

A Memoir of Langdon Hills Sanatorium
by David

Introduction

I was born in January 1932 in North London and from 1933 I was brought up in Kingsbury, Middlesex just a few miles from Wembley.

From November 1942 to March 1943 I was in Redhill Hospital, Edgware, Middlesex being treated for pleurisy, pneumonia and tuberculosis. After a short while recuperating at home I was then sent to convalesce at a sanatorium. To the best of my understanding, the usual sanatorium for cases at Redhill Hospital was at South Mimms in Hertfordshire but, whether because I was a child or whether wartime measures had merged hospital services I do not know, I was sent instead to Langdon Hills Sanatorium in Essex.

Another thing I am not clear about is the nature of arrangements before the NHS came into being - I know that my parents paid into some kind of medical club but I don't know how this would have been run and whether it would have played any part in where I was treated.

Anyway, this was a sanatorium for boys and girls which was also known as West Ham Sanatorium; most of the children there came from the East End - areas I had never really heard of before, such as Plaistow, Canning Town, Forest Gate and Stratford. Of course, I had heard of Stratford - it was where Shakespeare was born, but fortunately I kept my mouth shut long enough to learn that this was a very different Stratford.

The buildings

The buildings were, I think, typical of sanatoria built when rest and fresh air were the main curative treatments for TB. There was a small central admin area flanked by boys' accommodation on one side and a mirror image girls' area on the other. Both wards faced more or less due south and had folding glazed doors along the south giving onto a glazed veranda. These were opened as often as the weather allowed and in good spells the beds nearest to the doors were moved onto the veranda, while those behind were moved across the ward as far as possible. Most of us were supposed to be confined to bed rest for most or all of the time but I don't remember that we were especially obedient just because we were unwell.

In addition to the main wards there were several single-bedded side wards and bath and toilet facilities were placed behind the accommodation areas. The whole block, I believe, was built as a single storey. In front of the site there was an area of asphalt on which was built a schoolroom and beyond that the land rose in a slight hill at the top of which stood the Nurses' Home.

Out in the grounds

To the left of the asphalt and in clear view of the boys' ward was an orchard - or at least some dwarf wooded area - enclosed within a wire fence.

There were two fine trees along this boundary, an elm and a Lombardy poplar which had been named by one of the lads - goodness knows why - as the 'O'Gladys' and the 'Straight Jane' respectively. This threw me completely; I had never thought of giving a personal name to a tree and I asked the boy why he had done this. Alas, he seemed as unable to explain it as I was to understand it.

Beyond the asphalt was an open area of upland sloping meadow that gave onto woodland beyond. It was at the edge of the woodland that we boys built a series of 'camps', each of which was to be 'the last' and yet was inevitably replaced with its successor. I don't remember how we did it, but we managed to light camp fires in this place and 'toasted' wartime bread on the flames as well as making chocolate biscuits by attempting to melt some rare chocolate which we had received onto very ordinary biscuits. As I recall it, both these culinary adventures were minor disasters, but we ate the results anyway. At least the toast was more successful than our winter attempts to make it by laying slices of bread, smuggled from our teatime food trays, on the hot pipes.

The Staff

I think that the Nurses' Home must have been a private country house at one time. We never approached it, and it stands in my mind as a double fronted white two storey building with a porch, from which we could see the nurses emerge as they came down the winding path to start their duties.

The staff in charge were a Matron (whom we rarely saw at close range) and Sister, who saw us quite a lot. She was a comfortable looking lady who bustled about the place, often repeating herself, whereas Matron was a slightly built slim lady who said very little.

Nurses seemed to come and go - probably a result of the war - and the names have mostly gone too, but there were a mother and daughter - the daughter had striking red hair and a temper to match, so naturally we plagued her.

A Memoir of Langdon Hills Sanatorium - Part 2

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Air-raid shelter

Langdon Hills looked across towards Tilbury and the Thames estuary and since the boys' wing lay to the east of the site, we had a good view of the fires caused by the German bombers going along the Thames corridor. I think the girls' view would have been obstructed by the schoolroom and the Nurses' Home; on the other hand, the air-raid shelter had been built at their end of the site so they were nearer to safety than us. I only remember us all going down to the shelter on one occasion but there may have been more times. It was a busy night with incendiaries falling over the site and the next day we were able to see a large canister that had come down just outside the shelter. I presume it must have discharged smaller bombs as it fell but nobody told us what it was, or if they did I have long since forgotten. However, there were many nights when we could look out from the open doors of the ward and see the skies along the Thames glowing red.

Treatment

The treatment as I've already indicated consisted of rest and fresh air. An important consideration was, of course, keeping us 'regular'. We were not supposed to realise this, I suppose, but it did not take a genius to notice that sometimes the regulation mug of tea that arrived on your tray had your name written on its side in purple indelible pencil. It was not unknown for those who did not wish to be kept 'regular' to erase their name with a wet hand and swap the cup with another unsuspecting person's - especially as it tended to be the kind of place where might was right if the staff were not about.

The other patients

There was, in this context, a rough and ready pecking order among us, determined partly by age and partly by physique. The 'alpha male' so to speak was Vic, a young man of around 14 who had a room to himself adjacent to the ward and who more or less officially kept us in order. It was he who had the weekly comics first and they came to us in rotation after he'd finished with them. Then it was Wally and George's turn, then Peter and me and so on. At home I had only read the Hotspur; at Langdon Hills I could also read The Rover, Adventure and Wizard, as well as the picture comics like Mickey Mouse Weekly and Film Fun.

We all wore a kind of 'uniform' although it was never referred to as such. For the boys it was grey flannel short trousers, grey socks, pants and vest and white shirt with a zipped-up windjammer on top. (I don't remember what the girls wore, though there is a half memory of grey gymslips.) I do have two photos taken while I was there - who took them I have no idea - they show Vic, Wally, George and myself, all dressed as I've described except that I am wearing a double-breasted jacket and Vic is in long trousers.

I remember few names of the other patients: there was a Michael and a James; of the girls I only remember the names Louise - Vic's counterpart, Pauline and Valerie. We had very little mixing of the sexes; what did occur took place mostly in the schoolroom. A teacher came across from Stanford-le-Hope and held school for those well enough to attend; I have few memories of that room, so I conclude I didn't attend until near the end of my stay at the sanatorium. But I do remember that I was in the room on one occasion before the teacher had arrived and I opened the piano and played from memory some of the pieces I had learned at home. (I always have had some musical ability.) This impressed the others, of course - my moment of fame in a year at Langdon Hills.

Listening to the radio

