A glimpse inside the lunatic asylum

DUBLIN HISTORY

Some patients who entered the Richmond Lunatic Asylum never left again, writes Joyce Fegan, and the belongings they brought with them have only recently been discovered.

For 200 years, a 73-acre site in Dublin's north inner city, was home to tens of thousands of so-called 'lunatics.' The place was Grangegorman, and home was the Richmond Lunatic Asylum — Ireland's first public psychiatric hospital. It opened its doors in February 1814.

Some of its patients only stayed a short time, while others were forgotten about forever by their families and ended up spending most of their lives in the hospital.

Like the patients who were abandoned in Grangegorman, so too were the meagre possessions they went in with. Their handbags, containing love letters and Christmas cards, never left the site and remain there to this day. They were only recently discovered, when the old hospital became the new campus for the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT).

"In the handbags, there'd be anything that you'd expect — people have their vanities, so there would be combs, hairbrushes, lipsticks, mirrors and there might be tablets and medication," says artist Alan Counihan, who created a short exhibition last year from the abandoned belongings.

"There were diaries, there were books of poetry, there were false teeth and there were bicycle clips and an envelope addressed to President de Valera with two keys inside in it."

"Every single handbag had at least one set of rosary beads, every single handbag had a set of house keys and those house keys never opened the door they were supposed to open again," he adds.

"I wanted to explore these people as human beings and for people who came to the exhibition, to realise that the line between 'them' and 'us' is very, very thin, and some of these people that went in there weren't sick at all."

"They were abandoned by their families and the reasons that the belongings were still there were either because the person left, left the belongings behind them and began anew, or the person died there and the families didn't even bother to collect the belongings," says the artist.

In 2011, the late journalist Mary Raftery's documentary about Ireland's psychiatric hospitals, Behind the Walls, aired. This is when Alan came to know about the thousands of personal possessions left behind by our people that we forgot.

"In the course of that, when it was being filmed, a group of volunteers — that would be the retired chaplain Fr Piaras O'Duill, the retired director of nursing Dick Bennett and some fellow interested parties — suspected there was a lot of archival material in an attic in an old building, which was no longer in use, and in fear that that might go astray with DIT taking it over, they rescued it," explains Alan.

The hospital was fully decommissioned by 2013, and in September 2015, it had opened its doors to the first tranche of DIT students. By 2020, it will be home to all of DIT's 20,000 students.

"They found this incredible archive of the hospital — I think they found over 30 tonnes of paper, over two container loads, but to their surprise, they found boxes and boxes and boxes of personal belongings, and in a big pile in the middle of the floor, a big huge load of handbags, each one with a label on it," adds Alan.

It was from these piles of possessions that Alan revised our history and brought these personal effects out into the light.

He held his exhibition, called Personal Effects, on-site at Grangegorman in May 2014, then in Culture Box in Temple Bar and then in Axis, Ballymun.

Now, the handbags, rosary beads and hairbrushes remain in storage on the new college campus.

But what about the people behind the possessions?

"A lot of staff came and relatives came. It seemed to act as a catalyst and people would come out and talk to me about their relatives who had been in there and in some cases, whom they were never allowed to visit. Some people came to the exhibition hoping they could find something out about their relative," explains Alan.

LETTERS

Of Alan's discoveries, while he kept all names and addresses private from the public, he came across lots of personal correspondence. One remarkable group of letters was between a young man and woman.

"People go in there for the strangest of reasons — the young woman was in a mother and baby home about to have her child at the time of the correspondence, and it would appear that the couple married just before she had the baby. Just after the marriage, the man had admitted himself to the hospital, so what was in his mind?" asks Alan, who was able to work out the timeline of events from the set of letters he found.

"My feeling is that he left the hospital, maybe about four weeks later, and the hope is that they were able to keep the child, because they'd married under the guidance of the nuns if you like, and they were able to begin their life. I won't go into it, but I do believe that their life worked out," he adds.

Other documents formed typical hospital paperwork, but it too, gave him a sign of the times.

"In 1967, you have a 17-year-old being committed from the Magdalene Laundry in Donnybrook because she's 'impossible and breaks things,'" he explains.

Alan had applied for funding from the Arts Council for the project, but he was unsuccessful, so he went ahead on his own to make sure these belongings had their day in the public eye.

"I put thousands of hours into this, I just realised there was a really important story to tell here — maybe it was social activism."
“You can’t blame it on the Church, you can’t blame it on the State, you have to look at society here and the Irish families that made it up. The finger points back at ourselves — you can’t wag it and say it was somebody else’s fault, it’s us,” he says.

For the time being, the handbags and love letters, rosary beads and dentures remain in safekeeping, but unexhibited, on the new college campus. Their future is uncertain.

“This work doesn’t belong anywhere else other than Grangegorman. It’s about Grangegorman, what it’s made from is of Grangegorman and the place the work belongs is Grangegorman,” says Alan.

‘The line between “them” and “us” is very, very thin, and some of these people that went in there weren’t sick at all’