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# Some Strands of a Longer Story – Reflections on the Development of Therapeutic Child Care in Britain

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*ABSTRACT: This paper explores some historical pathways and experiences which have helped shape residential therapeutic provision for children and young people. The source of much of the information in Part 1 is Maurice Bridgeland's (1971) book 'Pioneer work with maladjusted children'. I have used this to develop a 'snapshot' of the 19<sup>th</sup> century foundations and precursors to the work. The other main reference for this work is Kajetan Kasinski's (2003) chapter 'the roots of the work-definitions, origins, influences', which traces the evolution of the different 'branches' of this tradition. In Part 2, I describe my experience of researching other strands of this story through experiences relating to Bodenham Manor School and New Barns, which I hope will provoke research into more as yet 'invisible' links and connections.*

## Part 1: Beginnings

In 1756 Mr John Fielding and Mr Fowler Walker founded the Marine Society 'for the redemption and reformation of young criminals' through naval training. Fielding later founded the Female Orphan Asylum and the Magdalen Hospital for destitute and 'erring' girls. In 1788 the Philanthropic Society founded a 'cottage home' system for 'the protection of poor children'. These early experiments were the precursors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century 'ragged' and 'industrial schools'. After the Poor Law Act of 1834, English taxpayers complained about 'the expense of maintaining the destitute in both workhouses and schools'. Twelve years later, in Bath in 1846, the 'Misses White' started a residential setting for 'the reception and training of idiot children'. They wrote:

H. B., aged eight at the time of his admission, was violent and unmanageable to a great degree: subject to fits of rage, during which he would throw himself on the floor, kicking and screaming until exhausted. In walking through the shops he was with difficulty restrained from rushing into the shops and seizing everything he saw in them ...

(Bridgeland, 1971: 46)

A little further west, also in 1846, Mary Carpenter, a philanthropist opened the first 'ragged school' at Lewin's Mead in the slums of Bristol. From this experience she wrote her 1851 book 'Reformatory schools for the children of the perishing and dangerous classes and for juvenile offenders'.

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These early communities persevered with a 'caring' approach, which was based on creating relationships within regular daily structures and routines. Stimulating educational and co-operative work experiences were also built in. These early practitioners often reported significant change in the children they admitted. For example, H B in Bath:

He is now able to read and write fairly, can repeat many texts of Scripture, hymns etc., and is perfectly orderly when walking, asking questions as to what he sees passing around him. His temper is equally improved.

(*ibid.*)

Similarly Mary Carpenter reported to her 'governors' committee':

from one to two hundred of the most destitute and neglected children of this large city are seen coming voluntarily and regularly to school ... improving rapidly in reading, writing figures and general knowledge ... and exercising, in general, sufficient self control to behave in an orderly manner, unawed by the fear of punishment.

(*ibid.*: 61)

Mary Carpenter's active work and constant campaigning persuaded the government of the day to set about supporting liberal reforms, and establish 'day feeding' industrial schools. This work, along with that of other prominent reformers such as Charles Dickens, Lord Shaftesbury and Dr Barnardo (whose village home for orphaned and neglected girls opened in 1875), led to The Education Act of 1870, establishing free universal and compulsory education for children up to age 11.

Pressure from liberal and philanthropic individuals and groups was important in development of provision for disadvantaged and anti-social children and young people. Slowly government structures were put in place to manage (or 'contain') the problem of troubled and troublesome young people within society. In 1908, separate juvenile courts were set up to differentiate the legal needs of children and young people from adults. These institutions and services gained legal and state support through acts of parliament, e.g. the Education Acts of 1944 (when the term 'maladjusted' was introduced) and The Children Acts of 1948, 1958, 1989, 2004.

Alongside this 'mainstream' developed other experimental forms of work, by individual 'pioneers' who believed in the intrinsic value of work based on developing relationship with young people in a community setting. These pioneers had different ideas, beliefs and values (see Kasinski, 2003). They were variously influenced by Christian and charitable doctrine (the monastic and Quaker traditions), political motivation, charismatic personality, psychological insight and the emergence of psychoanalytic theory. I will explore a 'live' experience of such influences in Part 2.

As well as Mary Carpenter, Bridgeland's 'pioneers' include: Homer Lane, A S Neill, William Henry Hunt, Leila Rendel, Otto Shaw, Rudolph Steiner, F G Lennhoff, David Wills, Bill Malcolm, Arthur Barron, Marjorie Franklin, George Lyward, Richard Balbernie, and Barbara Dockar-Drysdale. Much remains documented about the lives and works of these people and the communities they founded, but much has been lost or destroyed over time.

Craig Fees writes about the loss and random destruction of such archive material from this tradition:

The enormous and ongoing loss of human and archival memory is therefore one of the most important stumbling blocks to a genuine understanding of

milieu therapy in Britain as it is and as it has been and to establishing a secure political and social foundation for an area of work which society fundamentally does not feel the need to understand.

(Fees, 1998: 172)

## **Part 2: Other strands and experiences**

I will start with a true story about such a loss of experience. Sometime during the 1980s many of the children's files and miscellaneous material kept since the founding of the Mulberry Bush School were moved to a bike shed on the grounds for storage. By the mid-1990s a major re-development project was underway. The shed had to be levelled to make way for a new purpose built residential unit. Before this happened the files were duly rescued. All the children's files since 1948 were found to be intact, but other miscellaneous files had been badly damaged by damp, mould and mice.

Recently I was contacted by Robin Reeves, a previous Principal of the Mulberry Bush School. He asked me if, for research purposes, he could access the collection of referral papers written throughout the late 1940s and the 1950s by John Bowlby (and probably some by Donald Winnicott).

Although I had heard about this legendary file, I had never seen it; nor had Alison Shaw, our school secretary who, after 18 years here (due to retire in December – and I record this for history), can generally find most archive material. Maybe one day the file will turn up inside another file, or in the wardrobe of a former member of staff, or maybe its fate was to decay or become nesting material for mice.

### **An archival journey**

I contacted Craig Fees at the Planned Environment Therapy Trust (PETT) in May to ask his help in researching this paper. I visited PETT a week later.

Initially I had thought to write about my experiences at the Cotswold Community, and especially about my memories of Richard Balbernie in his last years as Principal of the Community before his death in 1986. I arrived at PETT and met Craig, who had opened up a computer file containing interviews which Craig had made with Robert Laslett in 1989. Robert Laslett (1923-2002) (see *The Joint Newsletter*, No. 5, pp. 36-37 and No. 6, pp. 35-36, 2002) had worked as a teacher in several of the pioneer therapeutic communities during the 1950s. He later worked at Birmingham University's Department of Education, in special needs education. He was also a valued Trustee of the Mulberry Bush School. These files contained fascinating memoirs and anecdotes of Laslett's experiences with Richard Balbernie as Principal of Swalcliffe Park School in Oxfordshire in the early 1950s. Another file contained Laslett's account of working at Bodenham Manor School as headteacher in the mid-1950s.

Craig had also left a large manuscript on a table in the library for me to peruse. The manuscript was an as yet unpublished book by someone called Tony Rees entitled *An Obscure Philanthropist*. It was about the life and work of a Frank Mathews (1871-1948).

I will start this strand of the story in the late 1870s when, after the death of her husband, Frank's mother moved the family to Birmingham where she pursued a career as a teacher. As a young man, Frank experimented with a variety of jobs including working for a local horticulturalist, who at the time was developing new varieties of seeds.

Also in Birmingham at this time was Arthur Holden, a businessman who owned his own successful paint manufacturing company. Holden was a member of the Unitarian Church; the combination of his political and religious beliefs underpinned his active

social concern. These views were also nurtured by the culture of energetic radicalism in Birmingham at this time. Holden found the ethos of Birmingham congenial to both business and his beliefs, and he set up the Hurst Street Mission, a centre for religious observation, and for providing basic welfare services to deprived local people.

In 1889, on his way to work, Frank Mathews regularly passed the Hurst Street Mission, and in June 1890 met Holden while attending the mission. The relationship and influence of Holden on Mathews was enduring. Frank wrote in his diary that by October 1893 aged 22 he had 'abandoned horticulture'. On 24 June that year he had heard John Trevor speak on a new organisation, The Labour Church; on Sunday 10 July, a Mrs Aveling talk on International Labour; and around this time he also heard lectures by Graham Wallas, an early Fabian, on The English Citizen.

Influenced and excited by this emergent culture, Frank bought Vols. 1-43 of The Fabian Tracts published in 1893, and quotes in his diary from Fabian Tract No.7, Capital and Land (1891):

One in five Londoners dies in the workhouse, hospital or lunatic asylum, one in eight of the manual class is a pauper, or has been one.

From 1893-1897 Frank was in regular attendance at the Unitarian Church (affiliated to the Labour Church) where he was involved in creating and running The Cinderella Club, which offered basic care and welfare services to destitute children in Birmingham.

By 1923 Frank had founded the Birmingham Society for the Care of Invalid and Nervous Children. Here he met a Hilda Price who was the typist and book-keeper for the society.

The society flourished over the next two decades, and ran a radical programme of foster care homes with social work support for disadvantaged and deprived children. In 1946 Frank, aged 74 and still active in the Society, bought Bodenham Manor, six miles from Hereford, for £5,000. The intention was for it to be run on behalf of the Society as a residential school for deprived children. It opened in 1950 with support from the Ministry of Education providing places for 30 emotionally troubled pupils aged 7-11. A warden, David Wills, was appointed. Wills had a track record for therapeutic work via the Hawkspur ('Q') camps (Wills, 1941), and more recently with emotionally disturbed young men in the Barns Hostel in Peebles.

### Another strand

I had got this far in my reading, when John Cross, Director of PETT, entered the library. I explained to John what I was trying to do. John knew the author of the book, Tony Rees: they had been friends together as children. Hilda Price (later Rees) was Tony's mother. It transpired that John had worked at Bodenham Manor in 1952. I asked John if I could talk to him about this experience later in the day. He agreed to meet with me at 3.00 pm.

#### *The 3.00 pm meeting: a conversation with John Cross*

John talked more about his connection with Tony Rees, the author of the book. They had been friends in Birmingham as boys. John went to the King Edward Grammar School in Birmingham. During the war he was evacuated, and King Edward's was amalgamated with Monmouth school. John felt that this experience of evacuation was a traumatic one for him, but later it gave him valuable insight into feelings of alienation and dislocation. Two years after being evacuated he returned to Birmingham, stopped going to school, and

spent much of his time in the Birmingham public library. John had joined the Labour Party at the age of 13 when Hilda Rees was the Moseley Ward party secretary. At the age of 15 John felt that his Church of England religion 'wasn't helping'. By the age of 16 John became the Moseley constituency secretary, and at 18 he had become interested in Quakerism, especially its emphasis on the concept of 'community' as a way of helping young people. In 1952, at age 21, John was persuaded to do some voluntary work in the summer before starting university. He spent a few days with David Wills the new warden at Bodenham Manor School in 1952. John felt that a combination of his evacuation experience, his social and political concern, and being well-read equipped him for this work. Within a week John had committed himself to working with children.

John Cross described David Wills as a very powerful figure who 'believed in people'. John described David Wills as essentially an 'authoritarian figure'. In John's view, Wills was able to transform and convert this authoritarian trait and make it more socially productive by: 'You make the success, achievement and will of the community your objective'.

John felt that purely authoritarian people would 'suppress that drive to recognise need'. At Bodenham 'everyone had a voice according to their development, and shared this development'.

Later, Craig Fees showed me a carbon copy of a letter dated 9.12.1976 from David Wills to a student, Kenneth Brownsword, who was researching Wills's work. I quote from the letter, in order to expand on John's observations.

It's about shared responsibility. The reason I used this was not that it was a useful instrument of therapy – it was to be sure, and how fortunate that it was! But for more fundamental reason arising from my religious beliefs and my whole attitude to life. The religious belief in question is the Quaker conviction that there is 'that of God' in every man, and while I don't propose to go through all the steps that lead to this conclusion, one of the things that follows for me, is the good old anarchist slogan 'No man is good enough to be another man's master'. Men have no right to order one another about nor to exercise power over one another, but should live together in such a way as to express in themselves, and to encourage expression in others, of what we Quakers call the inner light, or that of God ... So when I got to Hawkspur camp (and Barns and Bodenham and Reynolds house) shared responsibility was not something that I 'allowed' the clients to 'have'. On the contrary it was an inalienable right, of which I had no right (and no wish) to deprive them.

(Wills, 1976)

(This quote provides a valuable insight into the values, beliefs and motivation behind Wills's practice, and these find some common ground in the political and religious influences which are inter-woven into the formative experiences of Frank Mathews.)

John started as a student helper (he mentioned as in the tradition that Chris Beedell did at Hawkspur, the 'Q' camps, see The Joint Newsletter, No. 9, Dec. 2003) and then became the equivalent of a full-time therapeutic care worker. John became very involved in the life of the Bodenham community; he understood the dynamics of the community and 'its use therapeutically'. John also had close relationships with many of the children. By the time he decided to do a teacher training course, he was 'quite a powerful and influential member of the community'. So much so that new workers would often come to him for advice, as David Wills in his role as 'warden' was often taken up with other work.

At this time Howard Jones was the headteacher and Wills's deputy, even though as a teacher he was paid more than Wills. The management (governing) committee imposed a hierarchical structure on the school, and in John's view many of them did not understand the core concepts of the community and relationships being central to the therapeutic task. After Howard Jones, Robert Laslett arrived as headteacher; after he left a succession of headteachers or 'deputies' arrived but did not stay.

During this time, John found himself gathering all the children who were excluded from lessons. John had become the covert or 'unspoken' deputy. At the age of 29 John himself applied for the headteacher post but he was not appointed as the committee felt he was 'too young' and not appropriately qualified. They appointed someone who in John's view 'did not understand the TC approach'. Wills also told the committee that in his opinion they had appointed the wrong person. In 1961 David Wills resigned; soon after John and Hilda Rees also left. Within two weeks there was a riot, which resulted in considerable damage to the fabric of the school. As a result of this the school was temporarily closed and later re-opened with a Mr Bilby (a previous headteacher) in charge of a newly-created approved school. (The last meeting of the 'Birmingham society for the care of invalid and nervous children' was held in September 1977. Bodenham Manor School closed in 1987.)

In 1961, John moved on to work in a boys' remand home in Nottingham as a deputy superintendent, where the brief of the team was to create a new and more therapeutic environment. Here John was eventually put in charge of education! From Nottingham John moved to Liverpool, where he was made head of the assessment and observation centre at Newhays in Allerton (here he was joined by Robbie Kidd who had been the gardener and handyman at Bodenham). Between 1962 and 1965, John and his team set up a small therapeutic unit, within the observation and assessment centre. This enterprise was supported by a dynamic children's officer from the city's children's department, and through twice-weekly visits by Philip Pinkerton, a senior consultant psychiatrist from Alderhey children's hospital.

By 1965 John, David Wills and Robert Laslett were again meeting with plans to open a children's therapeutic community. They established a trust, and New Barns was opened in 1965. They had learned important lessons from the Bodenham experience, especially about the negative influence of a governing body which was neither committed nor understanding of the therapeutic model. They created a new model of governance in which half the group consisted of professional people chosen for their understanding, the other half of child care practitioners.

The staff of 10-15 were all appointed with their primary task as 'therapeutic workers', or as John called them 'professional adults'. They were all paid on a common scale linked to teachers' pay. They were allocated roles of teaching, care work and maintenance according to their professional expertise.

This 'socialist' model seems to have provided a balance between the vocational 'citizen of the community' element of the task, and the emergent links to a more 'professional' structuring of roles via the teachers' pay scale.

Within a short time it became accepted that John took a lead for the community, and he felt that he was supported by the staff to fulfil this role. John took the lead as 'principal' being involved in the overall organisation and structuring, but operating the system through a 'flattened hierarchy' model. He felt that he was managing with a genuine consensus from the staff team. The team worked from a vocational rather than a professional model with all staff 'living in' the close knit community.

I will leave that strand here. The history of the New Barns' community and its eventual traumatic closure is a story in itself, which I imagine will eventually be written up by those who had a direct experience of living and working in it.

### Conclusion

The process of dipping into and briefly researching this history put me in touch with the overwhelming scale and the immenseness of the inheritance of therapeutic child care. It has illuminated how individuals with a drive, ambition, or the right 'valency', can find themselves in the orbit of other like-minded people. Through planning, or serendipity, critical alliances are then formed. From this experience it seems that such alliances, within facilitating conditions, can bring about new ideas, experiences and trajectories for development and change.

Finally, several issues became apparent and relevant to myself during the writing of this, and are listed below.

1. Those involved in residential therapeutic work can enrich their experience through reflection on, and understanding of their own personal drives, motivations, and the experiences that have influenced and shaped their interest in such work.
2. An organisational 'matching principle' (Ward, 1995) is that staff might take time to reflect on the experiences and influences which have shaped their organisation's own development, in order to share this history as a meaningful foundation for their work.
3. A healthy organisation needs constantly to work to foster connections and a relationship with its governing body and its external environment. These connections, as an 'ongoing relationship with the outside world', help to anchor and secure the 'aliveness' and place of the organisation through communication, accountability, and transparency.
4. How the emotional containment, growth and survival of a therapeutic organisation is directly related to the quality of its management and leadership.
5. How the emergence and establishment of therapeutic child care at any one time might be seen as a reflection of emergent need within the current social context.

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