

LEAVESDEN REVISITED

Christmas at Leavesden Hospital, a learning disabilities institution, had many routines but few joys. Now, after the hospital's closure, Ian McMillan finds that former residents and staff have mixed feelings about its demise

It was an emotionally-charged moment when the band struck up a tune during a ceremony to mark the closure of Leavesden Hospital in late October. The band was performing in front of over 1000 former residents and their relatives, who joined staff in a final farewell to the hospital, near Watford in Hertfordshire.

Even a couple of decades ago, the hospital was home to around 1600 people with learning disabilities, had its own nurse training school and staff social club, and was a major source of employment for local nurses and ancillary staff. Any suggestion then that it might close in the mid-1990s would probably have been greeted with derision. But the band's music and the accompanying fireworks at the closing ceremony provided concrete evidence that Leavesden Hospital had irrevocably reached the end of an era.

Events of this kind will become increasingly common across the country in the next few years as the remaining psychiatric and mental handicap institutions from the Victorian era are phased out and replaced by community-based alternatives. Though most mental health and learning disability nurses probably support this trend, hospitals such as Leavesden have provided the backdrop to many of their lives for years. Enduring friendships will have been forged between staff and patients, and hospital closing ceremonies offer what may be a final opportunity for former colleagues and patients to spend time together.

Over the past decade or so, hundreds of residents have been moved out of Leavesden Hospital's wards. In 1995 alone, around 200 residents were moved into small group homes in the community. But 36, for whom community placements could not be arranged, were transferred to the nearby Harpurbury and Cell Barnes

hospitals, two learning disability units run by Horizon NHS Trust. One of the last residents to leave the hospital was Florrie Watts, who at the age of 108 moved into a local nursing home. The hospital's oldest resident, she had spent 60 years as a Leavesden patient.

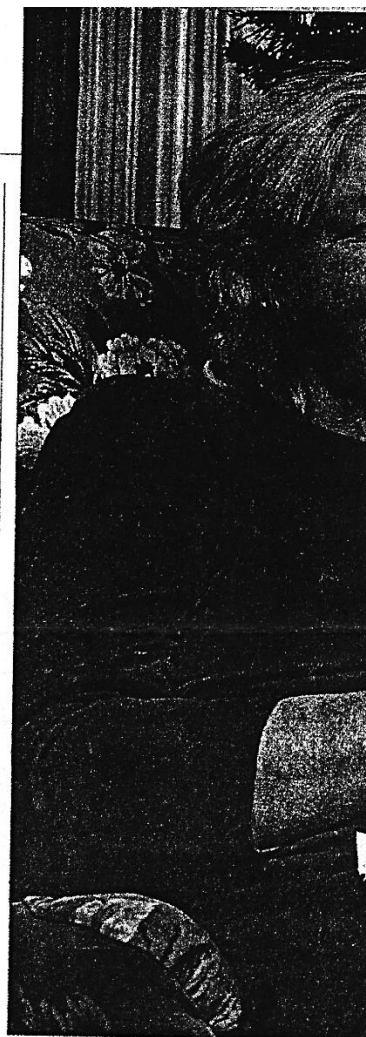
Sylvia Thomas, 72, moved into a group home in north-west London with six other Leavesden Hospital residents in 1991. Staff at the home, which is known simply by its house number and street name, accompanied Miss Thomas on the 50-mile round trip to take part in Leavesden's closing ceremony.

According to Ruth Shannon, who became the home's manager earlier this year, the event triggered feelings of unease in Miss Thomas. 'In the past when we have asked her if she would like to visit Leavesden, she has always said no,' Ms Shannon said. 'At first, the staff were quite apprehensive about her going. Every day she reminds us that Leavesden has closed down. Even though Sylvia has lived here for four years, she still feels insecure and needs constant reassurance that this is now her home.'

Indeed, Miss Thomas told me that she could no longer go back to Leavesden. 'They're building houses there now,' she said.

A high point in any large residential institution's calendar has always been Christmas. For staff and patients alike, the round of social events, extra visitors and extended menus brought a welcome break from predictable hospital routines.

Ms Shannon's life has been inextricably bound up with Leavesden Hospital: indeed, she was born in a flat in the grounds. She spent almost 20 years working there, first as a nursing assistant and then as an enrolled nurse after training in a general hospital. Her parents, who are now retired,



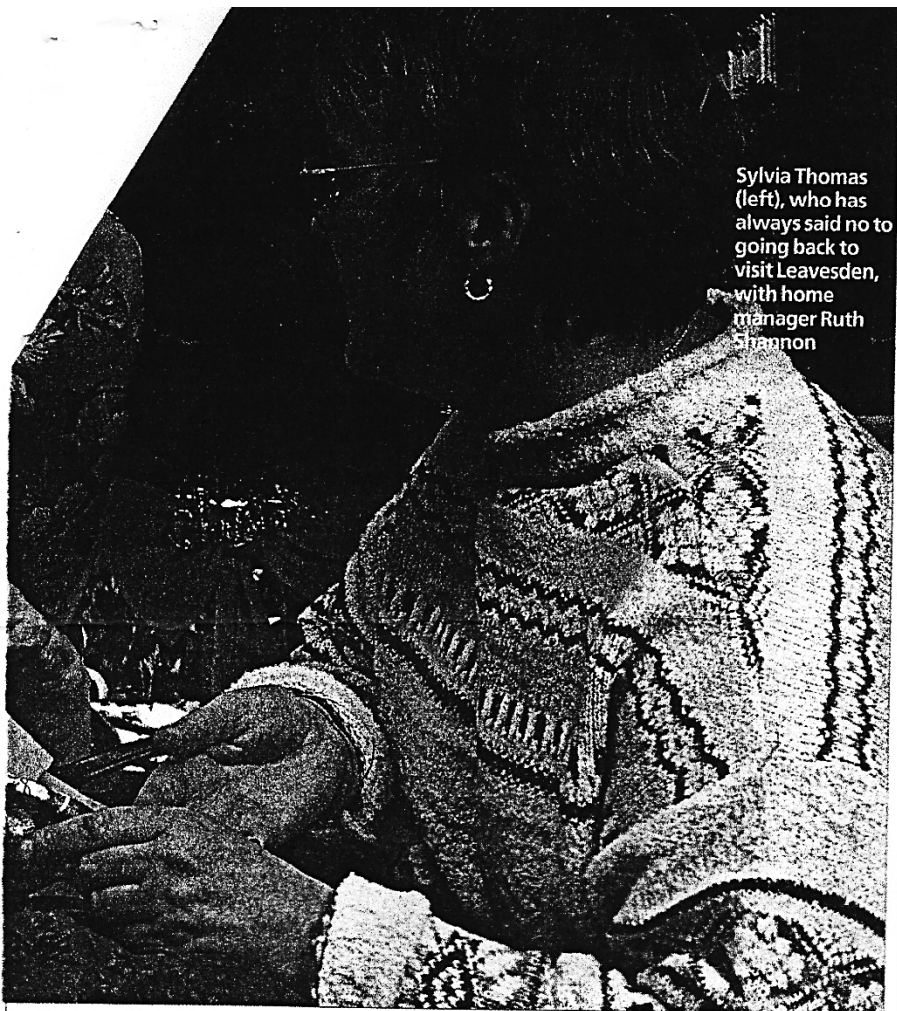
were nurses at Leavesden and lived in a hospital house. Ms Shannon's band, a scaffolder, is being made redundant from the post he held at Leavesden for 26 years because of the closure. From the age of five up to now she can recall visiting the all-locked ward at Christmas where her father was a charge nurse.

In the later stages of her care at Leavesden, Ms Shannon helped to run a ward in which residents were prepared for living more independently in the community. Although Ms Shannon admits that she was initially as sceptical as most of her colleagues about Leavesden's closure plans, she stresses that she gradually learned to support the resettlement programme.

Comparing the way in which residents in small homes can celebrate Christmas with their time in hospital convinces Ms Shannon that changes have been positive.

'I felt that more junior staff were much involved in preparing for Christmas and that, in turn, the residents had no say at all in what they would like to do over the Christmas period,' she says, when recalling her first Christmases on duty.

'In the early 1970s things were starchy and it didn't seem right for the staff to enjoy themselves or to



Sylvia Thomas (left), who has always said no to going back to visit Leavesden, with home manager Ruth Shannon

courage the residents to do so.'

The emphasis in the group home, one of 12 run by Life Opportunities Trust across Hertfordshire and North London, is on the residents reaching their own decisions, Ms Shannon explains. For example, the residents decide at one of their regular residents' meetings how they want to celebrate Christmas.

This year friends of the residents at her home — some of whom also hail from Leavesden — will be invited to a pre-Christmas party, along with relatives and fellow clients from the social services day centre that most of the residents attend on weekdays. None of the residents will spend Christmas with relatives. Despite the efforts of Leavesden's resettlement team, contact with relatives — which often broke down with patients' hospital admissions — has scarcely improved following the residents' move back into what was once their local community.

The introduction of the key worker system at Leavesden improved nurse-resident rapport, says Ms Shannon. But 20 or more years ago, encouragement was rarely given to relatives to visit regularly and there was little scope for privacy, with many wards containing 40 or more residents.

In the 1970s there was a lot of stigma about having a relative with a

learning disability and things were pushed under the carpet. Some relatives sent in collective presents like a box of chocolates, but I can't remember personal gifts ever arriving.'

While there were some special

Until moving out of Leavesden's main wards, some residents had never seen a real potato

events at Leavesden in the run-up to Christmas in the 1970s, such as a visit from Father Christmas who doled out small gifts to the residents, Ms Shannon points out that the regimented hospital routine continued, even on Christmas day itself.

'There were probably three staff on duty and 42 residents to get up. The residents did a lot of the cleaning and the bagging up of the laundry in those days. There was a special dinner, but even that would come up in the trolley and be dished out as usual — there wouldn't be a whole turkey or anything like that.'

The residents in the group home are encouraged help prepare vegetables and cook the Christmas meal. Until moving out of Leavesden's main wards, some residents had never seen a real potato, Ms Shannon says.

Residents are planning to go to a West End pantomime in the Christmas period and will have reasonably free access to a variety of alcoholic drinks, which would have been unthinkable in the hospital 20 years ago. However, Ms Shannon says staff will discreetly ensure the residents do not over-indulge in drinking.

Rebecca Law is a deputy home manager at the Firs, another seven-bedded home run by Life Opportunities Trust. It is sited on what were once the outskirts of Leavesden's grounds and has gradually been cut off from the original hospital site as a new private housing estate has sprung up around it. Six of the seven residents once lived in Leavesden, and some regret that they can no longer pop into the residents' canteen for a cup of tea and a chat with old friends.

Most of the home's residents went to watch the closing ceremony, says Ms Law. 'Some of our residents had been in Leavesden for 50-odd years so it's quite a shock when that goes.'

'They talk about the old days all the time. They often meet up with people they knew from Leavesden at their day centres.'

Ms Law's experience of trying to renew residents' links with relatives mirrors Ms Shannon's, in that invitations have largely been spurned. Just one Firs' resident will spend Christmas with relatives, and he transferred there directly from his family home.

Despite the distance from her origins in east London, resident Betty Newman, 70, has managed to retain links and will visit her family before Christmas.

'I did 49 years in Leavesden. I was beginning to get fed up with it,' she says. 'It's lovely here, really nice. We all have our bedrooms; at Leavesden we all used to sleep in one big dormitory. I'm not sorry it closed.'

Ms Newman can recall children from Tooting Bec Hospital in south London, which also closed recently, being evacuated to Leavesden during the Second World War.

The home's staff hope a school choir will visit the home to sing carols and entertain the residents. A juggler will be booked to visit in the New Year. In addition, there will be a party in the adjoining group home, various events at day centres and an outing to a pantomime in the holiday schedule. **NT**