



IN THE SHADOW OF THE

WORKHOUSE

The Swindon & Highworth Union Institution, c1912, and its legacy

ONLINE (PDF) VERSION,
CHAPTER BY CHAPTER:
CHAPTER VIII

Caroline Ockwell & Graham Carter

A Heritage Lottery Fund project by the Alfred Williams Heritage Society

See **www.alfredwilliams.org.uk** to read the other chapters and to find out how to buy a hard copy of the book

With thanks to Paul Wilkins, Brian Carter, Frances Bevan, Andy Binks, Linda Worth and Christine Ockwell, who helped us with research and the preparation of the book, and all those who contributed stories and other information to the project

Published by the Alfred Williams Heritage Society
© The Alfred Williams Heritage Society

Chapter VIII

Stories and Memories

As part of the Heritage Lottery Fund project, we made appeals for local people to come forward with stories and/or information about the workhouse or any of its subsequent reincarnations, including the medical care that took place there. We were contacted by a number of people, on a variety of themes, demonstrating the breadth of the subject and how the workhouse site meant different things to different people. The transcripts of what they told us are presented here, in no particular order.

Betty Austin (nee Stroud)

Betty started as a nurse at Stratton Hospital, soon after the start of the Second World War in 1939. Now over ninety and still living in Swindon, she began the interview by showing us a letter she had kept for nearly seventy years, from the mother of one of her patients during the Second World War:

My older sister Mary used to come and take down letters for the soldiers in shorthand, because she was a secretary, and then she'd go home and write them out in long hand, to send to their parents.

It wasn't so very long ago that I was going through my things and I found a letter, addressed to me from the mother of a patient, asking me to try and have her son moved nearer home. He was a stretcher case, but I can't remember how badly injured he was, because there were so many of them that went through our hands. Of course I couldn't do a

thing about it, but they were eventually found somewhere near home, when they got things organised.*

When I started, we had to go to the Royal Unit Hospital at Bath for two weeks' intensive training. That's all – and that's how badly they needed nurses because of the war. I can't remember how much I earned, but, my goodness, it was very poor. But you didn't go for that reason.

We were all billeted out to houses all over Bath, and this particular lady had about five of us. She even put an old settee on the landing, because the houses in Bath were rather flush with room, and I remember I slept on the landing. At breakfast time, I think there were about nine of us around the table, all squashed up. I was from Swindon, but the other nurses were from all over.

We just applied. It was called the Civil Nursing Reserve. I think they had a meeting place in Swindon, but we were liable to be sent anywhere in England. On compassionate grounds – because, at the time, my mother wasn't in the best of health – they allowed me to go to Stratton Hospital.

I lived in Wells Street, off Groundwell Road. My sister was a lady, but I was always a tomboy. I had a red racer and I used to cycle to Stratton Hospital and leave that bicycle outside, with no fear of it ever being stolen or anything like that, while I was on duty.

I was born in 1922, so I was only seventeen when I applied. Previous to that I was apprenticed to the tailoring trade. There was a tailor, up in Victoria Hill in Swindon. His son had a dance band. I used to work from eight o'clock in the morning until five o'clock in the afternoon, and he used to come home from college at about half past four, and he used to practise on his trombone, and that was the highlight of the day. It was Gordon Talbot, and he used to play with Johnnie Stiles.

If the war hadn't happened, I shouldn't think I would have become a nurse, but they were crying out for nurses, of course. I can remember standing at the bottom of that ward and feeling ever so self-conscious in my lovely uniform, all new. And then, suddenly, somebody said: "Nurse, can I have a bedpan please?" and that broke the ice, and I was away then.

Sometimes there were foreign soldiers, but mostly they were British. What some lads they were, and very, very fond and proud of them we were, because of what they had been through and suffered, especially

the tank boys, because they were so dreadfully burned when their tanks caught fire. I don't think there can be anything worse than burns. I can see it now. Terrible.

But what did they do? They bandaged them from head to foot, keeping the heat in, whilst today they are exposed to sterile air, not bandaged. And those poor lads must have been in a terrible state. They were burning inside and nobody seemed to know. It makes you cringe to think we were doing more harm than good, really.

Some survived, some didn't. Nobody would ever know what we had to deal with, and wouldn't realise what those lads went through.

We were thrown in at the deep end, but somehow we coped. You've got to be inclined that way to go into it in the first place, and nursing was at its rawest and in its infancy, you might say. The boys coming from the battlefield like that was all new to nursing. They hadn't dealt with it before, so I'm afraid a lot of suffering went on. But they were some brave boys; I'll tell you that.

We had to have time off, because we were so stressed at work – not only physically but mentally. We were trained not to react mentally, really. I saw some terrible, terrible sights, of course. You had to look and see and swallow and get on with it, but it could be very hard at times, but we had some laughs.

If you were making the bed next to a chappie you had your bottom pinched, many a time, even if they were badly injured. I can look back and really have a laugh. We didn't tell them off. You just had to be careful, the next time, that you didn't bend over next to him. It was a good sign that they were getting better.

There were about ten beds either side in each ward, and then there were little side wards that were for extra-specially poorly people.

The wards were in five wooden huts. They were supposed to be temporary, but they never were. Each ward was for different injuries, such as burns, breakages and mentally sick boys that were traumatised by the events, which needed a lot of attention. They were a grand lot of boys; I know that.

The other nurses came from all over. They were in what they called the nurses' home. There was one in Stratton – Beechcroft House, which was a grand old house, with a lot of bedrooms. Of course, we had to sleep in the hospital sometimes, and be on call. We'd have a special

nurse's room where we'd sleep, and if there was an emergency you'd have to put your uniform on quickly and get on with it.

The ones that were brought in and were very, very poorly were there for months and years. We got to know them very well. We used to have dances when all the servicemen were there. We used to go to the Bradford Hall and the Playhouse in the Mechanics'. There were no male nurses. Us poor girls went through awful times!

The shifts were eight till two, or two till eight, or eight in the morning until eight in the evening, with two hours off in the night. And during that two hours you had a rest room where you could go to sleep, but you can't leave a job like that, go to sleep for two hours and then wake up and do more work. It was drudgery, really. It wasn't good for you at all, but somehow we survived. Adjusting to shifts was hard, especially nights, when you tried to sleep in the day. It really wasn't practical, mentally or physically.

You were lucky if there were four nurses on the ward, and of course every bed had to be changed every morning, and some of them had to be changed two or three times a day.

We used to have some lovely little letters thanking us. Not that we wanted thanks. In one of the letters there was a postal order for one and six, which was a lot of money. We weren't supposed to, but we couldn't help it if we had a letter. To us it was what we wanted to do, and we felt we were doing what we could for those poor lads. My goodness, what they went through.

They used to come in on the train from Shrivenham, then they converted Bristol buses into temporary ambulances. They put the stretchers on the backs of the seats, and of course a nurse had to go with them every time, backwards and forwards to the station. We never knew where they came from.

I carried on nursing for some time after the war.

In the main part of the hospital, one end was for the ladies and the other was for the men; two wards upstairs and two downstairs. They were for civilians during the war. The wards were either side and the nursery was in the centre, and it had two cots in. We never had any more than two babies in one room. We knew them by 'Baby' and their surname, such as 'Baby Hammond'. I felt so desperate for the mum and dad when they used to come and visit that child. It used to really

upset me, but of course we couldn't show our feelings. I think Baby Hammond did die in the end, which is one of the worst things that can happen in nursing, as any nurse will tell you. It gets to you, but then that's all in a day's work when you're nursing. You have to take what comes. You can cry some tears. You're not supposed to, but you do, on the quiet.

The matron was like a matron! You got told off if you did anything wrong. I was sent to matron once. Our first job in the morning was to change the beds, and what we had to do was put a clean sheet in the middle of the ward, on the floor, and put dirty sheets in that. But, of course, wet-through dirty sheets, you can imagine, were all soaked through, and it was most unhygienic because you were left with a pool on the floor, not smelling very nice. One day I really got my hackles up and I knew Matron was due to come round, and I left those sheets on the floor. So of course Matron came around.

"And who's responsible for this?"

"I am, Matron."

I was ready to own up because I knew I'd done it.

"Report to my office in the morning."

So I went to her office in the morning, and I was thoroughly told off, but, within three days we had cotton bags on a frame, with wheels on the bottom. Every ward had these frames. One up for Nurse Stroud!

We had some tears, but we had some laughs too.

*The letter that Betty referred to was addressed simply to Nurse Austin (her maiden name) at Stratton St Margaret's Hospital, Swindon, Wilts, and came from a Mrs Ingham, who lived in Bradford, Yorkshire. It read:

Dear Nurse,

Thank you very much for your letter, which I received this morning. I see my son is still in your hospital, and I am very grateful for your help in writing to me. I hope he gets brought near, so that we can see him. I hope you can do something about this nurse, as there are such a lot of relatives, and they all like Freddie, and wants to see him. I am enclosing a few stamps for you for being so kind. Hoping to hear from you soon.

Dorothy Nicholls

Dorothy became a nurse in 1947, on the eve of the creation of the National Health Service, and spent 30 years working in St Margaret's Hospital, which she recalled with some affection.

I started training as a nurse in 1947, and at that time we used to do part of our training at the Victoria Hospital, where I was based, and part at Stratton, then I used to go to what we called the Isolation Hospital, and the Great Western Hospital, which was a pre-fabricated hut in Faringdon Road.

It meant that you did three months at Stratton – and at that time we had to go and have our meals in the same building where Elm Court was, but the cook was brilliant, and we used to get such good meals there that everybody always wanted to be at Stratton Hospital. It was soon after the war and everything was still rationed. It was always like living in the country when you went to Stratton Hospital. It was nice. All of us girls used to like it there. It was really good at Stratton, always.

We lived at Beechcroft – the house belonging to Arkell's. It was an absolutely beautiful house, with sunken marble baths that you bathed in, and huge bedrooms that you had to yourself, and a big central staircase that came down, and you really felt like the lady of the manor.

We had a dear old Sister. She was always there, looking after the place, and she was ancient. Her name was Sister Diplock; of course, we used to call her 'Dippy', but she was so good to us, and she used to make our breakfast and bring it up to us in bed on our days off. She was a darling, she was. So that's where we lived for part of our time, when we were doing our training.

In 1951 I got married and went to work at Stratton full-time. Altogether, Stratton was always – rightly or wrongly – loved by the nurses because the matron was a dear soul; Miss Moan her name was. She was Irish. A lot of Irish nurses came over, particularly after the war, because there was no work in Ireland for them. She was a lovely person. So I just went to see her and said: "Any chance of a staff nurse job?"

"Yes," she said. "Of course there is, for you."

And I started work there, and then I worked there for the following 30 years. I used to run to work every day, as a rule.

In about 1954, I think that's where my husband got some stone from to build a little wall, in a kind of memory of the place and it's up Tilley's Lane [in Stratton], and it's still there. You couldn't let it go, could you?

He went to see Mr Price, the hospital secretary, and he said: "Any chance of me having a bit of that stone?" and he said: "Yes, help yourself." You know how it was in those days. The place was being pulled down and nobody knew what to do with the stone, and it was beautiful stone. The wall is no longer than six feet long. We used to live there, in that little cottage.

Elm Court was like a rabbit warren. I remember the old men coming there for a night's sleep or whatever they did for them, but we were kind of preserved from Elm Court really, us nurses that were doing our training. We weren't allowed to integrate with many people over there because it wasn't considered the right thing, but I can remember seeing the old chappies out in the morning, digging up cauliflowers and things like that, ready to cook for dinner, to give to the staff to cook for dinner, and then they would be allowed away.

They probably didn't pay for their meal or their bed, and so they used to do a bit of gardening before they went. I can remember the cauliflowers. Nobody ever pinched those cauliflowers. They were there all the time, out the front, out the back, and nobody ever pinched them. It's amazing that, isn't it? These days you couldn't leave a bunch of flowers out anywhere; they'd be gone.

It was quite a big place, with nooks and crannies. There used to be families up there – children and adults, women mostly. I suppose it must have been the beginning of somewhere to go if you left your husband; a refuge? I'm not sure what it was, but there was always women and children up there, in a special part, and they always looked happy. And there was a laundry in there.

We didn't actually go in. We went in, through it – the quickest way to get to the dining room – but eventually they had another dining room built for us, a very nice dining room. That was later on, and we never went there after that.

You never sort of talked or stood about in there. You were allowed to go straight through and straight back out again, so we didn't see an awful lot.

The huts were put there for the soldiers during the war. They used to call that the West Wing, when they got a bit more posh. First of all it was 'the huts'. They used to have these huge cylinders in the middle of the hut to keep it warm – of red hot coke. How they ever survived, I'll never know. They were wooden buildings, but they always had these huge cylinders in the middle, with fires in.

I worked there on nights for a long time. When my son was small, that was the easiest thing to do, so for about eight years I did nights.

It was creepy at night. We used to get an awful lot of people looking through windows and stupid things like that, but we had it so much that we got used to it. They used to phone up and say: "There's somebody looking through our window," and the night sister would ring the police, and the police would come up and have a look around, and either find somebody a bit stupid or not, as the case may be, and get rid of them, but we never used to worry about it a great deal.

It wasn't very nice, wandering about there in the middle of the night, on a cold winter's night with the wind blowing and your cape flapping, taking somebody down to the mortuary. You weren't allowed to go on your own. That would have been too creepy. I wouldn't have done that. There were two people. You went with somebody.

I must say that I've never seen anything like ghosts. We never used to dwell on things like that. We were young and we thought that the whole of it was mostly a joke. We used to laugh. We had to, because that was the way we coped with it. If you were cowering and frightened to death, you wouldn't be able to do your job properly.

They always had an awful lot of geriatrics. I know people get the impression that it was the place people went to die, but that wasn't true.

I can remember going there, before I finished my training. I think I was being shown round for some reason, and they had a Russian doctor there, and he was lovely. Dr Rauschberger. We met him and at that time all these patients were kept in bed all the time. They didn't get up or get out of the bed because they were really ill, and they weren't moved around like we used to. And eventually that was all changed, and people used to get up every day, or they were dressed and sat out in a chair every day, similar to how they are there. But I remember at one time they never got out of the bed, which was bad for them. But it was the way they treated them in those days.

Of course, the people that went in there were elderly, and it was usually something that was seriously wrong with them that couldn't be cured. Some were in there for maybe a couple of years, but they just couldn't be coped with at home, and it was like a glorified nursing home at one time. The nurses were so good and so sweet – the ones that I knew, anyway – and really that was an awful mistake to think you went in there to die. Maybe you did, but you couldn't have gone to a better place because they were so kind, the sisters and everything.

You used to have to start work at an ungodly hour in the morning because you had all these different jobs to do. Everybody had to be washed and given their breakfast, and their beds made, and temperatures taken every morning, and you had to start off, sometimes, at half past four or five o'clock in the morning.

I was there before the National Health Service began. When I was first nursing there was an almoner's office – not at Stratton, but at Victoria – and everybody went to see the almoner before they had any treatment.

She would say: "Morning, Mr Whatever," and take their address and write it all in a book, and if they'd come for an X-ray she would say: "And how much can you afford to pay for your X-ray?"

And they'd say: "Oh, half a crown."

"Right," she'd say. "Half a crown," and she'd write it and give them a receipt, and off they'd go to get their X-ray. Can you imagine that?

She would know what you were earning, and if you said, "I can't afford anything," she would say, "Well now, I'm sure you can afford to pay two shillings for your X-ray." She was a really nice person as well. So they would say, "Well, all right then. I'll pay next week." And that was all written down, and eventually they had their X-ray. I've never known anyone not have their treatment, but I guess there must have been some.

When I think of things that used to happen then, it's hardly credible. The doctors would come on duty and get into the sister's office and sit down and it would be: "Coffee for Mr Schofield, Coffee for Mr Somebody," so the domestic on the ward would run around and make all this coffee, and biscuits and so on, and then when they'd had their coffee they would get out their cigarette holders and put a cigarette in the end, and light up the cigarette.

“Right, Sister. Ready to do the round now.” And they would go into the ward with their cigarettes. But they were special. They were really clever people, but they all smoked heavily.

We used to have high collars and little puffy sleeve things. You weren’t allowed to go around looking untidy. I still think nurses should use caps now. It sort of finishes you off. You look as if you don’t belong to anybody if you haven’t got a cap on.

The matron system was a good system. You didn’t put a foot wrong. You were frightened of the matron really. I nearly got sacked once, for fooling about.

We used to have domestics that were attached to the wards. They were always part of the family, as it were. You didn’t change over domestics or have anybody different; it was the same person there every day. We used to have deep cleans, and they used to go over the parquet floor, and they used to take all those up, and scrub them with Brillo soap pads, and then wash them off and leave them to dry, and then they’d all go back together again. And that was done once every two or three months.

We never had any problem with infections, but whether that’s anybody’s fault or not, I don’t know. With the advancement of antibiotics, all these bugs develop an immunity, and I think it’s to do with that really.

At Stratton Hospital we used to operate. We had a lovely theatre. We had a little outpatients’, but it got busy if there were more than six people in there! I used to have to clean that every morning because the nurses, in those days, did all the cleaning, apart from the floors. We were taught how to clean, and Sister used to put cherry stones behind the big bottles that were along the top shelf, and a prune stone and plum stone, just to make sure we moved it all every day. These sisters were straight out of the army because it was just after the war, and, my goodness, it was like being in the army for us because the sisters were so on-the-ball and strict; very strict. But you felt as though you had had a good training afterwards.

We had a home sister, whom we used to go to if we had anything to complain about. I can remember one of the other girls said: “Oh, Sister, I think my bed is damp.”

“Oh,” she said. “Is it? Your bed’s not damp until it’s floating in

water.” And you felt as though you were on the Anzio beach head or somewhere! Because that’s where she was, apparently.

There was a strict pecking order among the nurses. If you came a day after this one, you were junior to her. It was competitive, but we had a good training.

Things changed for the better. They had central heating put in in the West Wing, which was then renamed the Montgomery Ward and so on, after four people in the war, but it wasn’t changed all that much.

Would I do it again? Yes. I’d do it all again.

Jo Fisher

Jo contacted us to say she had a personal story to tell from her family history. Her mother was admitted to the workhouse in 1927, when she was seventeen, to give birth to an illegitimate baby: Jo’s brother, Ron. Her parents eventually married, six years later. Ironically, her mother returned to the workhouse site between 1950 and 1953, when it was a hospital, for regular treatment. Jo kindly told us the whole story, which demonstrates changing attitudes to various aspects of life, including illegitimacy, marriage, social and medical care, and what we tell our children.

I don’t know who sent my mother to the workhouse to have my brother, but I think it was probably my father’s parents. I don’t know whether it was just a recognised thing that that was done. I don’t remember how I found out that my mother had been in the workhouse, but it wasn’t from her.

I didn’t know my brother was my brother. He was married and he lived with my grandmother (my father’s mother), and I didn’t think he was my brother, because he didn’t live with me. I said to my mum, “You treat that boy special.” And she said, “Oh, well, he’s your brother, but he lives with Gran.” That was all. They never let her bring him up. My father said his mum would be better looking after his son than his wife.

When I found out that my brother had been born in the workhouse, it wasn’t all at once. It was all in bits. I must admit I did feel a bit devastated when I found out a lot of things. It took some understanding about my brother. I was devastated because brothers and sisters should

live together, and there always seemed to be an atmosphere. I wasn't to say some things. It really was a strain.

My brother knew the whole story. It's surprising how hush-hush things were kept, years ago. I don't think he really wanted to talk about it.

My parents were married six years after he was born, but I don't know why they waited for six years and then got married. Perhaps it was something to do with money. My dad did hit her around, as well. I could hear that going on downstairs. That might have been something connected with her illness, but I don't know.

My mother and father separated when I was ten. My father went to live with his mother and father again, and he married again when I was seventeen. My mum, being so ill, needed someone to look after her. She was ill; she was in bed, and I looked after her. There was only me. My brother was married by then. He used to come and visit us, but I had to look after her.

When my mother was seriously ill, she ended up being a patient at Stratton Hospital, where the workhouse used to be, but at that time I didn't know that she'd been there before.

Her kidneys didn't work very well and she used to fill up with water, and she had to go every six weeks, for the water to be drained away. I used to visit her in the evening, and have Wednesday afternoon off school to go and visit her, and then Saturday and Sunday. And that was every six weeks, and she would be in for ten or twelve days, while it was all drained away. That went on for years.

Visiting time was between two and three in the afternoon, and then seven until half-past. There were the wards, and then there was a part, out the back, with an entrance at the back. The matron's desk was through the doors, where the beds were opposite one another. If you were there for a long stay, you came out of the ward, and you went into this back area, this back entrance, with iron steps going up. There were two beds; that was all. It was beautiful. There was more glass. It wasn't like a hospital, actually. I could go in the back way, and I could go early and leave late.

I was in Clifton Street School then. I had to get a bus into town and then a Bristol Bus. I did that every day she was in there. I wouldn't miss a day. I didn't really think of schooling much.

I used to do the housework and everything, but there was a home help who came once a week, but the thing is: my mum didn't like it, so I had to do the cleaning up, after she'd been. So I had to work that in with the school, and cook her meals. I never saw the social worker or the almoner at the hospital. I didn't know there was one. Nobody told me.

Then there was the Eleven Plus. If I pass that exam, that means I've got to go to Commonweal School. With my mum being in bed, I thought, "There will be no-one to look after her." So I deliberately failed. I knew the answers, and I thought, how on earth... I did qualify for an interview, so I went for the interview, and I thought: "How on earth am I going to fail this interview?" Every time they asked me a question I said: "I don't know." And of course they reported it to the school, and I had an interview at the school. That was a bit awkward, but they knew the situation with my mum, that I looked after her, and they had someone go round to see her and question her, but of course she didn't know what I decided. So it was left that I should obviously not go to grammar school, but go to the secondary modern school. But I was still home, you see.

My mother had a family, so when my parents split up, she moved. It was next-door. We had the two houses in Westcott Place – forty-two and forty-three – because my grandmother (my mum's mother) lived in forty-two, and my father still had number forty-three. But of course my father was a bit annoyed about things, and he put a door between the two houses, so there was no contact with my grandmother. My mother found out that she had as much right to be in her house as anyone, so she said to me, one day: "I need to get into the next house."

There was a door, upstairs, leading from the bedrooms, and he'd put a lock on that, and also he put another door between the two houses downstairs. My mum said to me one day: "I want you to break in. I've got every right to be in my home. He's got no right to put doors up to stop me from getting in."

Obviously, she didn't have a key, but in doorways there used to be a little bit of space. You'd have your ordinary door, but there was a sort of little archway. So she said, "If you can only open that door from the other side, and I can get in there, he can't stop me from going in there, nor you from being there."

I thought: "Right. I want to be home," so I spent the whole day, on a chair, leaning over this door, through this little gap, and I had one piece of stick, with a hook on the end, lifting up the latch, and another banging it along, so I could get in. That was a to-do, that really was. I was a bit large at the time, and it was a bit of a problem getting through that gap, but I broke into my home. I wanted to get home. It was my home; it was my mum's home as well.

So then I looked after my mum. It must have been about two years. The thing is: Mum died when I was thirteen, anyway. I still stopped there, when she died, on my own, with my gran next door. I was thirteen. I had school dinners. I got them free.

I was 15 when I left school, and I thought, "Oh gosh." As I say, I failed to go up to the big school, so when I finished at the secondary modern, I thought: "Well, what am I going to do?" I wasn't prepared to go straight to work. The factory was the place to go, in the offices. I thought, "I don't want that, really. I think I can do more than that," so I went to the college in Victoria Road. So I used to do that, and cycle there every day, and then took exams there and passed. I got a job all right.

One place I worked was the RAF hospital at Wroughton. It was marvellous, absolutely fantastic. If people had only known they could have gone there, but people didn't know. They had the best of everything, and it was so clean and everything. It was really, really marvellous. I worked in 'gynae' and obstetrics, and the squadron leader I worked for was marvellous. He was ever so good to me.

The huts at Stratton were like a barracks compared with the RAF hospital. To me, the hospital was grand compared with the huts, but the food was very basic.

My children don't know all this. I haven't said, because it was so complicated and I thought I'm not complicating it for them any more. They don't know anything, but I will tell them before they read this.

They knew there was a family rift, and they couldn't understand why their uncle wouldn't associate with their grandfather, but I've never gone through it all to explain it. I thought they were too young to know or understand, and I felt awkward for them. It must have been strange for them.

Jenny Cox/Maureen Packer/Val Morley

These three ladies all worked together at St Margaret's Hospital in its latter years, and were there when it closed. They worked as a nursing auxiliary, a physiotherapy assistant and latterly a ward clerk, respectively.

Jenny: It was darned hard work; really hard work, but it was a team effort. It was lovely, it really was. Everybody wanted to be there, working with the elderly, because that was the elderly place. It wasn't like a general hospital, where you would get quite a few older people, obviously, but you would still get your youngsters; it was all old people.

I'll never forget the day I started. I went on to Kingsley Ward, one of the huts; ladies, it was. The first patient I saw as I walked in, on my left, she was like a baby, bless her. It was a bit sad really.

We were lucky, especially on Bronte Ward. We had as near to perfect a team on there. We worked hard, and in the end I think things got a lot better.

Christie Ward was the men's ward and they had a reminiscence room – a little room that was all made up in the style of their era. And they had a bar. On the main block the wards were ever so light and airy, whereas the huts, because they were one storey and low, were a bit dark.

On Christmas Day the WRVS used to come in and sing, and act as Father Christmas and all that, and give out presents. They raised a lot of money at Stratton Hospital. I used to take my dogs up there. They loved animals or babies. They would be motionless, not take any notice, but if they saw a little child or an animal, then they'd say: "I had a dog."

Years ago, when people went into Stratton they didn't come out, but we had a lot more people who did go home. I think that before we started working there, it hadn't always been as good as it was, but it gradually got better. People used to tell me that, years ago, if it was toilet time, they were all put on a commode in the middle of the ward. It's very undignified, terrible.

We used to spend a lot of time feeding people. We never would have just walked away. You couldn't just go off if it was time to go home. You had to finish feeding somebody. Our job was like the circus act

where you've got all the plates spinning around, you'd get to the last one and you'd think you were finished, but somebody else wanted something and you'd have to go off again. You used to come home shattered. You daren't sit down because you'd go to sleep.

We had students on the ward all the time. They'd come on a six-week cycle. They did everything. If they still had that hospital, or even a little building, just for older people, they could say to student nurses: "Go on there, see what it's all about, looking after older people, and if you don't want to do what you can see going on there, then don't go into nursing." The fundamental things are more important: making people feel fresh in the morning, helping them have a wash, giving them good nutrition, making them all relaxed and happy.

They shut it down right on Christmas; just before Christmas. Of all the times to move people and shut it down. They moved one ward and then gradually moved the others. I'll never forget the day we were moving. We were with some of the patients who had not been out of the hospital for donkeys' years, going out in the cold.

If I was going to have my life again, I'd still have the old people; hands-on nursing. Just talking about it makes you feel... oh, I wish we could go back.

Maureen: I was there for about nineteen years. It was a lovely place. I was really crying when it was closing. I was so emotional about it, because it was lovely. People used to say it was the workhouse. Well it was, years ago, but it wasn't when we were there.

Everybody got on with one another. We've all got happy memories of it over there, because people used to say to me: "How can you work over there?" And I'd say: "I love it. It's a beautiful place." They did care about them. They were the happiest days of my life, work-wise. People cared there. They really did. Nobody seemed to care so much as they did over Stratton.

It was more like an old people's home. Some of them were there for years – twenty years, some of them. A lot of them were just old. Some of them did have something wrong with them, but for a lot of them it was just their age.

My husband used to say to me: "What have you got there?" and I'd say, "Oh, poor old soul, I've been and brought her washing home," because, when it used to go in the laundry, a lot of it never came back, or

if it did, it was all different colours and whatnot. Obviously, they had a bit of a job doing it. He said, "Honestly, you go to work and you come home and bring everybody's washing." You couldn't help it. I was always doing that.

Years ago it was the old workhouse, where people were put, and they still had that in their minds. People did. It never lost that. It always had that workhouse name. People never forgot that.

It was lovely and clean. The girls did work very hard. It wasn't an easy job over there, but I loved it. We used to have some laughs over there; not laughing about the patients, but it was just funny what they said. You couldn't have stuck the job otherwise.

We used to have a chat. They used to tell me all their life stories, and it was nice. I didn't push it, but if they wanted to tell me, I was interested. They used to love to talk about the old days. When you went home late at night, you felt that you had chatted to somebody and made them a bit happier.

I think we had the best times.

Val: I lived in Highworth Road, right opposite the hospital. I started as an auxiliary in the evenings; five until eight and then eight until two at weekends. I did a couple of years as an auxiliary, and then a job came up as a ward clerk.

The majority of people we know loved it there. Every ward had a day room. We tried to get them in there every day and have their dinners round the table, like home. The sister in our ward would give her all. She would run herself into the ground.

My kids used to say, "Oh mum. How can you work up there?" and I'd say you either like it or you don't, really.

We'd do Christmas bazaars, summer bazaars and there were gardens where the patients could sit out, and raised flower beds. There were concerts, a couple of times a month, and church services in the day hospital. We used to decorate the wards at Christmas. Even the beds.

Sheila Harrod used to come over with the Kentwood Choir, and then you find that patients who hadn't responded to anything at all... They'd sit there and we would nudge each other and say: "Look." They would be tapping their hands, and then some of them were in tears. And you'd talk to them and they would say: "That's what they played at my wedding" or something.

Years ago, Allied Dunbar [an insurance company, based in Swindon] were doing a fundraising thing. For every pound we raised, they would double it up, so we put on lots of fundraising events for the hospital, and I did a garden party in my house. We wheeled a load of patients over to my house and sat them all out in the garden; we had it all spread out. It was a lovely day; we had little games to play and all that. All of a sudden the heavens emptied and it absolutely poured down, so we were rushing them indoors, in the greenhouse. My husband put one old girl in the greenhouse with the tomatoes and left her there. Later on, it cleared up again and she came out and said: "I'm allergic to tomatoes!"

They had a bar that Arkell's used to stock up. Thursday nights were pub nights. They used to bring patients from other wards, have a sing-song. Arkell's were very kind.

The laundry used to go to Swindon, so if anybody lost a watch or their teeth or whatever, you could phone the laundry up and say. There was also a day hospital, where people used to come in and have treatment and go home again; just come in in the morning and go home in the afternoon. They used to like that. That was probably people who were on their own who weren't ill as such, but they would have dressings.

The workhouse building just came down overnight. It was a separate building. People get muddled up. Elm Court was the workhouse. It was gorgeous, a beautiful building, and not derelict at all. It was lovely; very solid. Where the fire station is now, that was gardens that the old boys used to work on and grow the vegetables. It's another building in Swindon that could have been saved.

A lot of people thought Sandalwood Court was going to be the new hospital, but it's a psychiatric unit. The consultants fought against the closure because they said: "We've developed a hospital here that's especially for old people. The nurses have been trained to look after the elderly, and all the staff, but if they go to Princess Margaret's Hospital, they'll just be put in any old ward. They won't be treated as elderly."

What you forget is: they've had a good life, a lot of them; very clever people. We've had headmasters, we've had ex-doctors, all sorts. It's just having the time to talk to patients.

Ivy Shepherd

Ivy told us the story of her husband Fred's aunt, Martha Shepherd, known as Lil, who was a resident of Elm Court, the successor to the workhouse. Then, when Whitbourne House opened in 1966, she was to become the first resident of this new, modern 'old people's home'. Ivy and Fred visited her in both places – but she had been admitted to Elm Court years before...

There must have been a rift in the family because for years we never knew Aunt Lil existed.

She was engaged to a soldier in the First World War who was killed, so she lived with her parents in Clifton Street. Grandma died first, and then Granddad died, so that meant that the house went to Fred's dad, who was a passenger guard on the M&SWJ Railway, up at Old Town.

They moved in with Aunt Lil, and it meant two women in the kitchen. That didn't work. I suppose it's difficult with two women in the kitchen because it does cause friction, especially with a baby around. Mother-in-law took over the running of the house, and Aunt Lil was confined to her room, and eventually she was moved out to lodgings.

In her letters we've found she was removed, several times, for non-payment of rent, because she never had any income. We've got a couple of notes that she'd written to Liza, who was a cousin at Tidworth, begging for her to go down there to stay, but Liza said she couldn't have her because she already had a houseful of her own people.

She went in the workhouse in the end – because she became so destitute. It wasn't called the workhouse, but it was still known locally as the workhouse. It was a very hard thing to break down.

It must have been a relief after all those years of being moved around and becoming more and more destitute and desperate. I suppose she never had any savings left or anything, because she never inherited anything from her parents, so she became more desperate, and she would quite often ask for money. It's sad.

We didn't know anything about her until 1961, when Fred got a call at work to say, "Come home. Your dad's dying". And he walked in the front door, and the first words his mum said were: "You'd better go and tell *her*." Fred said: "Who's 'her'?"

"Your dad's sister."

And that's the first time he knew he had an aunt. It was a shock because we never knew.

When we knew she was there, we then went to visit her. We went to visit her straightaway. It's funny; she more or less recognised who it was – because he looked like his dad.

Some ladies worked in the hospital laundry, and they also did all the mending – darning the sheets and mending the nurses' uniforms and aprons. Some did cooking; some did sewing. I think they had a bit of pocket money, but to earn their keep and keep up maintenance they had to work. And the men used to do the allotments and grow vegetables for hospital meals.

As you went down the drive, the huts were one side and the laundry was on the other. You'd go round the corner and the hospital was there, facing you. The huts were built for the soldiers. It became specialist, towards the end of the 1960s, for elderly care – and, my God, they could do with it now.

My mother was a nurse there. That's how I know. I used to go out there on a Saturday and volunteer because I was a St John's cadet, and I used to go in the huts to help the nurses on a Saturday.

Aunt Lil didn't want to go into Whitbourne House. She was quite happy, towards the end, in Stratton. She was quite settled. But the dormitory was horrible – a long room with all these iron bedsteads in it, and they had that communal dining room, but they had a room where you could go and sit and talk to her. She did take me upstairs to have a look.

There were about twenty-four in the dormitory. It was just two rows of beds, and they had a little wardrobe thing. There were old iron bedsteads, with a low back. There were no curtains around the beds; no privacy at all.

They were all different ages. They always seemed to be quite happy, and Aunt Lil was quite content towards the end. She was always in this long black/navy blue dress. She never got modernised very much. The others all wore different things. They wore their own clothes. They could go out towards the end, but Aunt Lil would never go.

She would have been happy to stay at Stratton, but when she knew there was no alternative and she'd have to go, and when she saw that she was going to have a room of her own, it was more attractive.

She was the first resident to be transferred to Whitbourne House, and she was allowed to choose her room. That was the biggest excitement of her life, I think. She had an upstairs room, right on the corner. She had quite a little view, so she could look out and see what's going on outside.

She would never ever go out from there because she was scared that, if she did, somebody would take her room. We'd go there and say, "Let's take you for a drive round Swindon and have a look and see how it's changed," but she wouldn't go.

Aunt Lil saved every single card she was given. The addresses on them are 'The Institution, Stratton'. We also inherited twenty-four purses and thirty handbags, and we have some mugs that, when she went to Whitbourne House, she could take with her. They were from the workhouse. This was her treasured possessions – her mug from the workhouse. They all had their own mug. We saw plenty of mugs when we used to go out there. They all had the same. And her little pride was her own little teapot. That was her pride and joy: her teapot.

They gave us her money, but we never had a single silver coin. We only had pennies, farthings, halfpennies and threepenny bits. That was all that was there.

Michael Jefferies

Michael told us the story of his paternal grandmother, Lizzie Adams, who had two illegitimate children. The first was born when she was sixteen, at home, and sadly died, soon after. The second child, born when his grandmother was thirty-one, was born in the workhouse – most likely after being thrown out by her mother. She was there in 1911, which is most likely to be the same year that Alfred Williams visited the workhouse, and wrote about it in his book, published in 1912. We have changed the names at the interviewee's request.

You look back at it and think: how, in God's name, did it happen? But it did. It was part of life.

This is the family story, which is unconfirmable now, but so many different family members over the years have told me the same story.

My grandmother got herself pregnant at sixteen, and I don't know

whether it was her or him [to blame]... It was 1896 and she was living at home at the time. This guy was supposed to be her boyfriend, and all I've been told is his name was John. She had the baby and that's where things get a bit fuzzy, and that's where it goes in different directions.

The baby died, but lived a while. I can find no birth registration on any of the family history sites. One of the family stories was that her mother let her keep the child, but wouldn't let her feed it, but I find that impossible to believe. This woman had eight children of her own; she's not going to let a child die. So I don't know any more details than that.

I don't know whether it was born prematurely and then died. All I know is that she had a child when she was sixteen. Nobody seems to know whether it was a boy or a girl. One member of the family said she had a boy, but I don't know.

The family lived at the bottom of Kingshill, in Kingshill Terrace. Both her parents came from Corsham and he came to work in the railways.

You listen to your mum and your gran telling stories, but it's just stories. It doesn't mean anything, but my sister used to hear things, and because she heard them so many times, they stuck.

My gran lost the baby. She then went to work as a lady's maid to an actress called Jeannie Winston, although I don't know whether that was her real name or her acting name. She used to talk about Jeannie Winston. From what I can gather, she was British, but married an American. This actress went to America to visit family and took her with her. We found them landing at New York, going onward to Washington.

It was 1903, I think, when she went to America. She would have been twenty-three then, so from the age of sixteen to twenty-three she was obviously in service somewhere. I don't know where. I found her in the 1901 census at home, and it just said 'lady's maid'. I don't know whether she was lady's maid to the actress then or to somebody else. She'd obviously worked her way up from whatever she was; whether it was a scullery maid or just a basic domestic servant.

I don't know whether it happened in New York or Washington, but she caught typhoid and was shipped home. So she came back home to live with her parents. I don't know how long she was with her parents, but she then got a job in Swindon, or the Swindon area, and this, again,

is where it diverges. One story is that she was seduced by the master of the house or his son. That started me thinking: was she living at the house; did they throw her out because she was pregnant? Did she go to her mother and her mother said: "No, I'm not taking you back. You're pregnant again."

The other one is she was raped by a soldier. But judging by things I've found out about her, I don't think she was raped! Let's put it that way. I'm not maligning my own grandmother, but there had been a lot of stories. She did like men!

One of my cousins was telling me that her mum told her a story that she had to go up to the Town Hall to meet this man who paid her money – almost like maintenance – to look after his child, and he was a soldier. This must have been around 1909 or 1910, something like that, because I then found her in the 1911 census, in the Swindon workhouse. Her mother had thrown her out. She had a second illegitimate child and that was it. She was thirty-one by then.

I don't know whether her mother classed the first one as an accident. The story in the family is that she was thrown out, but she never talked about it. All she ever said was that she didn't want to go back to the workhouse.

But I couldn't find anything about her son until I did some cross-references. The census was done in April 1911, and he was born in June, so she was seven months pregnant while she was in the workhouse. The baby must have been born in the workhouse.

Little things kept coming back to me then. She lived with us in her later years. If she was ever ill, and Mum would say, "Look, I'm calling the doctor," she'd say, "Oh, don't let them take me to the workhouse," even though it was Stratton Hospital then. It was still the workhouse to her. And I'm talking about when she was in her seventies then, or eighties, so that's forty or fifty years on, and she still had that fear of the workhouse, so I don't know what sort of life she had in there.

In the 1901 census she was living with her family up in Hinton Street. Lodging in the house next door was my grandfather, who'd come from Great Rissington in Gloucestershire to work in the Railway Works. He was either a coachbuilder or a coach upholsterer. He married in 1899 and had four girls. One was born in 1899, one in 1900, one in 1902 and 1904.

His wife was taken into the Great Western hospital. They couldn't treat her in there, so she was sent to Guy's Hospital in London, and she died – of gall stones and heart failure. She was only thirty-six or thirty-seven.

So in 1911 my grandfather was living in Hinton Street and he's got four kids, and I suppose that once the dust had settled he needed someone to look after his four children – so he went to the workhouse to find a housekeeper. Of course, he found my grandmother, whom he recognised from having lived next door to her. If you're taking somebody out of the workhouse, they are desperate for anything, aren't they? Just to get out of the workhouse. I don't know the exact date that he found her or took her out, but in the following June (1912) they were married, and in the January after that their first child was born.

He's working in the Railway Works, and I don't know what hours they worked, but they were long hours, and he couldn't leave four young children, and him and my grandmother then went on to have four children; one of whom was my dad. He was their third child, of four. He had four of his own, she came with the baby, so that's five, and four others. Once again, it's only family stories, but she didn't treat these girls very well and her son didn't treat them very well, so, once they reached an age they left, so there weren't nine of them, all in the same house.

I've been in contact with somebody who is the great-grandson of one of the four girls, and he said she left very young. I think they actually left home, rather than going off into service, and I understand it was mainly due to my grandmother not treating them as well as she should have done.

Her son ended up in the army as a staff sergeant-major. I only met him twice, and I didn't like him, either time I met him. I suppose, being a sergeant-major, he was loud and he was bullish, and I wasn't used to people like that. He did actually come and see his mother before she died, which would have been mid-1970s.

Footnote: After further research, we believe Jeannie Winston, the actress referred to in the story, was a light operatic actress who was born Jeannette Webster in Liverpool, was brought up in Aberdeen and made her professional debut in Australia. She was well known during this period for her performances in the United States.

Mary Owen

Mary grew up in Stratton during the 1940s and 1950s, and worked at St Margaret's Hospital during the late 1960s. She went on to forge a successful career in marketing and now lives in South Wales.

Prior to becoming a hospital, my sister reminded me that it was what was commonly referred to as 'the workhouse', and she remembers seeing the old men walking up and down the street looking for cigarette ends. She says they seemed to be almost identically dressed in suits and flat caps.

My mother was a matron's maid during the 1950s. My memories of this are very sketchy. Matron herself was a very nice, amiable lady, and according to my mother was very nice to work for. Having, on occasions, needed to see her myself, she was always very approachable, despite her seniority. Matron had her own flat in the premises, so was probably always on call. She apparently lived there with her young son.

My mother's duties included providing and cooking Matron's meals, which always had to be served at certain times. It was during this time I believe that my mother learnt her pastry skills, which enabled her to be a full-time pastry chef at Pressed Steel Fisher for many years. She also had to ensure her uniforms were ironed, and collars and hat were starched, ready for wear, whenever needed.

Matron was responsible for ensuring that the hospital ran smoothly, and at least two daily inspections of the wards was essential. She was also responsible for the staff's wellbeing, and oversaw the employment of the staff.

My own experience with the hospital was in the late 1960s, when I joined as a nursing auxiliary. My duties in those days included maintaining the routines, such as: three-hourly turns for patients who were bedridden; bedpans; changing and making of the beds; certain dressings; enemas, and so on; serving the patients' food, and feeding them as necessary; serving the drinks; preparing patients who had died for the mortuary, and taking the bodies to the mortuary.

My first two years were spent on the emergency admission wards, numbers five and six. This was in many ways my happiest times at SSMH. The staff were, in general, very good, and caring. There was

an excellent sister who was Irish and whose name escapes me. The senior male nurse was a Mr Eatwell, who was also very efficient.

I spent some of my time on shifts – either mornings from eight until two, or evenings (two 'til ten). The wards were very busy. I also spent some time on night shift (10pm to 8am), three nights a week.

I would spend a lot of my time with the patients on nights. Some of them who could not sleep would appreciate you just sitting there and holding their hands. Many of them, including a Mr Davies, who was blind, and whom I remember well, had lots of tales to tell. This simple kindness meant so much to them.

I can remember a period when we had an infection on the admission wards and we were 'barrier nursing'. The wards were closed to visitors and we were donned in masks, overalls and rubber boots for some time, until the infection was cleared, it made working very uncomfortable.

I then moved to what were known as the long-stay wards. Staffing was limited for the number of patients. I encountered several disturbing things on the ward to which I was allocated.

Many of the staff had been working on these wards for so long, that they themselves were institutionalised in their thinking and practices. They, I felt, had ceased to regard the patients as human beings; only as numbers. The routines which I fully understand were necessary, seemed far too rigid.

There were set times for the bedpans to be taken round. Patients who asked for the toilet in-between those times were refused bedpans, and then humiliated if they soiled the bed. Bedpans were forbidden at visiting times, whether patients had visitors or not.

No-one seemed to have time or make time for the patients. I found myself not very popular with some of the staff because I would give out bedpans, and I would stop to peel an orange or talk to the patients. Peeling an apple or orange, although a small task, brought so much gratitude from the patients, but was very much frowned upon by the long-term staff.

Many of these patients had been in hospital for a long time; many of them had been forgotten and never had visitors. One of the most upsetting things was when these patients were dying or had passed away, The visitors would arrive, although they could not be bothered when their relative was alive.

Because of the staff shortages on these wards I, on a few occasions, was left in charge of the ward. One day I was left in charge of a ward with twenty patients, with only a seven-months-pregnant auxiliary nurse to help me. A Mrs Christiansen, a lovely lady, asked for the commode – she did not like bedpans – and as I started to lift her, she passed away. It took me fifteen to twenty minutes on the telephone to get a doctor to come and look at her, to confirm her death.

One of the patients, a Mrs Vine, who never had visitors, would put her hat and coat on every Sunday morning, waiting to go to church. It was heartbreaking to see her, but very rewarding, occasionally, when one of the volunteers who helped out occasionally came and took her to church. Her face was a picture of happiness.

The long-stay wards were also used, occasionally, for respite care, for younger and older patients.

I eventually left the hospital with a heavy heart to pursue another chapter in my life. I felt I was becoming too emotionally involved.

Looking back over my life, however, the one occupation which gave me the most satisfaction was my time at Stratton St Margaret geriatric hospital.

Dr John Clements

Now retired, Dr Clements visited St Margaret's Hospital once a week in the late 1970s and early 1980s, to check up on chronic long-term patients, as well as some acute patients.

I was a general practitioner in Shrivenham, and we all did a job outside the practice, and to start with I did geriatrics. It was another source of income, but it also gave me an interest outside.

Basically, at Stratton there was an acute admissions unit, which was looked after by Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH), and the doctors from PMH used to come down and look at the patients, as I remember it, in the units, so it was on-demand. I don't think there was any resident medical staff there. I may be wrong, but I don't think there was. And I looked after two wards, basically.

One was the huts down the side, where there were chronic, long-stay people, and they had been there for years and years and years. They weren't necessarily old people. I think there were one or two who were

young. There was someone with MS who had been there for a long time and he wasn't that old, but he was chronically disabled and in need of constant care and attention.

It was a hospital environment, and my job was I used to go on to that ward, once a week, and if there had been an emergency during the week when I wasn't there, then somebody from PMH would have come down, but the routine medical administration was done by me.

One of the first things I did was cut everyone's drugs. We got rid of every drug, and then we reintroduced them, because what had happened is – typical polypharmacy – someone would come in and they would be given a drug, and then they'd be given another drug, and another drug... and as often as not you'd be treating the side effects of the drugs they had been given in the first place. So it's easier in a hospital situation, where you've got nurses, to say, "Right; we'll cut everything out and then reintroduce those which we think are necessary, that have a proven need." What happened was life got very much better for a lot of them.

They were always the same people; there wasn't a great turnover! I don't know about the expense of it. Hospital beds are expensive. They were basically bed-bound. They would have got out if they could, but quite a lot of them couldn't. They didn't sit in front of the television because I don't think there was a television. I can't even remember if there was a day room, so they were very restricted to what they could do.

It was a typical Nightingale ward, where you had the nurses station in the middle, and the rows of beds. There were some side wards, and the sluices and everything like that. As you got better you moved out, away from the nurse's station, and as you got worse you moved in, so the nurses could keep an eye on the sicker people.

There was not a lot of privacy. They were single sex, obviously, but the modern idea of having single rooms is fine if you're not ill, but if you are, then you're out of the sight of everyone.

If you're very, very ill, I want to be in a Nightingale ward where the chap next door to me says, "Nurse! He's not looking too good," rather than in a private room.

I also looked after one of the more acute awards. If you have a cold today, that's acute; it's come and hit you. If you have a stroke or de-

mentia, that's chronic, long-standing. Again, it was really a supervisory role: go in, look at them, see what needed to be done. That was in the main hospital.

There was a rehabilitation hut, but the one I was involved in was chronic. In the other wards, in the main hospital, at the back – the old workhouse, as it were – they were for rehabilitation, and hopefully they were either going to come out or go into the chronic wards.

The main hospital wasn't bad, but the huts were grim, although they weren't as bad as some I'd worked in earlier. The ones in Gloucester were orthopaedic, and they ran with water. They were old nissan huts. They were horrendous things. The huts were comfortable, and they were looked after, but they had come to the end of their mortal, active life.

When people came into Stratton Hospital, it was still "going to the workhouse"; it very much was. It was very much looked on as the old workhouse. If you got put into these wards – although I think one of them was a physiotherapy ward – you were there until you died. I know the locals certainly referred to it as the workhouse, but I don't know about the inhabitants of the hospital. It always had the stigma, but I don't know whether, when you were a patient, sitting in the bed, you thought, "I'm in the workhouse." You may have done, but did you refer to it to the nursing staff as "I'm in the workhouse?" Not to my knowledge.

This was very much the poor relation to PMH. You got relegated to Stratton.

They had no means of looking after themselves. They were in need of total nursing care. It was mainly physical cases, but there would certainly have been mental illness too. They often go hand in hand. Generally, they are old people's illnesses, and you might have complications of diabetes and other nasty diseases.

But they had good professional nursing care; they were fed; they were looked after well; they had a visiting doctor once a week. I went round every patient, every week, just to check things out, to make sure there wasn't anything. I think it was very good, really.

They weren't there because they were social cases; they were there because they were medical cases, and there was a crossover between social and medical. If you are a severe medical invalid, then you do

pull in the social needs as well, so they are two sides of the same coin, to a large extent.

Today those patients would probably be in a nursing home. They [the authorities] are trying to move them on to somebody else's budget, but then there was no sense of them moving on. But the point is, if you are moved to a nursing home, as long as it is not closed down, you are going to die there.

I did the typical doctor thing at Christmas. I used to take my dog – I think my kids too – and we used to go into my wards and say hello and wander around.

I can remember trying to persuade a gentleman that he should give up smoking, and he could see no reason at all why he should give up smoking. He couldn't breathe, he'd lost both his legs through amputation because of the smoking, and he was demented, but he was still smoking. He couldn't see the association of his increasing morbidity. It was a sad sight.

June Lewis/Colin Howell

June and Colin were volunteers with a group from a local church that helped patients of St Margaret's Hospital (but not Elm Court) attend special church services in the 1970s. Although the site had its own chapel, built in the 1920s, by the 1970s it had closed, so services were held in a room of the original workhouse building.

June: It must have been the early 1970s when I first started helping out with the services. I went every Sunday morning.

Arthur Smith and Elsie Smith ran it. There were two other people from the church, who were in the men's group. I don't remember a clergyman ever coming. The people that were there were the night congregation.

There were about eight helpers, and we used to go to the wards, collect the patients and wheel them in, in wheelchairs, into the hall. It was like a chapel room. We had to go outside. It was very old.

We used to line them up. There was one person that would always come in on a bed. They used to wheel the bed in. Then we would have a little half an hour service at the front, and we would do what

we do now in the care homes; we would sing a couple of hymns, each say a verse or read a lesson, and then Arthur would run a little mini service, do a little talk, and then we'd wheel them back, afterwards.

Some of them loved it. Some were ex-congregation from St Margaret's Church, but there were a couple of people that had come from other churches, but just happened to be in hospital. There was, probably, on a good Sunday, ten or eleven of them that would come in. It used to take us a good quarter of an hour, or longer, with six or eight of us wheeling, to get them all in, and the nurses, obviously. The nurses stayed with some patients; not all of them.

I don't remember whether there was a piano. We just used to sing. Most of them that came in were people that wanted to come to a church service, and they could sing, or they could at least mouth something; not necessarily read. I don't think we gave out books. If they didn't know the hymn, they'd just listen.

It wasn't so much like the care homes tends to be... when you're responding. They were part of it, but in those days it was more like a church service, where we were presenting to them. We were giving a service to them and they listened, but joined in if they wanted to, if they knew the hymns. I probably only went for about 18 months, but it went on for quite a few years.

They still had the huts then. Most of the people came out of the huts, but there were a couple from the main hospital.

I don't think I'd ever been in the huts until then. They were antiquated. They reminded me of watching those old army films, and they always smelt. You wouldn't get that now. It was because it was the huts: very, very old-fashioned, and we had to go out in the rain because to get to where the service was, you had to come out of the huts and then walk along, and then go into the main building – a room in the main building. So you would get wet coming out of there, and we used to have rain covers that we could put over them. If it was cold and icy, it was really cold.

Some of the old people were chatty; the ladies more so than the men. I don't know whether the men really wanted to go to the church service, or whether they got commanded – if you know what I mean – by the staff, because it was the staff who identified people to come. I think

they did say they wanted to come, but two of us used to go into each hut and then say: "Anybody want to come to the church service?" but the women would know, because they would be ready to come. Some men just came, I think, just to get out of the hut. But also, the nurses – or the orderlies as they were then – would have known the people who go regularly, and have them ready.

It was the same people all the time.

I reckon it was something that the men's society decided to do, but they were short of numbers. That's why I got involved – because they didn't have enough people to wheel the patients. It's quite difficult, especially when you've got to wheel them up and down. The huts were wooden, and all the steps were wooden. How did we get them down the steps? With difficulty! We had to bounce them down very carefully.

I think the huts were quite solemn, like a proper old-fashioned hospital. To my mind, there wasn't the repartee between the nurses. You were in hospital, so there wasn't any conversation, whereas, nowadays, that's part of recuperation. I don't think it was. You were in hospital, and the nurses were doing their duties, so there wasn't the repartee between the two.

I also thought there were some patients that got brought in in wheelchairs, and I'm sure they used to strap their wrists because they would flip their arms around. So they used to tie their wrists, gently, to the wheelchair, so they couldn't throw their arms around. But I did ask about that and, apparently, it was the done thing because they could damage themselves; that's what I was told.

I think there was a massive divide, in those days, between nursing staff and patients. The nurses, I should say, just saw their job as to look after your medical needs, but not actually how you were feeling – to chat with you, and make you feel good about yourself.

It had a bit of a reputation to be a cruel place, and you only went there if you were in dire straits and you didn't have any money. I don't know what the other options were, but I had it in my head that you went there if you didn't have any other family and no means of paying to be looked after anywhere else.

The nurses always struck me as being older, and they wore the old-fashioned uniforms, and the Matron still had the matron's. I think we

saw her once, but not to communicate with. I think she just happened to be walking by one day.

The orderlies, in those days, wore different colours. Male orderlies wore the little white jackets and black trousers.

I can remember when my neighbour, Betty, went in there. She had a fall or something. I think she was in the hut for one night, then they put her in the main block. People didn't see it as a medical hospital, like the Great Western. Most people that went in there – it was either because there was nowhere else for them to go, or maybe it was the end of their lives. I think the people that were in the huts were the people that were real long-term.

I know I used to get the bad – not bad, but the wrong – impression because you automatically think that, because it was huts, that it was going to be geriatrics, and they were just put in there because they had nowhere else to go.

I thought it was ever so sparse, and noisy, and it smelt as well – but noisy because it was all wood. And very cold. I thought it was really cold, when you go to October/November time.

I can remember being there at Christmas and it was all decorated up nicely, and we had to get special blankets and slippers to wheel them from the hut into the main building, because it was so cold.

I've got a feeling some of them never went out, apart from that. It was the only time they went outside the hut.

It wasn't like it is now. It was a different environment in nursing, then, wasn't it? I think so. There wasn't that friendliness.

In the care homes we do on a Thursday now, there is, definitely.

At Church View, the girl there has all the patients that want to come to church ready, sat in a room, for when we arrive, and they're all sat there, and they're all happy to see us. Wemyss Lodge has changed now. Instead of us having the service in a little room, where they've got to bring all the patients in, we do it in one part of the main lounge. So the people over the other side might be sat chatting, or watching telly, or doing whatever, but if you look over and it's, say, All Things Bright and Beautiful, you can see them singing, so it's more inclusive.

I always found St Margaret's quite cold. It was nice, and I felt like it was like a service, but it was very much 'them and us', so they were in their chairs there, and we were in a row here.

Colin: The first service that I went to at St Margaret's Hospital was on May 7, 1967.

I was a member of the Church of England's Men's Society and the services had been started by Arthur Smith of St Margaret's Church when he was Secretary of the Society.

I'm not sure exactly how long it had been in existence before I became involved. There were three readers from the church who used to conduct the services. They were Ted Oram, Dennis Waters and Emlyn Lewis. Emlyn was a very dedicated person; he had grown up in South Wales and had been greatly affected by the poverty he had witnessed there.

When we arrived we would make our way to the huts, where we would collect the patients who wanted to attend the service. The hospital staff were very helpful and they would have them ready for us to push them in their wheelchairs across to the old chapel in the grounds.

It would take quite a time for us to wheel them all across and back again, so the service did not last too long, although it was a normal Sunday morning service. I would act as a sidesman and I would also read the lesson. Others that I can remember helping with me were Alan Amor, Ray Hawker and, of course, Arthur Smith.

As soon as the service had ended we would have to wheel them back to the huts in time for their lunch, so there wasn't much time to chat with them, but I do remember one old gentleman pointing up to a brass plaque on the chapel wall that contained about a dozen names. He told me his name was on the plaque, so I assume that he must have been involved in getting the chapel built, or something like that. Unfortunately, I don't remember his name.

Besides organising the services, we used to go to the hospital just before Christmas and put up the decorations in four of the five huts. The sister in charge of the fifth hut was a German lady, and she insisted on decorating her ward with greenery instead of the normal decorations.

We used to go back after Christmas to take them all down again for the hospital staff to store away for the next year. I can remember this whole task being a very hot and dusty job, not helped by the odour that prevailed in the wards.

I helped at the hospital for about three years until I had to give it up because of family commitments.

Teresa Page

Teresa worked as a nurse in St Margaret's Hospital from the mid-1970s until she was reluctantly forced to leave in 1987 because of the result of an accident. After leaving the hospital she went into politics, has been a long-standing parish councillor in Stratton, as well as a borough councillor, and was Mayor of Swindon when we interviewed her in 2014.

We were in the huts. We were part of Seymour Clinic. That was the ward we had, for the elderly mentally ill: Elizabeth Ward. We were controlled by Seymour Clinic.

I can tell you it was the best – and I won't say 'job' – it was the best place I could ever be – the people there, the staff.

We were told when we went in: "You leave your troubles at the front door; you don't bring it in on the ward." We had people whose husbands had been through the war. They didn't want to see sad faces.

We had a Sister Maddox. She used to come round at night and you could hear her rattling the front door, checking that all was locked up, but our door was always locked because the patients would wander out.

It was specifically for people with mental illness. We had people in there with Alzheimer's and dementia, and we would take people in on respite, who were cared for at home.

Every day, Monday to Friday, we had people coming in to the ward from their families. They would come in and they would have their dinner, and a bath, if necessary. They would have their hair done, their feet done, and then if they had to come in and stay for their three-week break, their respite, they sort of knew us. They weren't going into a strange place.

We had one patient there and her family would come and visit in the evening when she was in bed, because they felt that she was able to speak better when she was laying down; there was more blood to the brain. That was one reason why a lot of the hospitals stopped using the Baxter chairs. They were like a giant armchair and they had a handle on the back, and they kind of came back. They were saying, in the end, that it isn't good for any patient because the fluid doesn't go round the brain if you are half sitting up. This lady, if you gave her a book to look at, she would be rubbing the book the whole time, rubbing each picture;

and it wasn't until after she passed away that we were told she was an artist. And I thought: oh, the fun we could have had with an eggcup full of water and some paints for sixpence from the market. We were never told.

I think a lot of the visitors felt guilty because they weren't able to cope. I can remember we got twelve patients ready, one Christmas morning, to be taken home, and only two turned up out of the twelve. But I realised that, on Christmas Day, if you haven't been dealing with someone with dementia for a long time, it was kind of cruel of us at Stratton to say you will take your mum home for Christmas Day. We should have said for Boxing Day. But at the time, I thought: how awful.

I never felt that I worked there. It was so humbling to do things for people whose husbands had served in the war, and the women themselves – they were at the age where they had done stuff for the war, and you kind of felt honoured to serve them. It was an honour. It was an honour to be allowed to look after those people, that they were entrusted to your care. It was never a job. It was great. I loved it.

We often had nurses there from the RAF - men - when we were short and they needed a qualified nurse to do the drugs. We had one man, Ken. He was so lovely to the patients. He used to put a pair of tights on his head, with the legs hanging down, and pretend he was a dog, and he'd be barking. And the older people – they loved it! They loved that, and they loved seeing a child, or I used to take my dog down. It's the most natural thing in the world for an older person to see a dog or a child. We had good times there.

You were going to a family, really. You were going to share a family with others. It was fantastic. Did I cry when I had to leave because I couldn't lift?

We had one lady who said very little. It must have been about 18 months went by and she never spoke. Her family would come in and they'd talk to her, but she wouldn't respond in any way. And then, when it was Remembrance Sunday, we were short-staffed, so I got all the patients up to the day room, as we called it, and they were all around the telly, and I put on the Remembrance, and I was watching myself, of course. And this little lady said: "My brother died, you know. He was killed in the war. My mother really missed him." So I went round to the front to see who was talking, and it was herself.

Some things did bring the memory back.

At night-time my job, going off shift, was: the ladies who were not ambulant and could not get out of bed, when they were dozing off, we had to move those beds and put them nearest the fire exit. Do they do that now in a hospital? We had to check that all mattresses had the straps out so, if necessary, the fireman could just lift the mattress up.

In those days – and I think I'm still right – you couldn't cut their hair and you had to get family permission to cut their fingernails and toenails, because it could be classed as assault or punishment, that they might see it like that. There were very strict rules around people with mental illness, very strict, and they were very much adhered to. On Elizabeth Ward we all knew where we were, and what you did do and you didn't do.

It was 1987 when I left. I was there for eleven or twelve years. When I left I was trying to do something else with my life. I had become a magistrate, but I still wanted to do things for people in the community, so I enrolled at Salisbury School of Embalming. I had been a bereavement counsellor, and I just thought: I'm sure I could help people more if I knew everything.

I'm sure a lot of people in Stratton would tell you – but I can only speak for my ward – about the care and the love they got. You could double that a hundred times, especially when they were on their last days. I loved that part. I loved it, and I think that's why I think I went on for the funeral thing. I loved being with people.

The food was good. It was all cooked by the cooks there. Everything was spotless, and I've never tasted cauliflower cheese again like I did there!

One thing we could not mention on our ward, to all patients was: "This is Stratton Hospital". It was always "This is St Margaret's", because they associated it with the workhouse. You never, ever, ever, ever said "Stratton Hospital". If the ward sister heard you even say it, if you were having a conversation amongst yourselves, she'd say: "You ought to know better." We always called it St Margaret's because of the stigma.

At the risk of repeating it: it was never, ever work. If any nurse or anyone tells you they worked at Stratton, then their heart wasn't in it.

I was very sad when it went.

Des Jones

Des's memories are from the time his mother, Doris, was a cook at 'Elm Court, as the workhouse was then known'. Doris worked there until it closed in 1972.

To set the scene, my parents came to Swindon during the Second World War because of my dad's work at the Short Brothers aircraft factory. They lodged in Ermin Street, at the home of Miss Elsie French, who was the secretary at Elm Court.

Knowing that my mum, Doris, had been a cook and worked for Lord and Lady Astor, Miss French (or Auntie Elsie as she became to us) asked her if she could help out at Elm Court for a couple of weeks in 1954/55. Mum ended up staying until Elm Court closed, and moved on to work at Pinetrees, the care home, until 1975.

Mrs Thomas was the other cook at Elm Court; she lived in Morris Street, Swindon. Mrs Thomas worked from Monday to Saturday, while Mum's hours were: Monday off; Tuesday to Saturday: 7am to 6pm; Sunday: 7am to 4pm. Doris also worked every Christmas Day, and Mrs Thomas every Boxing Day.

The Matron and Superintendent at that time were Mr and Mrs Johnson. They lived in the bungalow which was just to the right of the main drive, in the grounds. They had assistants who lived in a flat in the main building. All the staff clocked in and out at the gatehouse on the left of the main drive, the same side as the chapel.

Kitchen staff consisted of three helpers who did preparing and cleaning. Mrs Thomas did all the ordering, including half a pig every two weeks, which was butchered by Mum for bacon and so on. A churn of milk was delivered every day, and there was always fish on Friday. There was a huge boiler in the kitchen, in which was boiled 50 or 60 eggs at a time, for tea.

There were 200 residents, and the kitchens also provided meals for Beechcroft House, Kingsdown. These were driven up by the husband of Elm Court's nursing sister, Mrs Prosser. Mr Prosser also collected the laundry from other Wiltshire County Council homes in North Wilts, which was all laundered at Elm Court.

The grounds were huge, and they used tractors and ploughs in the allotment gardens. There was a gardener, helped by the male inmates. I

used to go and talk to them during the school holidays, when I went with my mum to work. Some of the men used to say, then: "It's just like the workhouse."

There were sheds between Elm Court and the Rat Trap, which was then called the Plough. Also between the hospital site and Lower Stratton school was the pig sty, where all the kitchen waste ended up.

The men and women were kept apart at all times, it seems, the men having their meals in a large hall off the kitchens, and the females having theirs in smaller rooms, taken to the various floors in the lift. The men had a snooker table in their hall/refectory.

Christine Ockwell

In the 1960s, Christine worked as a medical secretary at Princess Margaret Hospital in Swindon, where her duties included secretarial support to consultant geriatrician Dr Lodge, who had a weekly outpatients' clinic there, but spent most of his time at St Margaret's. She lived at Stratton herself, and deputised for the secretary at St Margaret's during periods of leave.

The work for me at St Margaret's was totally different from that at Princess Margaret Hospital. There, most of the time was spent taking shorthand or using audio equipment typing correspondence.

Although I had visited my father as a patient in St Margaret's in the late 1950s my knowledge of St Margaret's was limited.

I walked up the long drive past the huts and into the main building. I was shown to the left up the stairs to the office. This was a large room which I shared with Dr Lodge, but obviously most of his day was spent elsewhere, and there were two GPs, Dr O'Grady and Dr Portelly, who also assisted there, and popped into the office. The work was completely different for me and was more administrative in nature.

I can remember collecting the paperwork each morning from the lady at the switchboard which consisted of details of admissions, discharges, deaths, etc, and one of my first jobs was to ascertain how many empty beds there were, so that Dr Lodge could admit patients on the waiting list.

I had to contact not only the wards at St Margaret's but also Watermoor and Northleach to get an accurate picture. I kept the register of

all patients admitted with their relevant details, and this would be updated when they were discharged or died. It was also my role to hand out the paperwork to the deceased's family, so this could be taken to the Registrar of Births and Deaths.

There were other duties arranging routine transport with the ambulance service, keeping records of the holiday admissions allowing the patients' families to have a break from the strain of constant care, plus other admin duties.

I also notified the patients' GPs of discharges and deaths. I can remember that at least on one occasion a desperate relative came to the office extremely concerned that someone they cared deeply about needed hospital care, but was obviously still on the waiting list.

I did find, however, that I spent most of the day alone, in a wing which seemed remote from the rest of the hospital, and was totally different from the hustle and bustle I had been used to. The few people that I did come into contact with, however, were very friendly and – much to my amazement – all knew my late father. It surprised me that Mr Price, the hospital secretary, knew him, as I felt our backgrounds were so different, but Stratton at that time was a village where most people knew of each other.

When the secretarial position at St Margaret's became vacant, both Dr Lodge and Mr Price asked me if I would be interested in filling the role. This I declined as I felt it was too lonely, and I did feel a sinister presence there at times, especially late afternoons in the winter months. I think I could pick up the sufferings of the inmates of the workhouse, which made me feel uneasy, and I was always pleased to see Dr Lodge return.

Ewen Bird

Not many people these days can claim "I was born in the workhouse," but Ewen Bird is one of them. He was born in the workhouse at Westbury-on-Severn in Gloucestershire, where his parents were Master and Matron, and after a short spell at another workhouse in Cirencester, the family came to Stratton, where they remained until they retired. As he was a young boy, growing up not in the shadow of the workhouse, but actually

within its walls, Ewen provided us with a priceless insight into what life was like in an institution that was still unofficially known to outsiders as "the workhouse". We are extremely grateful for him sparing us the time to share his memories in an interview, which is transcribed here, almost in its entirety.

My parents were at Westbury-on-Severn and then Cirencester, before they went to Stratton.

They were born right at the end of the 19th century, in Barrow-in-Furness, and grew up there. My father was, I always felt was, trapped by the situation, because he was an intelligent man and had he lived in a different time. He went to Barrow Grammar School, but left at 14 because everybody left at fourteen. You went to work in the shipyards, and that was it; that was the work. And so he went to work in the shipyards and became a naval architect. He worked in the pattern-making shops and so on, and he worked on the first submarines that Vickers-Armstrong made, which was the reason why, luckily, he wasn't recruited to go in the army in the First World War, because they needed shipbuilders. If you worked in the shipyards, you didn't get called up.

My mother trained as a seamstress and then a tailoress. And then, of course, the slump came in the 1930s. There was no money, and people weren't buying dresses and things like that, so my mother had no work.

They hadn't been married very long then, and the shipyards were cutting back; there was no work and workers were laid off, so they looked around for different kinds of work.

They were both – my mother, far more than my father – quite adventurous and happy to leave. Whereas the rest of the family stuck in Barrow-in-Furness, they looked further afield, and they had a distant relative who was in the workhouse in Westbury-on-Severn, and there was a job going as Assistant Master and Matron, and so my parents applied for that, and they got it.

Because it was a joint appointment, they also had accommodation provided in the workhouse. So they went there and my mother learnt nursing and then qualified as a state-registered nurse while she was there, and my father learnt book-keeping. According to my mother, he used to take the books home into their flat at night and he would go to bed with all of these big ledgers and pore over the ledgers in order to

try and understand them – and understood, in the end, how you actually did all the book-keeping.

And then, when this other couple retired, my parents were appointed as the Master and Matron, and I think, at the time, they were meant to be the youngest Master and Matron of an institution/workhouse in the country.

That was when they became in charge, and I remember my mother telling me about this whole business of people coming in, having nothing, and the workhouse took away all of your respectability and so on. She hated that, so she used to make ties and shirts for the men. Because she was a dressmaker, she knew how to do all this. But she was told off, at one point, by Lady Gregory somebody, who was the chair of the guardians, and she came in, looked around and said, “Matron, what are all these men doing, wearing these ties?” My mother told her what she was doing, and was told: “You really shouldn’t do that. They’re just not worth it.” My parents were always against that.

I was born in the workhouse in 1937, and I’m guessing they were in charge from 1935, and although it might have strictly been called the ‘public assistance institution’, still the attitude was that this is the workhouse, and I think it still was called “the workhouse”. Certainly, in the whole of the area the people referred to it as “the workhouse”.

Because of the area where it was in Westbury-on-Severn, it took in a lot of foresters. It had a lot of people from the Forest of Dean coming in. Interestingly, we went there, just a little while ago. In Westbury-on-Severn they had these beautiful Dutch water gardens which were beautifully constructed; lovely gardens. Then they fell into disrepair, and just recently the National Trust has bought them and re-done them. We went over to see them, and at the same time we wanted to see where I was born, because I had never been back since my parents left there.

And of course it’s all been knocked down. There was nothing there. And we walked up this little road through a housing estate and there was a gap at the back, and there were two very large, thick walls on either side, and we reckon they must have been the outside walls of the gardens, and you could see where the institution was. This big space in-between, which is now a big square, with council housing around it, must have been where the workhouse was. And then the church, which was just alongside it, was where I was christened.

The board of guardians in Gloucestershire issued a statement. From 1904, to protect them from disadvantages in later life, the birth certificates for those born in the workhouse would give their address just as 1 High Street, Westbury-on-Severn, and my birth certificate has 1 High Street, Westbury-on-Severn on it.

Then, about 1938 or 1939, my parents went to what was the workhouse in Cirencester, which is still standing. It’s the Rural District Council’s offices, and you can actually go round it and have a look at it, and there are parts that are recognisable from the old plan. And you’ve also got Cirencester Prison. It’s a little building which dates from goodness knows when, and it’s now a protected building, but that used to be the public prison, and then alongside it you had the workhouse.

So my parents were there. I think it was a step up. It was probably bigger, and the salary was a bit higher, I should think. It was obviously a career move. They weren’t there for very long – about three years – and then, in the middle of the war, about 1941, they went to Stratton which, at that time, was obviously a much bigger place, again, than Cirencester, and they stayed there until they retired in 1958.

I remember it with the drive up, and the chapel on the left side, and the little gatekeeper’s house, and then lawns, and flower beds either side, and elm trees. I know that’s only because my father used to work like anything to make the front of it look really nice, really pleasant.

So they were there for quite a long time and it changed quite considerably. I remember my parents saying, at one point, the thing that was a bit different with the Stratton workhouse-cum-institution, cum-Elm Court, old people’s home and so on, was that it always had a different atmosphere to it than a lot of the other workhouses. Whereas a lot of the other workhouses were traditional, like Westbury, like Cirencester, like the ones in Pewsey, Devizes and Chippenham, and were set out to be fairly unpleasant places, the one in Stratton actually did try to care for people.

My parents often wondered whether or not it was because of the rather more benign influence of the Railway Works and the unions in Swindon, who wanted to look after their workers, and the unions supported them. They couldn’t give money, but they supported the fact

that there was a workhouse there that took care of people, rather than took away their respectability.

They were cared for and they were looked after well. I would never have the impression that the people there were not looked after well. They were well fed, there was entertainment given to them from time to time. I remember my father buying a half-size billiard table once, and putting it in for the men. Those sorts of things were done. It's where I learnt to play snooker, actually!

I went away to school when I was thirteen, but came back in the holidays, then went away to university when I was eighteen, and again I came back during the holidays.

I went anywhere and everywhere on the site. Nothing was barred to me.

The whole place was fairly self-sufficient. We had our own boiler house with a big chimney, and the chimney was too close to the building, so they built a new boiler house and chimney; very, very high.

I remember my father coming in one day at lunchtime and saying there was this big group of Irish builders, building it, and of course down at the bottom, on the main road was the pub, the Rat Trap, and at lunchtime they all went down there. And they're all steeplejacks, and he came back and he said: "God, I've just seen three drunken Irishmen climbing up to the top of the chimney and they're shouting 'Whoa!' at the top." I think he never forgot that.

We had generators, so we created our own power. It was a bit of a nuisance because it meant it was DC, not AC, so you had to have everything adapted. I remember coal being delivered, and men putting coal into these two huge boilers, generating steam to drive the generators in the generating house next door.

We had our own engineers who would go round to make sure plumbing and all that was done, and there was a carpentry shop with a carpenter who came in every day and did all the work there. My father, because of his background in shipbuilding, liked carpentry, and he used to go and work there in the evenings, and I've got a bookcase upstairs that he made, years and years ago.

Surrounding it, there was what amounted to a pretty big smallholding; in fact, it was probably even bigger than that, almost like a small farm. So we produced most of our own vegetables. It had a head gardener, a

couple of assistant gardeners, and this tractor, which I used to drive. In fact, I learned to drive on it as it was very like a car. I learned to plough. They were quite happy to let me plough as I was doing the work for them!

We had pigsties, and kept a whole load of pigs, and they were interesting. The pigsties were right down the end, and then there was a hedge, and just over the hedge there was the primary school, and I went to that school.

I remember once that I thought lessons had finished, and I had mistaken break for lunch time, so I used to nip over the hedge and go back home. I didn't bother to go all the way round the road. I went back into my parents' flat, and they used to have coffee every morning, round about eleven o'clock – a couple of visiting doctors and nurses and so on were always there, and I walked in on this, and my father looked at me and said: "What are you doing here?" And I said: "It's lunchtime." "No it's not. It's only coffee." And he said: "Right, you've got to go back to school. I'll take you back and explain. I didn't want to go back. I thought it would have been reasonable to let me stay until lunchtime and then take me back, but he wasn't having any of it. The infants were at the front, facing on to the main road, and the other one was at the back.

I never found the place menacing. People were pleasant. I knew some of the inmates. We had some of them that worked for us. My parents had a couple of 'maids'. One was a young girl from the forest that had come into the workhouse at Westbury-on-Severn, and my mother had taken her under her wing and had taught her to sew and read, and things like that, and she just followed my mother around. When they went to Cirencester, she wanted to go with them, and so they took her with them, and when they went to Stratton they took her with them. She used to come in and do a lot of the housework.

And there was another youngish woman. She had been admitted. She'd been sectioned at one point – I don't know for what reason or anything like that – and my mother always felt this was wrongly done; that she shouldn't have been, that she was actually OK. My mother taught her to cook, and she became our cook and cooked all our meals. They paid her a small salary for doing that.

My mother used to get quite cross, sometimes, with some of the vis-

itors who came. At one point they had a wing that had a number of elderly ladies who were in because they had things like Parkinson's disease, and they couldn't look after themselves, and there was this one apparently charming elderly lady who was afflicted in that way, whose son came every now and again, not very often. And my mother took him apart one day when he came in, and she told him how rotten he was, how bad he was not to come in and visit his mother, and so on, so I always felt there was an atmosphere of looking after people there.

For me, at five, six, seven, learning to ride a bike, getting rollerskates and so on, it was wonderful because I had the whole grounds, and there was a roadway that went all the way round. I used to ride my bike round and round and round, and my father would get complaints about this boy who was racing around on his bike, but it was great for me. I loved it. It was different!

There was a long drive and a round flower bed at the end of the drive and my father used to park his car there. The staff used to come in here, and that became our flat, with our dining room next to the kitchen, which went into the male dining hall. They had male and female dining halls. They didn't mix. I can't remember them ever mixing. The females: they used to eat in the female day room. I think there were probably more men than women.

Upstairs was my parents' bedroom. My bedroom was downstairs, and above there we had a lounge, on the first floor. It was quite a reasonably sized flat. Outside was a garden – a lawn with railings around, and the railings were all cut off during the war. I used to play cricket at the front. We had a greenhouse that had a wonderful vine in it that produced excellent black grapes.

My mother was responsible for the nursery. There were anything from young babies, newly born, to three or four years old. They had a yard as a playing yard. They had sandpits and whatnot there. Presumably these were children who were either foundlings or their parents didn't want them or they'd been abandoned, or whatever reason, but there must have been, I would guess, thirty or more children there, because there were quite a number of nursery nurses there. I remember that finishing, and they took the children away, and they re-used the space for the kind of ladies I was talking about, with disabilities.

There was a section for homeless families, and they were homed at the back. During the war there were also army offices on site, and the officer-in-charge was billeted with us. Other rooms my parents had adapted for their Assistant Master and Matron, who lived on site, and they also adapted a couple of rooms for a resident care assistant who looked after the men. His wife was a nurse, and they were given quarters.

Other rooms were given over to families, and I remember because I used to go and play with them. I remember one family with just the mother and at least three or four children. We'd all race around on our bikes and knock orderlies down, and so on. It was the time of cycle speedway and my father allowed us to create two tracks – one near the hospital huts, just outside the laundry, where we made a sort of oval, and another near the boilerhouse. We made a track around the coal stores, and used to go and have cycle speedway races there – much to the consternation of some of the staff who saw these eleven-year-olds doing very dangerous things. We didn't think it was dangerous.

During the war, there were quite a lot of Army and Air Force people stationed around the area, and particularly in Corsham, and if anybody was killed, then the family, if they were in military lodgings, were turfed out. They couldn't stay there. It was a terrible thing. So they had to find somewhere else, but there was always a time when they had to contact their families and get other things sorted out, and I remember, at least on a couple of occasions, families coming in with young children and staying with us for a short time. Very sad. There was one where, I think, the father had been a pilot and shot down. Then the family were just told: "I'm sorry, but you'll have to get out of your accommodation." While they tried to make other arrangements, they came in and stayed with us.

My mother talked about it being really rotten for them because, in this particular case, the husband was an officer, and they were in officers' accommodation, and used to going in the officer's mess and so on, and all of a sudden they were in the workhouse. They were upstairs in a room and it must have been really terrible for them.

At the front of the workhouse there were big windows, so there was a lot of light at the front. What was the board room was actually quite a pleasant room. It was meant to be where the committee meetings

were, and my parents took that over as a male sitting room. That's where they put the billiards table. So you had one big sitting room, with these lovely big windows, and then another on the other side, and they had big windows. On the other side of the boardroom were the offices – my father's office, his secretary, and so on. Then you had the nursery, which became an old people's thing later, and that was quite light, and then behind you had another male sitting room. That, perhaps, wasn't quite so light, but it certainly wasn't dark and dingy.

The spittoons were in one room and the heavy smokers were in another, but with no spittoons, and in what was the board room you had the sort of 'best' of the male inmates, who used to go and sit there, and it was a kind of sorting out – not according to their class or anything, but according to the kind of people they were, I suppose.

I never found it dark and dingy, as a building, to come into. When I was a student, because I was studying languages, I met and befriended quite a number of people, particularly from Germany, and they used to come back with me and spend a couple of weeks during the holidays, or spend Christmas with us. They never were put off by the building.

The male dining hall was quite a big room. From the back of our flat it went right down the centre, and then the kitchens were at the end; big kitchens, and there was a sort of a washing-up room at the end, and I remember that my parents used to have big formal dinners there, once or twice a year, particularly when the Army were there. They would have Army people there and then people from County Hall would come over, and so on. They'd have a dinner dance at least once a year – maybe New Year, or something like that – and they'd have it in the dining hall. They'd move the tables out, my father would go and scatter whatever it was that you scattered on the wooden floor to make it slippery so you could dance on it, so there were things going on like that. I had to play the piano in that dining hall because there was a piano in there.

It was a tall building, but only one storey. It was quite a pleasant room, with windows on either side. Admittedly, on one side they looked out on to the boiler house and the generating house, but on the other side they looked out on to a pathway and garden.

It wasn't forbidding. I'd never say that the buildings as such were forbidding in any way. We had carpets in our flat, but the main living

rooms were either linoleum or wooden block, parquet flooring, which were polished every day.

There were restrictions. You did have your set meal times and so on, but there weren't restrictions on the men going down to the Rat Trap, for instance. If they had any money, they'd wander down and have a pint and wander back again. There was no "You can't do that."

The only restrictions that I can remember were on the tramps that used to come, and that went on for quite a long time. I can't remember when they actually finished coming, but I remember the separate building for the tramps. They would come in at about six o'clock in the evening, and they would wait outside their building. They all knew where it was. They would then be checked in, and they'd be taken to the kitchens and they'd be given food, and they'd take it back, and then they'd be locked in at night, and they each had a cell – and it *was* a cell. They'd spend the night there, and then in the morning it would be unlocked, and they'd be given breakfast and then sent on their way.

A lot of them just did it on a circuit. They'd walk from Pewsey to Devizes, then from Devizes to Stratton, and then from Stratton to somewhere else, and about four weeks later you'd see the same one come back again.

I didn't get to know any of them. You didn't get much opportunity. They all knew that six o'clock was the clocking-in time. They all arrived at round about that time. They waited outside, they were checked in, put in, and that was it; you didn't see them again. So they were kept separate.

I think my parents always said, "Be careful who you talk to," and all that sort of thing, but there certainly wasn't the kind of feeling that there is nowadays about young children talking to people, and certainly with the inmates, my parents never said, "You mustn't go and talk to the inmates." I used to talk to some.

I remember one old man. I don't know what he used to do in this particular shed, but he was peeling – it must have been a parsnip – and he gave me a bit and he said: "There you are. This is the poor man's coconut." And I remember eating this, raw. That just sticks in my mind.

I didn't have any restrictions, and I was never aware there were any dangerous people. There was, I think, fairly good observation of all of inmates. The – I call them 'porters' – carers or whatever you want to

call them... there were several that came in during the day. We had one that was resident. They would walk through. They would always be walking around and helping and checking and so on, so there was a fairly reasonable amount of care, of looking after and looking out for, making sure that nothing amiss was going on, or anything like that.

Those men who were able-bodied were, if they wanted to, put to work, to help in the gardens. They'd go and help the gardeners and dig, and so on.

When I was a little boy at the end of the war, our bread was delivered by a dray – a big baker's van, drawn by a horse, and they used to come up, every other day, and deliver God knows how many loaves of bread, and the delivery man always used to stop off and have a cup of tea, have a chat, and take the horse out of the harness, and I used to go for a ride on the horse. I used to sit on the horse and he'd take me for a ride around the grounds and then back again. Little things like that I remember, and for me, growing up, it was quite a nice, free environment.

Given the fact that, next door, it was Vickers and it was the airfield, it was wonderful to go and trespass on, and play cricket and football on. I had various mates who lived on Highworth Road, outside, and lived across the other side, and we used to meet and go and play football on the airfield and come back again.

Of course, the airfield was then used after the Normandy landings. They had people who were picked up, wounded, off the beaches, and inland, and they'd be given first aid, there and then, on the spot, and, where they could, put into planes and flown to South Marston, to the airstrip. And from the airstrip they came down to us. All of the huts were taken over for that. They'd come there for first assessment, and they were kept there until they were well enough to travel, and if they wanted to and they could travel, they were transferred to somewhere nearer where they lived.

I remember my father showing me a room. They came in with all their kit, and this room was choc-a-bloc, full of helmets, kit bags and all the things that they'd come in with, which obviously had to be taken off.

One of the huts was used particularly for broken bones. I wasn't allowed to go into there, for all kinds of reasons, and I remember my fa-

ther saying it was a bit like going into a room full of scaffolding because of these men with wire all around them, on their legs, and legs up in the air, and goodness knows what. They had some fairly horrific burns, and there were a couple of huts that were given over to that.

One of the doctors came to my father once and said, "It would be really good if you could get hold of a couple of bottles of brandy." You couldn't get it, normally, during that time, but it was thought that, when they came in, just to be able to give some of them a tot of brandy might actually help them a bit. So my father, with the Army people, contacted Shrivenham, and they said: "No problem. Come down to Shrivenham."

So my father drove down to what is now the Military College, and they took him into a big room – one of those round ones with glass over the top of it – and he said he'd never seen anything like it; it was like an Aladdin's cave. It was packed with booze – wine, everything you'd want. There was a sergeant major there who said: "Right sir, what do you want?"

"I wanted some brandy."

"Right sir. Yes, certainly. How many do you want?"

My father thought, "I'll push it," and said: "I'll have a dozen."

"Certainly sir."

And he came away with a dozen cases. He thought he'd get a dozen bottles, and I can remember it lasting until well after the war. They never got through that much, and we always had a bottle of brandy around!

But you remember the good times and not the bad times. There must have been some pretty bad times, and some pretty horrific injuries coming in, and people having to deal with them. And yet, at the same time, in the evenings, there was the officer commanding, who was with us, then there were a couple of other officers, then two or three squaddies, and then quite a lot of medical orderlies, that were all drafted in. Down one side, by the huts, which was then later ploughed up, they pitched tents, and the medical orderlies used to live in the tents and sleep there.

But they used to have quite a good time. I remember the offices at the back, that had become military offices; every now and again they'd have a bit of a get-together there in the evening. One morning, my mother had gone into her office, and the sister, who had been in charge of the female block above the offices, had come in and said: "Matron,

I really do have to complain, but last night these men were singing down there. They'd obviously been drinking. They were singing, and not only that; they had a woman with them as well!" And my mother said, "Yes, sister, I'll see to that", but it was her who was there, singing with them.

I don't remember an unpleasant, unwelcoming place at all, and how much that was to do with my parents, it's difficult to say, because I was a young lad, but I feel, looking back now, it probably had an awful lot to do with them. They came into it from being in a quite different environment, up in the north of England – working, in the shipyards, dressmaking and so on, and then suddenly being out of work themselves, and then coming into that; they brought a different kind of view to it. My mother was – I wouldn't say she was anti-authoritarian at all – but if anyone from County Hall came and said, "You've got to do this," and she didn't want to do it, she didn't do it. So they had a different kind of attitude.

When they retired, it wasn't the easiest of times – for my mother, particularly. They came from the north, and although they had a lot of friends down in the south, and a number of their friends retired as well, down there, they just felt that they wanted to go back to the north of England.

My mother had to take early retirement because of arthritis, but because it was a joint post, they both had to take early retirement. Then they had to go through the whole business of trying to find a mortgage, which they eventually got, and they bought a house and went to live up there, close to my cousin, which is why they moved there. In the end it was OK, but it took her a while to go through that.

My father settled in fairly quickly, but my mother found it much more difficult to adapt from being the matron to being Mrs Bird. She said to me once: "I feel I've come down in the world."

About the authors

Caroline Ockwell is the Secretary/Treasurer and a co-founder of the Alfred Williams Heritage Society and is passionate about Alfred Williams and his literary works. Her family's connections with 'The Hammerman Poet' go back much further than the century covered by *In the Shadow of the Workhouse*. Her grandfather grew up with Alfred during the late 19th century and he was a frequent visitor to her family home in Stratton St Margaret. Caroline grew up in Stratton during the 1950/1960s, just a mile away from the old workhouse, and her former primary school shared its boundary with "the house". The combination of these close connections gave her the inspiration to link the Heritage Lottery Fund's All Our Stories project with the writing of this book. This is the first time Caroline has taken up the challenge to become an author, previously always having been too busy with her day job as a chartered tax adviser.

Graham Carter is a freelance journalist with a special interest in local history, and he is the Vice-chair and a co-founder of the Alfred Williams Heritage Society. Born in Swindon and brought up in Upper Stratton, he can trace his ancestry back to this area over at least eight generations. In 2006 he researched a major history called *The Chronicle of Swindon*, which was serialised by the *Swindon Advertiser*, and he writes a weekly column for the paper. In 2012 he became a co-founder of Swindon Heritage, and in 2014 he published *Full Circle*, an illustrated history of that part of the former Swindon Railway Works now occupied by the University Technical College in the Railway Village.

See **www.alfredwilliams.org.uk** to
read the other chapters and to find out
how to buy a hard copy of the book