

The place of Le Court residents in the history of the disability movement in England

(This paper was never published and is based on anecdotal evidence from residents living in Le Court during the 1950s and 60s).

To Peter and Paul.

As disabled people increasingly identify one with another in common actions to bring about a more just society we have a duty to take note of events of the past and ask ourselves if these are not part of our history, a part of the story of a shared struggle for more control over our own lives.

It is my contention that disabled people once resident in the Le Court Cheshire Home have a significant place in the history of the disability movement. To ignore their relevance is to undervalue the struggles that took place there and to fail to recognise the contribution these residents made to the campaign for self determination among disabled people in this country.

This paper is written to draw attention to these people, their circumstances and their courageous and principled actions in response to their shared oppression.

The following chronicles the period from 1945 to 1974 with the main events taking place during the late 1950s through to the mid 1960s.

1. At the end of the Second World War Leonard Cheshire tried to establish an ex-servicemen's self help community in North London. After a time this failed and the assessment

was that this was due to the absence of an agricultural resource. An estate with such potential became available in Hampshire and the community moved to Le Court. In time this foundered due to the lack of capital. The debts were settled by selling off land leaving Cheshire and the remaining participants with "the big house" in which they sought to retain the "Christian Socialist" experiment of the original community.

2. In 1948, Arthur Dykes, one of the earlier participants in the self-help community and often described as the first "Cheshire Home Resident", was homeless having left the community when it failed through financial problems. Dykes was admitted to a local hospital where he was diagnosed as being terminally ill. The hospital contacted Cheshire and requested his help to find a nursing home. He failed to do so largely because such facilities were very rare. The result was Cheshire's spontaneous decision to take Dykes in and care for him.

This led to the ad hoc development of another kind of semi self help community, except that this time the residents were "patients". A variety of sick and disabled people came to Le Court of their own initiative and they sustained themselves by their own efforts. Each contributed. Some washed up, some cooked, some mowed the lawns, some did the shopping, and some tried to raise the funds necessary to cover their costs. Everyone took part in the running of the Home.

I believe that this was to prove significant for what follows in that, from the beginning, the residents expected to be involved in the day to day management of their home.

3. As time progressed Cheshire's attention was drawn elsewhere and Cheshire's father, a Professor of Law, felt it necessary to establish a Management Committee composed of local dignitaries to take on the responsibility of managing the funds raised through donations thus giving "respectability" to the venture.

New developments in the Welfare State opened up opportunities for the statutory funding of residents, a more secure arrangement than relying on charitable income. However this funding lead to pressures to conform to Nursing Home criteria. At around the same time the "big house", a Victorian mansion, had to be replaced as it was being undermined by an underground stream. In 1952 a new Home was purpose built with a grant from the Carnegie Foundation.

There now followed a period of parallel development. The self help resident ethos persists and more and more physically impaired people get themselves to Le Court as this gains a reputation for being the place where disabled people can lead their own life. Alongside this the Management of the Home unquestioningly conforms to and adopts more and more medically orientated practices. These, and other more petty rules, are firmly implemented by the Management Committee through the Warden and the Matron.

4. A tension developed between the independently minded residents body and the authoritarian management. This tension, though not always clearly defined, bubbled beneath the surface and occasionally erupted. The issues are focussed on the leadership of the two parties, the Warden and the Matron who are the appointed arm of the Management Committee, and, the Chairman and Secretary

of the Residents Association, who are the elected representatives of the residents.

The residents officers at this time were Peter Wade and Paul Hunt.

5. Tensions bubbled near to the surface with a number of eruptions of varying magnitude. Two incidents seem to epitomise the issues and actions. The second being a 'defining moment.

The first incident was between 1956-58 when united action was taken by the residents in the form of putting staff into Coventry. The residents proposed a "Works Council", made up of staff, residents and Management Committee, as a way of ensuring consultation. This was rejected out of hand though later the Matron was responsible for some easing of rules.

The second action was in 1962 when a further united resistance resulted from the management threat to "expel" Peter Wade.

The general issues leading to the second action were the increasing introduction of petty hospital routines and rules by a new Matron, thus eroding the hard won gains of the previous action. One of the early skirmishes was to do with a rule that insisted that residents requiring staff assistance must change into their pyjamas before the Day Staff finished work at 6 o'clock. The residents agreed to resist this rule together. On a chosen date all refused to co-operate with staff and would not allow themselves to be changed into their pyjamas.

However the real crunch came one dinner time when the Warden and Matron read out the following rules without any prior discussion or consultation:

- i. All TVs off by 10.30pm.
- ii Everyone needing help to be in bed by 11.00pm.
- iii Residents wishing to go out after dark must ask permission.
- iv No public exposure of bodies in hot weather.

Peter Wade broke the silence that followed this announcement with a loud "Rubbish!". The Warden ordered him to leave the room and when he refused a member of staff was instructed to wheel him out. Peter is reputed to have eyed the person indicated and said, "Lay a finger on me and I'll kill you!" Later, when things quietened down, Peter left the room of his own accord. Infuriated by this defiance the Warden then took steps to have Peter expelled from the Home.

Intense anger about this threatened expulsion spread amongst the residents. Within days there was an escalation of tension and resentment and the split between the Management and the residents widened. The Warden, supported by the Management Committee, decided to "punish" a whole group of residents particularly identified with Peter's stance and gave these "ring leaders" notice of eviction from the Home.

6. Appalled by this decision the residents, and a growing number of their supporters outside the Home, appealed to a variety of authorities including the Founder who, after considerable persuasion, eventually became involved. Possibly fearing adverse publicity in the Press he responded by advising the Management Committee that a Cheshire

Home was a home for life. That meant that residents could not be evicted. Thereafter the Management Committee were disbanded, a new Chairman was appointed (Hampden Innskip QC) and charged with the task of working with the residents to find solutions to the issues causing the tensions.

It should be noted that one of Cheshire's earlier proposals was the suggestion that the six "ring leaders" should leave and set up their own home in a local town with a gift of £1,000. They were tempted despite the risks involved, (remember that this was 1962 and neither the social welfare climate nor public acceptance was as conducive to such a move as today), but the six refused to be "bought off". They felt it would be an abandonment of the other residents and the principles they had fought for. Their refusal to go was an honourable decision, an important example of their solidarity and commitment.

7. The long standing complaint of the residents was that they had no role in what happened in the Home and so, in what happened in their lives. The new Chairman of the Management Committee chose to co-operate with the residents in order to develop ways to include them in decision making. But it was not until 1965, eight years after the original "Works Council" proposal, that the Management Committee finally agreed to the inclusion of two residents for a trial period. The prize for eight years of consistent and persistent struggle.

The pendulum had begun to swing. Residents gradually became involved in every aspect of life in the Home. Such was the transformation that in 1974, 17 years on from the "silent" action, one resident who had been in the struggles said to me that the battle had been won and that there was

nothing left to do. The Le Court Home came to be seen as a 'model' Residential Home to be emulated by other Homes.

8. However, by the time the reforms were complete, disabled peoples' aspirations had moved away from controlling their own Homes and on to the issues facing them in the world outside.

9. The significance of this history lies in the characters involved. In particular I would suggest that the episode proved a confirming experience for Paul Hunt who some years after "the action" left the Home and went on with others to found the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). His friend and colleague Peter Wade was also to leave the Home and marry, but he chose a different course of action.

It is instructive to note the subsequent career of these two friends. Peter believed that by joining existing orthodox disability organisations he could change them from the inside. Paul felt that these charities, by focussing on Residential Care, were basically wrong. He saw disabled people's place as being in the community. In addition Paul felt that these existing long established "disability" organisations did not reflect the interests of disabled people and that disabled people should organise and form their own organisations.

Peter joined the management committees of the Leonard Cheshire Foundation and RADAR eventually becoming a Trustee in both. In later years I came to know Peter and can report that he regretted he had not influenced either organisation as much as he had hoped. There was a sense of disappointment relieved only by his subsequent very close

association with and support of Project 81 and HCIL -both organisations of disabled people.

Meanwhile there can be no denying that Paul Hunt and UPIAS did much during the 1970s to clarify disabled peoples' 'thinking. in this country. UPIAS was at the heart of developments leading, in 1981, to the formation of the British Council of Disabled People (BCODP).

10. Such a brief summary is possibly an over simplification of events. Certainly the text has not give any sense of the atmosphere that existed in the Home during the difficulties: the Management oppression; the resident's vulnerability and fear as well as their solidarity and courage. Of course it would be foolish to characterise it all as struggle and strife; of course there were good times as well as bad and of course there were 'good' people as well as 'bad'.

I believe this story needs to be told and its significance recognised in order that Peter Wade and Paul Hunt as well as their many unnamed associates, their fellow residents and their supporters, can take their place in the history of the disability movement. They are a part of our shared history, the story of people who refused to accept the conditions society put on them and who, by acting together, brought about changes. Changes that benefited themselves and subsequent generations.

These are our heroes. Let us not forget them.

Philip Mason: 4th Draft 9 August, 1990