

The 2023 Magazine

Well, Well, Well, what a wonderful surprise.... (I do enjoy a good bit of alliteration, it just popped out) the reason for my surprise is that I have just received issue No 26 of 'Chailey Old Scholars Magazine'. It is a shining example of community reporting with delightful photographs that illustrates the astounding work carried out by the dedicated and selfless staff in every department. I was startled by the colourful brilliance of the front cover photograph; its composition is genius and the vitality of the posing participants jump off the page with their exuberance...I know...I know...more alliteration... will somebody please shoot the writer.



As it turns out, it is the first issue to be published since 2019 as, if anyone needs reminding, we have just emerged from Covid, or Coronavirus disease to give it its proper name, the first pandemic for 100 years that kept us locked down and in despair for three years.

My surprise came as I turned the pages...there I was in print. It caught me off guard. I had written the articles for Ian Sowerby's website CHOSA, and had forgotten all about them. I was also delighted to see an article written by my jolly-good friend Annie Goodhall. We email each other most days, yet we have never met and are a couple of generations apart. Our virtual meet-up came about through Ian's Articles page on CHOSA, we being both contributors. Annie was a student at the Girls Heritage, a generation after I had left St Georges where I had arrived in 1939 as a six-year-old boy, but we have similar interests in life, she lifts my spirits and writes poetry in the vernacular that fires my imagination. Just how do you write poetry from a disabled persons perspective? I don't know, but she does. I was happy to read her articles, they brought back memories of my stay in the very same ward at St Martins many years before her, and the very same doorway that led to the nurses' rooms. My bed was opposite and I could watch the nurses coming and going during the day.

I have long been a fan of Ian's, and admire immensely the work he does with CHOSA, Chailey Heritage Old Scholars Association Website. He is also a good editor and has assisted me over the years with his sound advice when editing my articles. For many years now Ian has been the webmaster and has produced the most inspiring digitised record of Chailey's past history. I have been an eager contributor to his pages. It is not just written articles that Ian has logged, there is a river of films and videos in his archive, some going back to the early days of the Heritage, that everyone should visit.

He tells the stories of student's personal trials, their achievements, their daily struggles, their likes and dislikes. When he took over CHOSA, Ian re-built the database, he designed it to keep scholars in touch with each other and the Heritage via OSA. He made sure we were all kept up to date with the latest news, views and events. He built a record database of all scholars, so that we received the latest news, reports, announcements and notices, which was invaluable during the Covid lockdown years. His documented accounts in digital format cover some of the most important periods in the history of The Heritage and of its successor, the Chailey Heritage Foundation.

Ian has instigated a channel of communication with the East Sussex Record Office where, as Webmaster, he updates their archival records on a six-monthly basis with the latest news from

CHOSA. This is where it is saved for posterity, the survival of all of our history depends on it. Can you imagine how important this material is for the medical and education professions. It gives them 120 years of documented history of the evolution of treatment and education for disabled children and young people at Chailey and it is digitally stored. Without Ian this unique digital archive would not exist, its importance cannot be over stated, especially when we consider it covers the periods of two world wars and the birth of the NHS.

Changing the subject, we missed three years of our renowned Reunions and AGMs which were commonly followed by animated group discussions as friends swapped stories and news of happenings since the previous Reunion

Lunch was always a delight as we gathered for self-service and enjoyed the most sumptuous buffet that I have ever set eyes on. We were regaled with fresh ham or chicken salad garnished with potato salad etc. For afters the tables were laden with choice strawberries and cream, lavish sherry trifles made with custard AND cream, with strawberry jelly and sprinkles on top. I may exaggerate with the sherry, but my mouth is drooling with the memory. This was accompanied by the most delicious choice of cakes or pudding of apple pie with cream or custard; and if that was not enough there was a glass or two of wine to add sparkle to the occasion, either red or white, the choice was mine. For those unfortunate to be driving, there were soft drinks of orange or lemonade, and a cuppa tea if that was more to your liking...what a magnificent spread. I have never forgotten them, nor should we, this was all laid on by volunteers and they never failed.

I have been fortunate enough to have attended three Reunions, the first in 2012. I left Chailey in 1950, so this was my first reunion with the Heritage for 62 years, it was followed by two other memorable visits but then the pandemic intervened and everything was out of bounds. Like many of us of more mature years I wondered when it would be possible for my next trip. My previous visits to the Reunions were only made possible through the kindness of a friend who made the long drive from Wiltshire. Covid changed everything, for the next three years social life was brought to a halt. My friend lost her husband and, now that I am in my 90th year and feel the strain of a very long day, it is too much for both of us. Sadly, I will miss the gossip with a coffee and bickies in the Staff Room which, in my day, was the Carpentry Workshop, proudly displaying the sign above the door 'Men Made Here'. Also, I will definitely miss my strawberries and cream.

Of course, my story would not be complete if I failed to mention the delightful meet and greet welcome that we all received from Janet and Richard at the arrival point of our destination. My journey started in Wiltshire and brought me back to the beautiful county of Sussex whose natural beauty is engrained in my psyche where it has been planted since childhood, despite it being in the war years and an absence of 60 years or more. Chailey North Common was our playground. As a kid it appeared to me as a landscape of wide-open spaces, with me running through bracken beneath blues skies. Well, that's my memory of it 80 years ago.

The day's events following our greeting at reception were carefully choreographed by Janet and her talented husband Richard. His contribution to the business side of CHOSA is equally matched by the social and community events arranged by Janet, which are quite impressive. It was her teamwork that kept things running smoothly throughout the day. Without their joint enterprise I doubt very much that CHOSA would survive. These events stretch over not just the important AGM but also the full day of activities that includes the service in the captivating elegance of St Martins Chapel and the much-enjoyed buffet meal. Again, there is a calendar of events, no doubt arranged by the Committee, that needs to be relayed to members by letter from Janet or Richard, which includes the annual outing in the summer and the Christmas dinner booked into a local hotel.

Undoubtedly the biggest change to have overtaken the Heritage in its 120 years of history, is its transformation under the National Health Service. Yet, even if the words in 'The Coming of Age of The Heritage Craft Schools' book by Grace Kimmins written a hundred years ago sound arcane, their meaning remains just the same today. Her aim was to provide medical care and education to children and young people with disabilities, where both School and Hospital are brought together yet remain separate in their professions. We have seen that huge progress has been made in medical knowledge accompanied by astounding developments in new technologies that give a whole new meaning to life for a person with complex disabilities. This is visible in the Immersive Technology Zone, and also in the Hydrotherapy Pool where a whole lot of fun can be had helping users to develop and improve their physical abilities.



The Foundation also manages Patchwork Farm as a therapeutic facility where children can have hands-on experience with farm animals gaining self-confidence in their presence. The animals are chosen for their friendly nature and instincts to thrive in human company but who can deny the pleasure of seeing a bouncy fluffy lamb. But did you know the Heritage had a School Farm a hundred years ago? It gave children with disabilities the opportunity to gain farming experience with the view of finding work after leaving Chailey and, just as The Foundation has developed a Sensory Garden today for its students to enjoy, so too in 1908 every disabled child at the Heritage could spend time looking after his own garden.

The Heritage Craft Schools have come a long way since its formation in 1903. It started with eight physically disabled children. Its expansion was rapid, by the time it came round for its 21st birthday it had over 70 disabled children in its care. Its management had a full Medical Board it could call on, and, with resident teachers and carers who now had a boy and a girl's school in their safe keeping, its medical facilities now included a hospital built in the shadows of St Martins Chapel, after which it was named. Throughout its medical history the Heritage gave a future to physically disabled children and young people whose numbers doubled down the years, but this changed during two World Wars when it opened its facilities to wounded soldiers. As mentioned above, further ground-breaking changes occurred in 1948 with its assimilation by the National Health Service. Important fundamental changes have taken place in its raison d'être, gone are the 200 boys and girls it cared for at its peak. It now provides a fully-rounded programme on a personal basis to a small number of young people with complex neurological disabilities living in self-sufficient bungalows, while further offsite students attend on a daily basis. The Foundation has world class medical facilities at its disposal supported with cutting edge technology masterminded, programmed and invented by its own expert technicians.



This is just one example of the inventiveness of Chailey Technicians. This is a wonderful photo of Bertie talking to his high-tech e-chair. The technicians have come up with this cracking invention, it allows Bertie to give instructions to his e-chair by the tone of his voice, and has gained him his independence to motor off in any direction he wants. How cool is that.

It's no wonder the more I learn of the evolution of The Foundation, that more I am reminded just what a remarkable woman Dame Grace Kimmins, its founder, really was. It just leaves me to say, how I envy all the lucky ones who attend the Reunion, I will be thinking of all that strawberries and cream and other loveliness being there without receiving my attention. I will be thinking of you too Janet and Richard doing your stuff as you have been doing to keep things moving all these past years. Enjoy.



Janet keeping things together at the 2012 AGM