

Crossway Hospital – memories of a child patient from June 1948 to November 1950

I grew up in Pyle, and can remember watching the older boys walking along the wall for the entire length of Beach Road, and then having to jump from pillar to pillar when they came to gate entrances. I, of course, tried to do the same, even though I was only about 4 at the time, and then I jumped down onto our front garden lawn. Not long afterwards, my mother noticed I was limping for far too long and eventually took me to see our family doctor, a Dr. Basu, a short and stocky man but a very kind and mannerly person, as I was to find out some years later. After seeing a specialist, I was found to have Perthe's disease, which affects young children, mostly prevalent in young boys. It is the softening of the leg bone within the hip. I was subsequently sent to Crossways Orthopaedic Hospital, just outside Cowbridge, Glamorgan. The curse was to have both legs encased with sticking plaster and wrapped in bandages from top to ankle for eighteen months. My bed was called a Pugh Bed, which meant that the foot was raised about 9 inches, and a six or seven pound weight was attached from both my legs to a neighbouring bed, on either side. Later, I had both legs placed in an A-frame. This consisted of them being encased again, in plaster of Paris, with a bar stretched across at the ankles.

I can remember even now not only the original journey going into the hospital, on the 16th June 1948 (just two days after both my sisters' birthdays), but also the final journey home, on the 26th November 1950 – I was there for a period of nearly two and a half years. There were good times and bad times in Crossways, but sadly only the bad ones I'm best able to recall.

On warm, sunny days, all the beds were pushed out on to a large patio area and then sometimes you were wheeled back into a different bed position. On one such occasion, I was put by a wall that had a large hole in its plaster work, and after one large nurse came to check my pulse the marks of her finger nails were left embedded in my wrist – she had noticed the hole and accused me of causing it. Another time, I was given a bowl of water with some toys in it to play with. I got so involved with this that I tipped water over the bed. As a result, I was bent over the bed (my legs on the bed, as it was really awkward me being in the A-frame) and had my bottom smacked a good few times. I have a vague recollection of seeing that nurse from under the other side of the bed.

Visiting was only permitted on one Saturday of the month. Our parents used to bring us sweets etc. We tried hiding them from the staff, but to no avail; they sought them out every time, as soon as the relatives left and before one had time to enjoy them. Of course, there was a good reason for this as we were then all allotted two sweets each night after tea.

We also had an occasional piece of fruit, and one time I discovered a live maggot in my apple, which I immediately threw at the poor, unfortunate nurse who had given it. Yet another hiding for me. Once, I was put into a part of the ward that had only three beds, and that Christmas I kicked up hell, screaming at the boy in the next bed. The reason? Why, he had the drum that I'd asked Father Christmas for. When I was in that other ward, an older boy had rigged up a mouse trap and caught a mouse near the radiator by his bed. It didn't half frighten the poor nurse who discovered it, and I don't think he was chastised for that – why?

There was a time when most of us had to have injections. The nurse doing the necessary asked us who would like to have an injection. Most put their hand up, even muggins. Some injections didn't take and had to be done all over again, including mine, but this time I said no. That didn't work, so I suffered again. It so happened that one lad in the next bed had to have a blood sample taken, and it literally took ages. His arms were so thin that it was impossible to find a vein. Blood was going all

over the place and he was screaming something terrible. This affected me very badly, and even now I cannot stand the sight of blood. I feel very faint and look away if I have a blood sample taken.

Another bad time, was when there was an outbreak of mumps and we landed up in an isolation ward. Some while later, my cousin Raymond came visiting and brought in a few conkers from outside by the car park. I hid one down the side of my plaster, but it gradually worked its way further down my leg almost to my knee. This resulted in me being taken to Cardiff Royal Infirmary to have them cut into the plaster. Needless to say, the cutters there fell apart and I was in trouble once more! On another occasion, we were doing writing tests by copying from a book. Now there is in English the phrase 'had had', as in 'he had had enough'. And so it was in this particular book, with the word 'had' being the last word on the bottom of the left hand page and also the first word on the top of the right hand page, which I duly copied out. This damn teacher said that I had made a mistake, and told the nurse there was to be no tea for me that day. I'm not sure of the name of that teacher, but think it was a Mrs Harries, the other two being a Mrs Salmon and a Mrs Roberts. I can remember doing things like knitting, and also weaving wool around on card shaped like a shoe to make slippers.

After ten months in plaster, I had to learn to walk again. I and another boy decided to go for a stroll. We went through the shelter ward and then through a private room, cum smaller ward consisting of one or two beds. We then followed the fence along to some wooded area at the hospital boundary. We stopped immediately. In front of us we saw, in a small clearing in the woods, the top few rungs of a wooden ladder boldly sticking out of the ground. Suddenly a figure emerged, and we both ran back frantically to our wards, as if we were running normally – never mind 'learning to walk'!

I was due to leave hospital on the 3rd, a Thursday, in November 1950, but as the monthly visiting was two days' later I expressed a wish to stay on because the bus conductor (bringing my parents) had promised me I could ring the bell. Mam and Dad had hit upon a friendship with a couple from Dafen, near Llanelli. They were the parents of Alwyn James, who at one time occupied the next bed to me. They all remained in contact with each other for many years afterwards. When Alwyn learned that the hospital was due to close, as he was now driving he picked me and Mam up to take us on a final visit. We spoke to many of the parents, especially those whose children had the same predicament as us. Alwyn and I ventured down to the Staff Canteen, where we chatted to all the nurses there having their break. Nice experience, nice nurses. Oh, why couldn't they have been on duty when we were patients?

One of the patients at the hospital, Mam told me, was later to become the co-test pilot of Concorde, along with Captain Trubshaw, the main test pilot.

In 1963, a friend from across the road persuaded me to try caddying at the Royal Porthcawl golf club. I had never done it before, or since, but can certainly remember the experience. A player there asked me if I wanted to go around with him, and told me that all that I needed to do was to pull the trolley and follow him. This I did, but when I followed him onto the putting green he really ticked me off. Trolleys were not allowed on that particular area. A few weeks later, I had to go for a final check up on my hip at the orthopaedic hospital in Newport Rd, Cardiff. I was quite surprised when I saw that golfer there. When I told my mother, she called him over and he recognised me and recalled my little misdemeanour. It turned out he was the same doctor who had sent me into hospital in the first place – some coincidence!