

## **Conversation with Margaret Maughan, April 2011**

I was working in Africa in 1959 when I had a car accident. I was in Nyasaland (Malawi) and was treated at the local hospital where a South African surgeon was flown in to perform a laminectomy on my spine. Then the Foreign Office arranged for me to be flown back to England. They told me, 'We're sending you to a very famous hospital called Stoke Mandeville'. I'd never heard of it. When I got there a doctor said 'Tell me what you think is wrong with you'. All I knew was that I couldn't move; then they explained that my spinal cord was severed and that because those nerves don't regenerate I would never be able to walk again.

In those days the wards were just a series of long huts, with nice flower beds, rose bushes and grass outside of each; and behind these there was a field where the sports huts were. I remember maybe 24 to 30 patients on each ward. The wards were very open; there was such a lot of chatting and people shouting to their friends from one end to the other. Every ward had a long table down the middle for dining. And once you were well enough you were expected to be up and sitting there in the morning for breakfast. The first few days I was there I was quite amazed, because I saw all these young people in wheelchairs taking themselves off to the pub for supper. They were going down to The Bell in the village; we all went there when we were strong enough. It was good to push oneself along and use our arms or get a helpful push.

When I first came to the ward I was treated by Dr. Michaelis, my very caring consultant. Then one day Dr Guttman just appeared at my bedside; he had been away somewhere for a few days. I came to know him very well and discovered he was the boss. From then on every week his ward round was quite an experience. There would be about 20 people with him – nurses, physios, junior doctors, visitors – all come to see what his treatment was like. He would go to each bed on the ward and hold forth in a loud voice about each patient's condition; so we all ended up knowing about each other. He could be very curt. You didn't dare say anything back to him. I remember once I told him I was bored and I got this long lecture about how I shouldn't be bored because there was always something to do or be thinking about. He was very strict with everyone. Patients used to go to the pub in the evening and sometimes get a bit drunk and rowdy on the wards afterwards. He was like the headmaster and the culprits would have to go to his office the next morning to be told off.

Every Friday the Hoover people came. There was a factory somewhere nearby and their staff brought in things for us – goodies: chocolates and biscuits and things - and chatted to us. They also did regular fund-raising for us and took us for outings. I also remember carol singers from Aylesbury coming round at Christmas; loads of decorations on the wards; they did their best. Then there were these marvellous volunteers; each ward had some coming in mornings, afternoons or evenings; and they would read to you, look after your flowers, tidy your locker, bring coffee round, help you with writing letters: things like that.

In those days you had to lie in bed for several months and life was very boring. I was there for almost a year and spent the first four months on bed rest. You started off by doing bed exercises, lying on your back stretching and squeezing springs to build up your arm muscles. Once you could move about the whole day was full from very early. I might start with woodwork. I remember learning how to turn wood and making a lovely wooden bowl; then there would be swimming; then "down the hill" to physiotherapy which you had every morning and afternoon. We thought they had positioned it on purpose; it was at the bottom of a big slope and you had to push all the way back to

the ward afterwards – and no one would help you; they had been told not to; you had to struggle your own way back up. There was a lovely ‘League of Friends’ café on the way up where we could meet and have a drink and a rest.

The relationship you had with your physiotherapist was very special. You saw them twice a day; and they were so much better at explaining things. Some really close relationships developed and a number of patients married their physios. I remember my very first outing was to my physio’s house; two or three of them shared a bungalow nearby in Stoke Mandeville and they took us there. That was the first time I learnt how to transfer from a wheelchair to a sofa. They really helped us with practical things like that. It was a very close and closed community at Stoke. In fact it didn’t really hit you until you left and went home.

In the afternoon you would also do sports. Previously I had played a bit of badminton, but I had never really been interested in sport. Now I started with table tennis and archery. Archery was good for your posture in a wheelchair; it made you sit up straight; while table tennis was good for your reactions. Every June the National Games would take place at the hospital; competitors would come from other spinal units, the Star and Garter home and disabled sports clubs from around the country. They would empty out one or two of the wards for the other competitors to stay in and also put them up in some of the huts at the back of the hospital. I first saw the 1959 games when I was still at the hospital; one of the nurses took me out to watch. The following year, not long after I had got back home, I was invited to take part in the national games. I had become quite good at archery and had joined a club back home. So I competed in the 1960 National Games and did quite well; in fact I think I must have won; and then to my amazement I got a letter inviting me to be in the British team going to the games in Rome.

There were about 70 of us in the British team. We all assembled at Stoke where we were given our uniforms. I was in the archery and swimming teams. Unlike some of the others in the team I had already travelled a lot for work, so I wasn’t particularly nervous. There were loads of volunteers then; there needed to be. First of all we were put on a coach to go to the airport; we all had to be carried on and our wheelchairs folded and loaded. Then at Heathrow the same thing was done in reverse. It took hours! Then at the airport to get us onto the plane they had to use a fork lift with four of us at a time in our chairs on a platform being lifted up onto the plane. Then we had to be lifted into our seats and our chairs folded and put as baggage. At the other end it all took hours more; if you were the last off the plane you were sitting waiting for two hours. But back then that was part of your life; and you just had to accept it.

Once we were unloaded in Rome we were taken off to the Olympic village. (This was the worst bit) The buildings we were supposed to use had been changed for some reason and we couldn’t use them. To our horror we found that we were being housed in two storey buildings on stilts. The Italian organising committee had to bring in the army so that there were soldiers and other volunteers to lift you up and down the two flights of stairs in your wheelchair each time you went in or out. There were always two soldiers stationed at the top and bottom.

Of course things got better each year. By my last games at Arnhem in 1980, twenty years later, things were so much better. I remember there they laid on special buses with the seats taken out and there were ramps at the bus stops so you could just push yourself onto the buses.

In the archery in 1960 we competed at four distances: 90, 50, 70 and 30 metres; all the competitors did a round together, each shooting off six arrows. What was strange was that no one told you how you were scoring and there was no immediate announcement of the results. I only found out later that evening; someone said 'Where's Margaret? You've got to come and get a medal. And then I found out that I had won the first British gold medal of the games. I remember there was a little podium with places for the three winners, with the gold medallist in the centre, slightly higher than the other two; and at the back was a ramp that you could be pushed up to get onto the podium. And some important person – the Italian president of the Olympic organisation, I think – presented me with my medal.

Back then we would spend all our time with other sports people and you would all support each other. It was smaller scale and everything was taking place around the same arena so you would go and support all your other team mates. And back in the clubs you all did a variety of sports and met people who did a range of other sports. Now everything is split up by sport, by association or club and everyone meets separately so you don't meet anyone outside your specialism. Of course the standards have improved by leaps and bounds – but at the loss of a certain camaraderie that we had back then.