

My Days in St Martins Hospital

I was aged six when I arrived at St Georges, known at the time as the residential home for 150 disabled children in the care of The Heritage Craft Schools and Hospitals for Crippled Children, but today it is the Chailey Heritage Foundation caring for children and young people with complex neurological disabilities. It was here on that day in 1939 that I settled into the daily routine that would shape my life as it unfolded over the next ten momentous years. World War Two was about to breakout and shed its fear and unrelenting horrors around us both day and night. Meanwhile, I was to oscillate, as medical needs dictated, between St Georges and St Martins which was the hospital for the Heritage Craft Schools, some half a mile distant from each other. The hospital was so named after the adjacent picturesque sand stone chapel, which has its own history. Its oak shingle spire and three clocks remain as a standing tribute to Dame Grace Kimmins who in 1903 founded the Chailey Heritage Craft School and Hospital for Crippled Children.

My most lasting memory of those days was being bedridden in St Martins, for what reason I can't remember, but I do so vividly recall lying back in soft white linen sheets of the hospital bed and the misery of fighting back against the most pressing call of nature to relieve myself, nature won. My humiliation was complete when the day nurse arrived on her routine ablution duties. We both remained silent, guilt welled up with my feelings of shame. I was not too young to feel blameless, but I suppose the strangeness of my environment and never to have found myself in that situation before, was the reason for my discomforting happening. I do recall dual feelings of anger and relief as the pressure of events that ailed me that night resolved themselves.

This episode happened in the middle years of my residency at Chailey. My memory dims a bit with the passing of a lifetime stretching beyond 89 years, but the reassuring feeling of freshly laundered sheets and the caring attention of a young nurse, complete in her white starched apron over her blue short sleeved gown, stays with me to this day, with her white crisp hat trailing behind her neck as they did in those days, but not to be seen today. However, I cannot say my future experiences gained from this steep learning curve brought me any sense of joy or comfort, instead it led to my introduction



Nurse Trestrale and Nurse Vicky with their caps and uniforms of the time. Darning blankets during the war years at St Georges.

to the bedpan. As I recall, I was not allowed to sit up at the time, for what reason I don't know, but I'm beginning to think as I write I would have mostly likely to have been on 'Extension', or 'Traction' as it is called today. It meant the foot of my bed was tilted on blocks with weights attached to my leg. At any rate, my first experience of using a bedpan was extremely uncomfortable.

To describe the offending article; at that time it was a large round enamelled metal pan with a rounded edge to form a lip, and with a hollow handle pointing slightly upwards but opening into the body of the pan. The depth of the pan always made me wish they were a bit deeper and, as it moved and slid about beneath me, the handle was always on my mind creating anxiety about escaping liquids. The over-large circumference of the pan for a small body meant my spine was the prime target as a pressure point, increasing my antagonism towards the offending utensil. What I now admire, but didn't then, was that it was always the nurse's thankless task to perform the necessary duty of hygiene following the main event.



Typical bedpan used with great difficulty during my prolonged stay at St Martins Hospital with the foot of the bed raised on blocks.

Something for which they have my eternal thanks. An abiding memory that also continues to linger is of an angel of compassion leaving my bedside bearing a discreetly covered bedpan heading down the ward towards the ablutions.

It was not all Bedpans and Toilet Rolls at St Martins hospital. For those of us hospitalised with long days ahead of immobility, our days did not necessarily mean hours of idleness and boredom. Craft lessons were given by teachers skilled in their trade. Laying on my back with the foot of the bed raised on blocks limited my ability to be proactive for anything too animated and so I settled for needlework. Actually it chose me, for there was nothing else fitting my current situation. Much to my amazement I loved it. I took to it like a duck to water. My teacher was a kindly lady of mature years. She was quietly spoken and dressed in tweeds, but she was a very skilful needleworker. Sadly, I have forgotten her name. I was given a small square of canvas to practice on and a needle threaded with thick coloured wool, it was open weave with square holes. I was shown how to do various types of stitches, but the one I eventually worked with was the cross stitch. This is a large chunky stitch and rapidly filled up the canvas. I was also given to try threading needles and sewing hems, again with a variety of tiny stitches, but my fort  was the cross stitch on open-weave canvas. Even so, my sewing lessons have always stood me in good stead. I have been able to take up the turnups on my trousers, darn my socks, and sew on buttons. Much to my surprise a piece of my needle work and carpentry appears in the 1948 Heritage book. It is a cross-stitched Clutch Bag, I think it was two tone in yellow and red wool. The carpentry item, made earlier, was a child's articulated toy Dachshund on wheels painted brown and white.

Of the more serious side of being a patient in St Martins came the medical aspect which could be life changing. Chailey had at its disposal the services of leading surgeons and doctors visiting from their London practices. I have recently discovered the surgeon who performed my amputation was an eminent naval surgeon of his day, George Murray Levick. He had an adventurous life as many men with his inclination appeared to have at that time in history. He was a member of the Scott expedition of 1912 and he served as Fleet Surgeon at Gallipoli in 1916. His adventurous life can be read by typing his name in Google.



Naval Surgeon Murray Levick member of the Chailey Medical Committee at the Heritage. He sailed with Scott on the Antarctic Expedition and later was Fleet Surgeon at Gallipoli 1915.

Our paths crossed for the first time in 1947. Having returned to St Georges after my period of 'Traction' the decision was made that my right leg should be amputated, but my consent was needed before procedures could begin. Osteomyelitis had taken its toll and at the age of 14 had left me with scoliosis and had restricted the growth of my right leg by about 12 inches. Events began to unfold with me being called into Matron's office. Following a brief greeting, I was confronted by three or four important looking gentlemen who said they would like to talk to me. Bearing in mind I had not long since left St Martins. There I had been flat in bed for a lengthy period undergoing 'Extension', which turned out to be a dismal failure. Now, I had just settled into my familiar self, having regained my mobility and sense of freedom, and here I found myself again anticipating a return to St Martins. It was only later that I realised my interviewers were in fact members of the Medical Advisory Committee and would have included my surgeon George Murray Levick.

The topic of conversation turned towards my growing disability. I was not making good progress, I recognised that. My spell of 'Extension' had left me with severe knee problems, it had become frozen and locked solid, and any attempt to flex it was extremely painful. The difficulties facing me with my

present disablement for the future were candidly explained and laid out before me but, even with such a painful limb it's suggested amputation came as a shock out of the blue. I was struck with alarm and could only mumble incoherently and nod my head in agreement. I left Matron's office in a daze and have little recollection of how the time passed until I found myself once again returning to St Martins. I settled in for the next two or three days feeling very subdued while being prepared for the coming surgical event. However, fate intervened and the surgeon George Murray Levick for some reason was not able to attend, and my operation was postponed for an indefinite period. I returned to St Georges and soon fell back into the usual routine of courtyard inspections before meals, and forming into groups for the daily trek across Chailey North Common to St Martins for morning prayers, followed by lessons and craft in the afternoon.

But all too soon the fateful day returned, with me once again finding myself between the white laundered sheets at St Martins Hospital, this time it was for real. The day before my appearance was required at theatre, screens were put round my bed and an orderly appeared carrying a tray of accoutrements that I was not familiar with at the time, but would be on a daily basis sometime later, and he shaved the lower portion of my body. On the following day, 22nd February 1948, the all-decisive day, I found myself with other patients, our beds adjacent to each other's, all destined for the operating theatre. My time was booked for 11am. The day began early, I remember. I had no breakfast. At about 9am I was collected and taken to the annex. I can't remember the nurse's name but this was her busy day. There I was bathed and the lower part of my body, on the right side from the waist down, was painted in a purple dye.

I remember the time being 11:30am when I was taken to the operating theatre covered in a white gown. I was transferred from the trolley to the operating table with all the paraphernalia around me. Although outwardly I appeared calm, inwardly I was in a fearful panic. I knew I was about to lose my leg, but the most fearful thought flooding my mind was that I would die under the anaesthetic, I remember still the fabric mask being placed over my mouth and nose. A few kind words were being spoken as I vainly struggled to stay awake against the overpowering effect of the anaesthetic still mumbling words until I slid into unconsciousness.

I was wheeled back to the ward where I regained consciousness slowly not yet quite aware of what was restraining my movement. I could feel with my hand my right leg was gone, and there was a feeling of weightlessness from the six inches that remained. It wasn't until I fully regained my senses that I realised a linen stricture had been placed across my thigh and weighted down with medical sandbags on either side that held my residual limb flat to the bed. I am convinced that my frozen hip, which was locked at a raised angle of about ten degrees, was not noticed at the time of the amputation and the sandbags used to compensate for the weight loss of the amputated limb and hold the residual in the horizontal position. I half solved the discomfort by sitting up supported by more pillows. The sensation of weight loss and my thigh struggling against the stricture remained until it was finally removed. Today my prosthesis is angled to take account of the 10-degree alignment needed. My recovery was slow mainly due to low spirits, feeling sorry for myself I grizzled for two days. I later learned that I had come out of the operating theatre at 2pm, which the nurse said was longest operating procedure she could remember. I was told my operation had been performed by an eminent naval surgeon. It is only now that I realise how his war time experiences as Fleet Surgeon at Gallipoli had brought him to such prominence and that I was a beneficiary of his medical experience and skill.

I remained in St Martins all through the summer in convalescence, sleeping on the veranda, until eventually I found myself back at St Georges on crutches minus a limb. My recovery was swift, I rapidly adapted to the use of crutches and attained a speed of mobility that I'd never had before. My speed and dexterity did not go unnoticed by the powers-to-be and come the annual sports day I was entered into most of the events they thought fit. I remember I excelled at football, not necessarily for my goal

scoring prowess, but for the speed at which I could propel the ball forward and open up goal-scoring opportunities for others, although it was often at the expense of a few bruised ankles and shins from contact with my crutches during the rough and tumble that ensued.

Time was fast approaching for me to leave Chailey for the outside world, of which I knew very little, but first I needed to be fitted with a prosthesis. This entailed several journeys to the Limb Fitting Centre at Roehampton, London. This would have been in the latter part of 1948 when I was 15 years of age. Transportation remains a bit of a fog, but I would have been driven by car. Compared with today's prosthetics, my first one was made completely from wood, apart of course from the pelvic band as it was called in those days, which today is the waist band. My current limb has not changed all that much, it is still a metal-shaped steel band, padded and covered with leather, and is attached to the socket by a tie rod and a hinge. The wooden socket of my first limb was hand carved, I remember at subsequent fittings the fitter shaped the lip of the socket using hand tools.

I think it was early 1949 that I took delivery of my first artificial limb, the word prosthetic didn't enter into my vocabulary until much later in my life. As my 16th birthday approached in April so too did the time when I would leave Chailey for the last time. I was making slow progress with the new limb and the thought of entering a new life in the outside world completely unnerved me. I had spent a holiday staying with my grandmother, she was a loving caring lady, who had kept in touch by sending me her sweet rations throughout the war, but I could not envisage coping with civilian life as I called it, while acclimatising myself with my prosthesis. The normal period for holidays at that time was from August. Being classified as an orphan meant that I spent practically all of my holidays at Chailey. My mother had died in 1935 and I had no memory of her, my father was in the forces abroad, also unknown to me, and my guardian was my grandmother. By this time, I had spent ten years at Chailey and I didn't want to leave. I had a very sympathetic talk with Matron and as I expressed my fears and doubts, she made it clear that such a request was unusual, nevertheless, at a later audience, I learned the good news that I had been granted an extra term until I became more accustomed to my prosthesis.

My last year at Chailey was very active. A scout troop was formed and I became leader of the Raven Patrol. We joined the International Jamboree for disabled scouts at Nijmegen in Holland. Making the journey by cross-channel ferry and train was an awesome experience and, although the war had been finished three years, there was still so much war damage to be seen. Yet, these were more happy than sad times at Chailey, but times of stress are inevitable in the world of disablement. It's how one deals with it that is character forming. I can say without any doubt the removal of my recalcitrant limb was the right decision. Within a few months I had put on weight and my growth had increased markedly. I am now aged 89 and have never been out of work until retirement age. I consider I have had good life which would not have been the case had it not been for the caring medical professionals and staff at Chailey Heritage, and the work of its founder Dame Grace Kimmins.



Jack leading the Raven Scout Patrol at St Georges while on crutches 1949.



Jack wearing his first prothesis at the International Scout Camp for disabled scouts at Nijmegen 1949.