

Mabel finds her voice

When Mabel Cooper was four months old, her mother was caught begging on the street in Islington, a crime in those days. Mabel was taken away and her mother was put in Darenth Park Hospital, like St Lawrence's, a hospital for people with learning difficulties. After two months Mabel's mother tied some sheets together and ran off. They never caught her and Mabel never saw her again. She spent her childhood in different children's homes and at age 13 went to St Lawrence's.

She says: "Oh, my God. I thought I was coming to a mad house, because of the screaming. But I was there for so long I got used to it". She remained at St Lawrence's for the next 25 years and during all that time she never spoke other than to say 'yes' or 'no' or nod her head. "I could always talk," she explained, "but because they kept telling you to shut up a lot of us said, 'Right, we're not gonna talk.' We only did it for a protest". Since she came out of St Lawrence's, it's been a very different story. "Now I don't shut up at all!" said Mabel. And she has been using her new-found voice to tell everybody what it was like in St Lawrence's. St Lawrence's, like other institutions at the time, was a self-contained closed community. The bulk of the work was done by people without learning difficulties. People with learning difficulties did the washing up and swept the floors and staff did the cooking. People did the pulling apart of old clothes, removing buttons, etc. and the staff did the machining to finish off new clothes.

Even on the ward where there were small kitchens, the patients were not allowed to make tea – the nurses did it for them. "They even made our shoes and I can tell you the shoes were horrible", said Mabel.

There were 4,000 people living at St Lawrence's in two large blocks – men on one side, women on the other. There were more women than men because, as Mabel explained, "If women got in trouble with the law, because there weren't enough prisons, they used to come in to St Lawrence's where there was a ward for them." So as well as being 'home' for women with learning difficulties, it was also a prison for women offenders. In the early days there were 75 people in a ward so the beds were very close together. If you were a big person you had to climb over the end of the bed to get in and out.

No one was allowed possessions, such as a toothbrush or comb. "In those days you used other people's. They used to wash them in disinfectant and rinse them out," said Mabel. None of the children had toys. "When I first went there, they used to have bars at the windows. If you had toys they would be thrown out through the window and you

wouldn't get them back because the outside children would just pinch them," says Mabel.

Although Mabel was only 13 when she went to St Lawrence's she received no schooling. "You made baskets or did colouring, anything like that. You didn't go to school. They used to say, we can't teach you because there's too many of you". Clearly Mabel could have benefited from proper education. "I think if they had had the time, if somebody had had the patience, I could have learned. Now I can read a little, enough to get by".

After coming out of the hospital Mabel went to college for a year just to see how much she could learn and now she can read the headlines in the paper and the minutes at meetings. At the hospital their attitude was that people with learning difficulties need care all the time. But, as she says, Mabel has proved them wrong in lots of ways. "I've achieved a lot of things. I live in supported living so I get the support I need, like shopping and cooking. I do need a bit of support for that. But most of the time I am fine," she says. All the clothes were of the same style though in different colours so when Mabel left the hospital people stared at her because she was dressed differently.

"When you went outside of the hospital, people would stand by the gate to see you and take the mickey about the clothes you were wearing. The youngsters thought it was funny, but it wasn't funny, it hurt." Since coming out she saved enough money to buy her own. People had no money – they were given coloured coins to use in the hospital sweet shop. "They weren't worth that much – all you could get was a packet of sweets a week.

Even when she left St Lawrence's she was not given any money. People were not allowed out of the hospital except for two hours on Saturday afternoons. But they were not allowed in cafés or pubs and as they had no money all they could do was look in shop windows. If people didn't come back on Saturday afternoon they were caught and sent to a punishment ward, known as G3.

"They used to have their clothes and shoes taken away and had to put on a night gown, dressing gown and slippers and stay like that for two weeks or a month," said Mabel. Another punishment was to put people in a small room until they calmed down (time out). At mealtimes, people were given a plastic spoon and fork and a tin plate. "That was because it didn't break if somebody threw it", explained Mabel. "But the meals were horrible – you didn't get a drink or anything. They used to bring the meals about 11 o'clock from the kitchen and plug them in until 12.30, so it was horrible when you came to eat it".

Men and women were kept strictly separated. Some managed to meet but if they were caught they would get into trouble. As Mabel recalls: "Some of the women used to write a letter in the ward, then when they went to church the letter would go under chairs all the way round until it got to the bloke they wanted to get it. The men used to do the same. And the same happened in the pictures and in the dance hall. In the dance hall they used to have male staff in one line, female staff in another line, back to back. They used to dance around and when the music stopped the men had to take the women back to their seat and go back to theirs".

Mabel was asked, if people weren't allowed to meet, why did they write letters? "I think it was because it was somebody they could write to, get contact with, because some of the women liked the men. Why not?" "But if you were caught you got into trouble, so some people didn't mix. A friend of mine got pregnant by a worker in the hospital. He got the sack. I don't know what happened to my friend – she went somewhere else". Mabel didn't see a child running around until she left the hospital. The children in the hospital stayed in the ward. "When we saw children we thought they were midgets because we had never seen them before".

If parents brought their children, they were taken to another part of the hospital where two staff sat with them. There was no privacy for people. There were four bathrooms with four baths, six toilets and six hand basins all in one room. "If you wanted to use a toilet when somebody was in the bath you had to go and go past the one in the bath," said Mabel. When women had their period they stayed in bed for three or four days as the staff didn't want any mess.

As well as the men and women being separated, people were also divided into grades: higher, middle and lower. Those that could read were in the higher grade ward. Mabel was in the middle grade. There were fewer staff in the wards for the 'higher' grades.

When Mabel left the hospital it took a long time before she could settle anywhere. First she went to live in a house in Caterham Valley. "I stayed there for three months, then the lady I went with, she had a nervous breakdown". "I got frightened. I went back on a bus to Eva's (a member of staff who had be-friended her). "I stayed with Eva one night and then I had to go back into the hospital". There followed stays in a home in Norfolk , then with an elderly lady who had a boy with Down's syndrome – "She only wanted somebody to keep the boy company," then in an old people's home. "They said you can't stay here, you are not old enough. So I moved again. Then she stayed in another home, this one for six and a half years, then another for 10 years. At last, Mabel met someone who was advertising for people to stay in a supported living house. "I said OK – I like that. So now I live in a supported living house". Asked what was her best memory of St Lawrence's, Mabel replied without a pause: "Coming out of it!" _

In 1981 a TV documentary Silent Minority showed the shocking conditions in St Lawrence's and Borocourt Hospitals.

This film can be obtained from: Concord Video and Film Council, 22 Hines Road, Ipswich, Suffolk IP3 9BG.

Tel: 01473274531