

THE WALK OF ALFRED

In 1877 Alfred Smith, aged 59, writes a diary from his home 'The Retreat', a 'private lunatic asylum' in York, UK. Alfred's diary is interesting in many ways, and significant as a historical account of disability, mental health and life in York.

The Retreat is also significant in the history of Mental Health. Founded by William Tuke in 1796 in reaction to the neglectful death of Hannah Mills, a fellow quaker, whilst in Bootham Asylum in York. William Tuke's son, Henry Tuke, and his son Samuel Tuke continued the work.

The Retreat proposed a different, more humane, family approach. Described as 'moral treatment', much is written about how this changed mental health care in the 1800's. However, less is heard about the lives of people that lived there.

Alfred's diary gives a good account of life at The Retreat. It includes many things, including a large number of walking routes that he took around the streets and pathways of York.

These all begin '...took a walk...' and then detail, the specific street names and pathways of the routes he follows.

1877, 1 MO. 18TH, FIFTH DAY.

'23 years ago on the 3rd day of the week and 18th of 1st month at 9 o'clock in the morning, I left Grove Hall Asylum, Fair Field Road, and Old Ford Lane, Bow, with a man named William Hornshaw, sent by Dr. John Kitching from York Retreat, to bring me with him to the Retreat; and we went to Bow Station of the North London Railway, close by and took Train, and went to Caledonian Road Station, Battle Bridge, and there got out of the Train and walked along Maiden Lane, to Kings Cross & the Great Northern Railway Station, and took Train & started at ½ past 10 o'clock, and arrived at York Station at ½ past 5 o'clock in the evening; and walked to The Retreat by 6 o'clock, and went in and sat down, in a small kitchen room till bed time at 8 o'clock.

After I arrived at The Retreat William Hornshaw did not offer to get me any victuals till I was forced from sheer hunger to ask him to go and get some, which he did, and not with very good grace, but in a surly indifferent manner, as he was only a very surly bad tempered man, with a countenance which bespoke the image of the evil one.

He only stayed at the Retreat til some time in the 10th month of the same year when he left for abusing a man, who came after I did. I had one bun at Peterborough Station on the journey.

I went out the next morning in the grounds, with the farmer man James Mason and did some work, and have worked very hard as any labouring man for many years up to 1874 and after, since that I have been obliged to give up work, having had a paralytic stroke, and been more or less under it since, up to the present time. John Kitching has left the Retreat. James Mason is deceased; John York, Cowman left; William Wood is left and some others.

Took a walk by, Church Lane, Lawrence Street and in John Shaftes Brick Yard, and then up Brick Yard Lane to Lawrence Street, Walmgate, Fossgate, Whipmawhopmagate, St Savioursgate, and looked at the large house, number 25, where my mother lived, as servant (the cook) with Henry Tuke, when Samuel, Maria and Esther his sister were children and whom she missed and they remembered her kindness to them for years after when they came to see her at the yearly meeting time sometime between 1840 and 1846 when we lived at no. 3 Burlington Place, Broad Street, Ratcliffe, London.

Went onto the Pavement, High Ousegate, Low Ousegate, Kings Staith, to Castle Bridge, to The Retreat'.



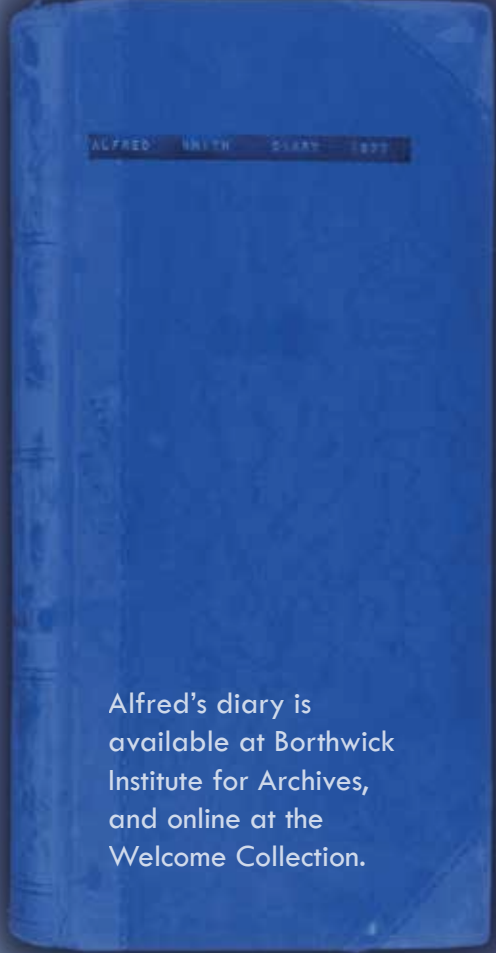
Portrait of Alfred Smith and a page from his diary.

This entry is insightful. It begins with Alfred recollecting the day he came to 'The Retreat', the conduct of the staff, the working contribution he made and then a walk to look at the house where his mother worked and lived, as a cook to the Tuke family. Alfred's mother had died 11 years prior to him moving to The Retreat.

This is one of many entries in Alfred's diary. With more than 350 pages written in an ink pen script covering 1876, 1877 and 1878 it is full of many interesting everyday things.



Like fixing his 8 day clock, seeing the new gas lights at the station, watching Fulford New Church go up in flames, buying a Portuguese onion, visits by government inspectors, the Mile End 'tinker', fetching wine for friends, sitting under a hedge, the New Lodge being built and a 'Racoon' in the back yard.

Alfred's diary so rich in many ways and a wonderful piece of disability history as significant and relevant as the many other 'professional' histories written about The Retreat and mental health care in the 1800s.



Alfred's diary is available at Borthwick Institute for Archives, and online at the Welcome Collection.

The 'Walk of Alfred' was created as part of 'Stories of Mental Health from York: Past, Present, and Future', funded by 'Mentally Fit York' at the Borthwick Institute for Archives 2025.



THE WALK OF ALFRED

Here is Alfred's walk from Friday, 18th January 1877. The route is approximately 4 miles, gives directions using current street names, follows a level route and begins and ends at The Retreat, Heslington Road, YO10 3HZ.



DIRECTIONS

Go left from The Retreat along Heslington Road, turn right down Wellington Street then follow the pathway beside St Lawrence Parish Church, cross over Lawrence Street and turn down James Street that is a little way right from the pathway, walk along James Street, past Lidl, then turn left and walk beside the Morrisons Car Park to the right until you reach the crossing on Foss Island Road.

Cross the road, turn left and walk along to the Red Tower. Continue along until Walmgate Bar, turn right onto Walmgate through the City Walls.

Walk along Walmgate, continuing ahead onto Fossgate, cross over onto Whip Ma Whop Ma Gate, continuing briefly along, then turning right into St Saviourgate, walk along to the space between house number 27 and the Masonic Hall.

Head back to Whip Ma Whop Ma Gate, onto the Pavement, continue along onto Coppergate, then across the junction down King Street, to the left, continue down to the river, then left along Kings Staith, then by the river along South Esplanade, then at Tower Gardens join Tower Street, head right, across the River Foss, bearing right to join Fishergate, turn left down pathway beside the Edinburgh Arms, cross over to Kent Street, continuing onto Heslington Road to the Retreat.