



# STORIES OF MENTAL HEALTH

Friday 10<sup>th</sup> October 2025.

An art and archive exhibition to celebrate World Mental Health Day 2025.

The former Recreational Room, The Retreat, Heslington Road, York, YO10 5BN.

**Background:**

The Retreat helped reform mental health care in the 1800s but the voices of those who lived and were treated there are rarely heard. This exhibition gives life to their words, memories and creativity back on site.

Stories of Mental Health from York: Past, Present, and Future', is a project funded by 'Mentally Fit York' at the Borthwick Institute for Archives.

**Contributors:**

Laura Yeoman, Dorothy Waugh, Gary Brannan and Lydia Dean (Archivists), Helena Cox (Curator), Griselda Goldsbrough, Stephen Lee Hodgkins, Reg Sidebottom (Artists) Art groups and individuals from across York.

## **Approach:**

The artworks created for this project began with an exploration of materials held at the Borthwick Institute for Archives at the University of York. Writings and artefacts created by people who lived in mental health institutions across York during the 1800's were the main focus. The archives gave opportunity to uncover the voices and experiences of individuals with lived experience of mental health and disability.

From the collection, archives particularly noted were:

- The diary of Alfred Smith (1877) – Ref: *RET/6/19/1/157*
- The unsent letters of Eliza 'Minnie' Harrison (1885) – Ref: *RET/6/19/1/69*
- Poems and writings by James Newby (1860s) – Ref: *RET/6/19/1/119*
- A small notebook of verses contributed by women at The Retreat (1830s) – Ref: *RET/6/19/2/2/1*
- Photographs of unidentified women at The Retreat (1890s) – Ref: *RET/1/8/6/7/40*

A number of creative workshops were then facilitated where extracts and insights were shared from the archives, with groups from the Art for Wellbeing and Sketchbook Circle groups at York Art Gallery, individuals from St Nicks Eco-therapy group and other York participants.

As part of the programme, walks were taken, inspired by entries from Alfred Smith's diary, tracing his words through the landscape.

From these workshops and walks, the following artworks were created.

## **Artworks:**

### **1 The Walk of Alfred – *Fold out map, plus audio clip.***

A retracing of Alfred Smith's diary entry from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1877 where he recounts, his initial journey from London to The Retreat, the conduct of staff, his working contribution and a reflective walk to look at the house that his mother lived and worked as a cook for the Tuke family. Illustrations by Reg Sidebottom.

### **2 Hiya Bud! – *Sketch, David Roberts.***

Inspired by Alfred's diary entry from 7<sup>th</sup> November 1878 that reads '*... In my room looking over books. After dinner went to the lodge back yard to look at a racoon, pretty creature...*'. David said, '*I was intrigued by an entry in Alfred's diary where he describes seeing a " racoon. How such a creature made its way to England is unknown and he may have been mistaken. However I liked the idea of a proper Victorian gentleman startled by the laid-back North American animal who greets him, "Hiya Bud! Whadda see? Whadda say?"*'.

### **3 Took A Walk - *Poem, printed and audio/visual clip.***

Carol Warren's creative response to the many walking routes noted in Alfred's diary and the importance of walking for wellbeing.

### **4 The Walk of Alfred #2 - *Cyanotype print and pink stitch shape.***

Cyanotype print of Alfred's portrait plus stitched route shape presented on an original notice board from The Retreat.

### **5 Come To The Point – *Mannequin, letterpress prints, community responses.***

In 1885, patient, Eliza Minnie Harrison, wrote a series of heartfelt letters to friends and relatives from The Retreat - letters that were never sent. These

letters, preserved in the Borthwick institute for Archives, are accompanied by a small locket of her hair and a token inscribed with the words “Come to the Point.”

Remembering Minnie, and reflecting on things unsent or unsaid, people on the streets of York were invited to respond to the question: “*What should we come to the point about?*”

Their responses were placed in envelopes made from pages of *A Retired Habitation: A History of The Retreat, York (Mental Hospital)* by Harold Capper Hunt, 1920s. These envelopes are pinned to a mannequin covered with a reproduction of Minnie’s unsent 1885 letter, connecting past and present voices in a shared act of expression and remembrance.

## **6 Once On A Time – Paper Kite, inspired by James Newby’s poems**

In his poems and reflections, James Newby - a writer and patient at The Retreat in the 1860s - explored imagination, freedom, and the limits of confinement. One poem begins, “*Once on a time a paper kite, was mounted to a wondrous height, / where giddy with its elevation / it thus expressed a self-determination.*”

## **7 Nobody Knows My Name #1 - Cyanotype prints.**

Carol Warren/Various.

Based on a small notebook containing verses by Women at the Retreat, 1830’s and unidentified Women at the Retreat, individually photographed, 1890’s.

## **8 Nobody Knows My Name #2 - Poem, Anonymous.**

Creative response to the collection of Unidentified Women at the Retreat, individually photographed 1890’s.

## **9 No One Knows My Name - Collage, Gemma Thompson.**

Based on the collection of Unidentified Women at the Retreat individually photographed 1890's.

*Gemma said "I learnt about the patients here in the 1800's. I learnt of a man named Alfred but a lot of women were not even named. This felt sad to me that they had no known names, they had no identity. I wanted to give them a personality I feel they deserved, I tried to put myself in their shoes and give them a story. I used feathers for the word name as I imagined them being collected by patients while out walking".*

## **10 The Hand You're Dealt - Collage**

A creative response to the writings and lives of Alfred Smith, Minnie Harrison, and James Newby.

Blending text, collage and playing cards, this work weaves together fragments from their words and experiences - chance, fate, and reflection - creating new connections between the voices of the past and our own interpretations today.

## **11 Come: And Another Thing - stream of thought, paint on paper.**

This work explores the word 'come' - a small, everyday word that carries invitation, movement and emotion. It threads through daily life, suggesting arrival, inclusion, and relationship.

In the context of The Retreat archives, 'come' also speaks to longing - to be seen, to be heard, to belong. The piece reflects on what it means to exist on the edge of community and understanding and the human need to be welcomed in.

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