

A celebration of survivor history

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Phillip Morgan

A unique event celebrating the lives and achievements of people affected by mental health problems from the 18th - 21st century took place earlier this year. Entitled ‘A Pageant of Survivor History’ it was organised by independent survivor-led group Friends of East End Loonies (FEEL).

FEEL was inspired to organise the event by historical research conducted into the lives of survivors by Tower Hamlets African and Caribbean Mental Health Organisation (THACMHO), and the Survivors History Group, which meets at Together from time to time.

At the pageant, which took place in London in March, the lives and voices of survivors throughout history were celebrated and brought to life through readings, poetry, music and song.

An African prince

Seeking to restore strength through history THACMHO researched and published *‘Writers and the Struggle Against Slavery - Celebrating five African writers who came to the East End of London in the 18th century’*. One of the writers profiled in the book, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, was remembered at the pageant.

Ukawsaw, born a prince in West Africa about 1705, was considered foolish or insane by his community because he imagined a God who created the sun and the stars. Because of that belief he was sold into slavery, crossed the Atlantic, and became a domestic slave in New York. Eventually he was granted freedom and came to England.

Performer Phillip Morgan gave voice to Ukawsaw’s own story at the pageant, telling how in spite of the many problems he faced after arriving in England, he married Betty, an East London silk weaver, settled in Essex, and brought up a family, before dying aged 70 in October 1775.

Asylum voices throughout history

The nineteenth century confined increasing numbers of people in lunatic asylums. One of these was John Clare, a man described as ‘the greatest labouring-class poet that England has ever produced’.

One of Clare’s best-known sonnets *The Nightingale* was written at Northampton Asylum where he was confined from 1842 to his death in 1864. The last line of verse, which was read at the pageant, ends at evening when “the fields lose all their paths in dusk” as the Nightingale sings “her soft melodious song.”

Eric Irwin drawn by Colin Hombrook

Speaking out and challenging the system

The audience at Kingsley Hall then heard how in July 1924 six patients in "The Royal Albert Institution for the Feeble minded of the Northern Counties" bravely wrote and signed a statement that they had witnessed an attendant kicking a patient and injuring him.

The work of Peter Whitehead, who was put into solitary confinement at Rampton Hospital and campaigned tirelessly in the 1950s for his freedom, as well as the civil liberties of other patients, was next. Working through the National Council for Civil Liberties large numbers of patients, including Peter, won their liberty in the 1950s.

Peter advised other patients at that time to: "Write letters. Get people outside interested in you. Tell them you've been wrongly shut away. If you stay quiet, nobody will lift a finger to help you, however long you stay here."

Civil liberties

In July 1971 the "Petition for the Redress of Grievances" was signed by patients in Hartwood Hospital in Lanarkshire, and the signatories became the founders of the *Scottish Union of Mental Patients*. Two of them were among the founders of the *Mental Patients Union*, formed at a packed meeting in London in March 1973.

The London meeting was in response to a pamphlet called *The Case for a Mental Patients Union*. The pamphlet was published by, among others, Eric Irwin. Eric was born in Belfast in 1924. During his life he was detained in 17 psychiatric institutions in Ireland, Australia and England.

In July 1974, Hackney Hospital Mental Patients Union won the right to meet on hospital premises, becoming the first United Kingdom patients' union known to have been recognised by the hospital authorities.

Battle for survival

In the 1980s, Eric Irwin came to think that the word "patient" was too passive. He helped to form a group called *Campaign Against Psychiatric Oppression*.

Another group of people who had been in psychiatric hospitals produced a television documentary called "We're Not Mad - We're Angry". Out of this ferment of activity a new name was born - mental patients became "survivors".

Survivors Speak Out (SSO) was founded early in 1986, and for more than ten years it was an important networking organisation for the growing "survivor movement". The pageant audience burst into spontaneous applause when Peter Campbell, a founding member of SSO, performed the poem "The Mental Marching Band", which he wrote in support of its work.



Sophie Mirrell

Creative routes

In the early 1990s the life of old Hackney Hospital in London was drawing to a close and the emptying buildings became the site of artistic activities. Artist Paul Monks made his studio in a vacant ward, and patients seeking refuge from the monotony of life on the psychiatric wards immersed themselves in a world of paint and colour. Out of this, *Core Arts* was born in 1994, an organisation with a mission to promote the creative abilities of people with mental health problems.

One of the artists who now works through *Core Arts* is the gospel singer, Sophie Mirrell, who sang her own creation "Loneliness is not the will of God!" at the pageant.

Frank Bangay, a poet who often works with Sophie, was one of Eric Irwin's closest friends. His struggle for the dignity of people who suffer from mental distress goes back many decades, and he concluded the pageant with a poem that sums up all our struggles: "...memories haunt in the deep of the night - Leaving a longing to open up and cry - But a proud rhythm beats inside, A proud rhythm beats inside, Yes we will be strong this time."

Pageant: <http://studymore.org.uk/Pageant.htm>

Tower Hamlets African and Caribbean Mental Health Organisation:
c/o Social Action for Health, The Brady Centre, 192 Hanbury Street,
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Survivors History Group,
177 Glenarm Road, London, E50NB <http://studymore.org.uk>

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Meets at the LARC Centre, 62 Fieldgate Street, London, E1 1ES
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