

They say the Royal Al-ber-t's a won-der-ful-place, but the go-ings on there is a  
shock-ing dis-grace. The mat-rons and doc-tors have noth-ing to do, 'stick their  
nose in the air when they're walk-ing past you. They say don't you wor-ry you soon will be free.  
My wor-ry is that you'd str-olled over me. And I think it's use-less to pull up you socks, for  
when you go out you will go in your box

They say the Royal Albert's a wonderful place,  
But the goings on there is a shocking disgrace.  
The matrons and doctors have nothing to do.  
'stick their nose in the air when they're walking past you.

They say don't you worry you soon will be free.  
My worry is that you'd strolled over me.  
And I think it's useless to pull up your socks,  
For when you go out you will go in your box.

In this song, as with the last, there is a sense of betrayal and a division from society. In the outside world 'they' believe, or want to believe, that the institutions are wonderful places where the residents are content but the reality is far from this. This sense of oppression and captivity is even more clearly expressed in the last verse, and the fear of never getting free and so dying within the institution. For



Figure 5: Peggy Palmer.  
(Courtesy of Jewli Winder)

many residents of institutions across the country this was the case, admitted in



**Figure 1: Mrs Wareing**  
(© Lancashire County  
Museums Service)

early life they spent most of their lives within institutions and died there.<sup>31</sup>

*Come to Barlow and A Hospital Song*, both stress dissatisfaction with the nursing staff and the petty rules. Life within institutions was governed by a series of strict rules and regulations which the residents were made to adhere to. The glib reference to ‘pull up your socks’ actually highlights one of the areas where rules were applied. In reminiscence sessions the former residents spoke about the strictness of the rules governing dress, and staff enforcement. The Matron Mrs Wareing would send residents back to their rooms to redress if they were not wearing ties and jackets at meal times. Leonard Hockinson recalled how Ted Walmsley (probably a Chargenurse) made sure that residents arrived on time for meals.

‘He was a funny man Ted Walmsley ... if you wasn’t in on time you got no dinner (sic) ... you wouldn’t get anything ’till next morning then, not ’till breakfast.’

### *Rules and regulations; When this lousy war is over.*

The petty rules and regulations of hospital life are also reflected in the words of the final song that was recorded during the reminiscence sessions. *When This Lousy War is Over* was one of the most popular of English war songs, originally sung in the trenches it was revived during the Second World War.<sup>32</sup> Although part of the reason it was sung by the residents would have been its popularity at the time, it is also important to consider why this particular war song was chosen and what it reflects about institutional life.

<sup>31</sup> Ledger and Shufflebotham, ‘Songs of Resistance’, p.78.

<sup>32</sup> Brian Murdoch, *Fighting Songs and Warring Words: Popular lyrics of two World Wars* (London, Routledge, 1990), p.86.

## When This Lousy War Over.

Voice

When I get my civ-vy clothes on, No more sol-dier ing for me.  
You can tell the Ser-geant Ma - jor, No more sol - dier ing for me.  
No more church pa-rades on Sun - day, No more ask-ing for a pass.  
You can tell the Ser-geant Ma - jor, to stick his pass - es in his arse!

### Royal Albert Version

When I get my civvy clothes on,  
No more soldiering for me.  
You can tell the Sergeant Major,  
No more soldering for me.  
No more church parades in Sunday,  
No more asking for a pass.  
You can tell the Sergeant Major,  
To stick his passes up his arse!

### Most Common Version

When this lousy war is over,  
Oh how happy I shall be.  
When I get my civvy clothes on,  
No more soldiering for me.  
No more church parades on Sunday,  
No more queuing for a pass  
You can tell the Sergeant Major,  
To stick his passes on the wall.



Figure 7: Drilling in the Boys' Yard c 1920s  
(© Lancashire County Museums Service)

The original version was a song specifically for conscripts to the army, and stressed dissatisfaction with the conditions caused by the petty rules and regulations of their superiors. In addition the songs look forwards to the end of the war, and the freedom to be found in ‘civvy clothes’.<sup>33</sup> Clearly these themes would have been of particular resonance for many of the residents of the Royal Albert. Like conscripts into the army, many were not in the hospital by choice, and desired to leave. The other songs have already highlighted the dissatisfaction with much of hospital life and regulations. The reference to ‘asking for a pass’ would certainly have struck a chord. After the NHS took over the hospital they introduced a ‘parole’ system which allowed some of the residents to leave the hospital unaccompanied, which had never been allowed before.<sup>34</sup> The former residents clearly remembered this change, and as with the introduction of payment, again linked to Dr. Thomas. At the same time as being pleased at the new freedom of being allowed out ‘without a nurse’, there was still some resentment of the pass system.<sup>35</sup> Anyone who was allowed out on parole had to apply to the charge-nurse for a pass each Saturday, to be allowed out initially from 1-6pm, although this was later extended to 11am-6pm.

The rules governing parole also link to another implication of the army song; that of hierarchy with an institution. When the parole system was implemented it was initially for what were designated ‘higher-grade’ male patients only<sup>36</sup>. The wards of the hospital were split into a series of grades depending on the perceived ‘condition’ of the residents, and privileges were dependent on the grade of the ward. The former residents remembered this system. ‘Derby Home Lads’, one of the ‘high grade’ male wards, being the only ones allowed on the

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<sup>33</sup> Murdoch, *Fighting Songs and Warring Words*, pp.87-9 and 204

<sup>34</sup> Alston and Roberts (eds.), *The Royal Albert*, pp.88-9.

<sup>35</sup> Royal Albert Reminiscence Session, No.12 Morecambe, November 4<sup>th</sup> 1988, reel position 105-25, side B.

<sup>36</sup> It is necessary to explain about terminology: individuals who are now described as having learning disabilities have been labelled in many different ways in the past. Many of these labels are seen as deeply offensive. However in the interest of historical accuracy and to reflect changing attitudes this article uses some of these terms. I do not in anyway support the everyday use of such terms. It is clear from the use by the former residents that these terms were in common use, it is also necessary to say that the members of the reminiscence session would see themselves as ‘high grade’ patients.

balcony of Winmarleigh Hall for parties and cinema evenings.<sup>37</sup> This hierarchy of wards seems to have been clearly marked, the former residents unhesitatingly identifying Derby Home and Brunton Upper as the ‘higher grade’ male wards, and Henderson and Siviour for the women. In addition Coupland was, as one former resident said, for ‘the dopey ones’ and Welch Upper the punishment block.<sup>38</sup> The question of punishment, although not mentioned directly in any of the songs, was brought up in several of the reminiscence sessions. The former residents spoke of the dispensing of punishment in term of ‘taking him to Welch Upper’ and referred to the regime of the hospital as being like a prison or a prisoner of war camp.<sup>39</sup>

### Resistances Songs and Direct Action

The four songs of resistance sung at the Royal Albert form a body of protest against the running of the hospital; from the conditions to the rules imposed by the staff. All the songs share some common features. One of the most obvious is the use of humour and laughter to make the situation more bearable. This is used to undermine authority figures, ‘who stick their noses in



**Figure 8: Royal Albert Nurses c1950**  
(© Lancashire County Museums Service)

the air’, and bring them down by ‘burn[jing] the bloomin’ lot’. The singing of such songs could act as morale boosters, by making tedious jobs more fun or though the recognition that singing them was flouting authority.<sup>40</sup> This was very clearly done in the singing of *The Cocoa Song* in Winmarleigh Hall.

Many of the studies into life in long-stay

<sup>37</sup> Royal Albert Reminiscence Session, No.1 Morecambe, June 17<sup>th</sup> 1988, reel position 001-12.

<sup>38</sup> Reminiscence Session, No.1, reel position 013-50

<sup>39</sup> Reminiscence Session, No.1, reel position, 040-50 and Reminiscence Session, No.3, reel position 493-579.

<sup>40</sup> Ledger and Shufflebotham, ‘Songs of Resistance’, p.85-6.

institutions have found that humour was often used as a weapon by the residents, especially in relation to very difficult or painful events.<sup>41</sup> All the songs express a desire to be free from the Royal Albert and a desire for a better life. The themes of escape and freedom appear in all the songs, from ‘Gee Ma, I want to go home’, to ‘get[ting] my civvy clothes on’. This raises the question as to whether the resistance evinced in the songs was limited to the songs alone, or whether there were instances of direct action.

One example of direct action is of course the public singing of *The Cocoa Song* but the reminiscence sessions brought up some other examples. One of the former residents recalled, with amusement, how a firework had been put into the Medical Superintendent Dr. Coupland’s pocket during a Bonfire night celebration, resulting in such celebrations being stopped until the NHS took over.<sup>42</sup> The other major action taken against the regime was in attempts to escape from the hospital.<sup>43</sup> All the participants agreed that there had been many attempts at escaping from the hospital but that they had all been useless. None of the participants gave any accounts of trying to escape themselves, although one said he had been asked to join some friends who were planning an escape.<sup>44</sup> They also gave a detailed account of what had clearly been a memorable escape attempt in which one resident, Dennis Neil, had stolen Dr. Henderson’s car and driven to Scotforth before being brought back by the police.<sup>45</sup>

### Conclusions and Ideas for further study.

Using reminiscence sessions it had been possible to look into what has been a largely ‘hidden history’ of the experiences of residents in long-stay institutions. The reminiscence sessions have highlighted the issue of resistance

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<sup>41</sup> Dorothy Atkinson, ‘“I got put away”’: Group-based reminiscence with people with learning difficulties’ in Joanna Bornat (ed.), *Reminiscence Reviewed. Perspectives, Evaluations, Achievements* (Buckingham, Open University Press, 1994), p.102.

<sup>42</sup> Reminiscence Session, No.12, reel position 000-086.

<sup>43</sup> Escape from institutions is a common issue in many accounts, see for example Nigel Ingham, (ed.), *Gogarburn Lives* (Edinburgh, Living Memory Association, 2003), pp.42-5.

<sup>44</sup> Royal Albert Reminiscence Session, No.18 Morecambe, January 26<sup>th</sup> 1989, reel position 000-050.

<sup>45</sup> Reminiscence Session, No.12, reel position 095-125.

amongst the residents of the Royal Albert. The four songs indicate the main areas with which residents were unhappy. The conditions in the Albert which included food, clothes and the question of payment for work which holds the implicit suggestion of exploitation. These problems have tended to be linked to the staff, who were the providers, and who imposed the rules and regulations that the songs rebel against. The songs also raise more difficult issues about betrayal, in the way patients were admitted, and isolation once in the hospital. All this adds up to a strong demand for freedom, which was acted out in attempts at



**Figure 9: Royal Albert Asylum (as originally known) c late 19<sup>th</sup> century.**

escape from the hospital. This article is, however, only based on the memories of a small sample of some of the more verbally articulate residents, whose experiences might be very different to those who were less so. Also the songs emphasise a sharp division between the

residents and the staff, although this may not be an entirely accurate picture. Other examples from the reminiscence sessions suggest that on some occasions the staff and patients worked closely together.<sup>46</sup> Although based on only a small sample the songs and reminiscence sessions suggest that there was a sub-culture of resistance within the hospital. The extent of this is difficult to determine from such a small sample but it does point towards the need for further study into this area, as well as into other issues brought up by the reminiscence sessions.

Harriet Wheelock (May 2006)

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<sup>46</sup> Also this was often the case in other similar institutions, as highlighted by Ledger and Shufflebotham, ‘Songs of Resistance’, p.79, 85