



University
of Dundee

Using the past to create the future:

how asylum records are helping mental health service users
tell their stories to future generations

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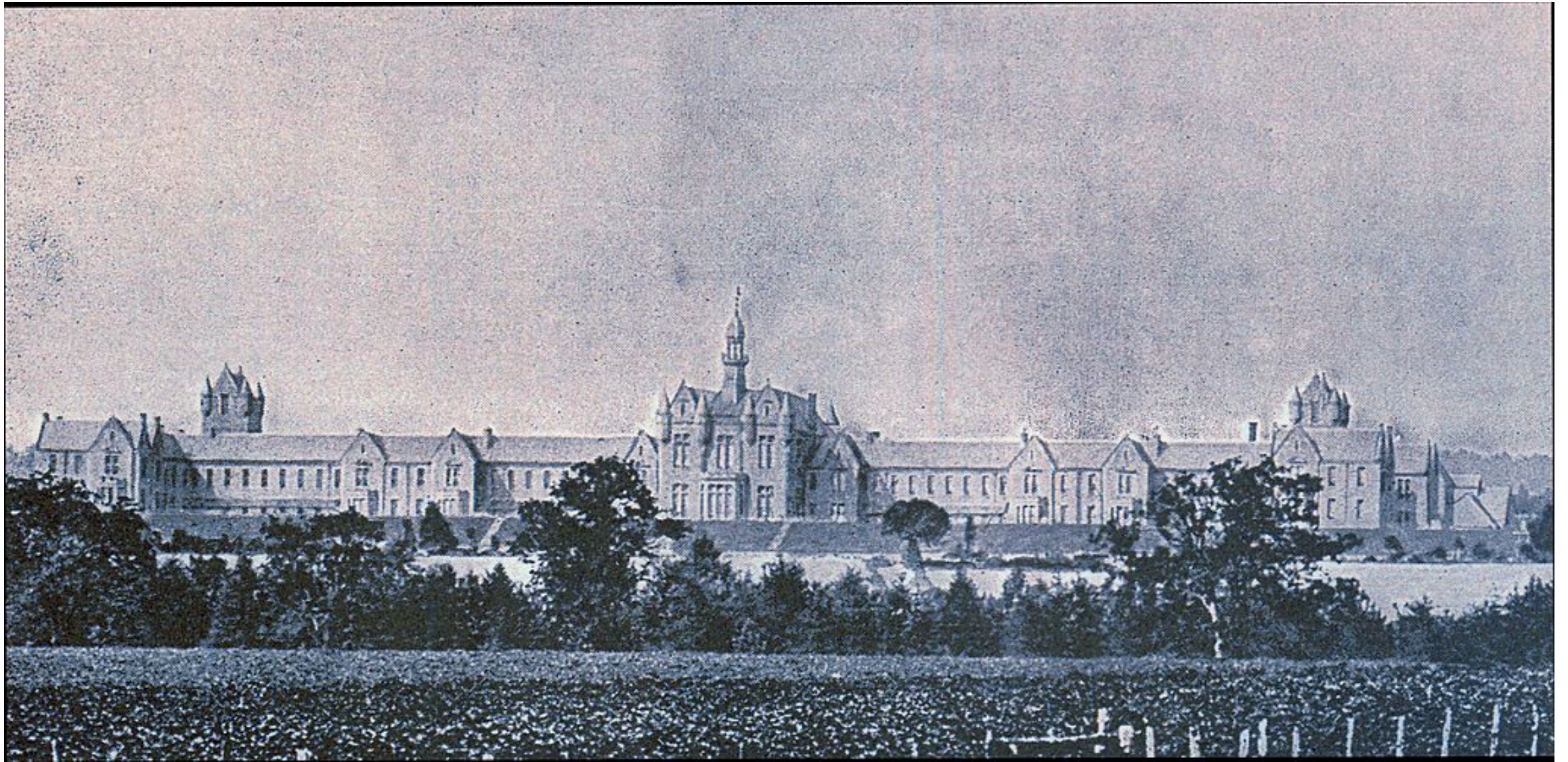


Image: public domain: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Westgreen Asylum, Liff, 1897.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Westgreen_Asylum,_Liff,_1897.jpg)



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What does history mean to "John"?



“John is the oldest of three sons. He describes a chaotic and traumatic family life where he often witnessed his father assaulting his mother. Frequently John and his brothers would be taken from the house by different extended family members. He had been to ten different schools by the age of fourteen and had difficulty forming friends and learning to read to write. He frequently got into trouble with the teachers and was expelled at fourteen for assaulting a teacher.”



“John has had at least ten hospitalisations over the last six years with what sounds like an exacerbation of his schizophrenia. On one occasion he had a serious suicide attempt where he jumped in front of a car and fractured his hip in response to command hallucinations. He tells me he has been on a number of medications including chlorpromazine, haloperidol, pimozide and an injectable antipsychotic. He also describes frequent side effects such as tremor, impotence and akathisia. He does not believe that the medicine treats his voices only dampens them down”

What would "John" say about himself?

My name is John. I am a father, son and brother. I enjoy art and gardening which I find therapeutic. I live with a mental health condition which can be debilitating. I live in a small flat in Lochee, having had to move out of my council house due to harrassment from other tennants on my estate. I would like to see more of my 4-year-old daughter and am hoping to gain a college place in September. I will be studying horticulture and want to be self-employed upon qualifying as I think this will be easier to manage in terms of my illness and the stigma it can generate. I am not 'a schizophrenic' - I am a man who lives with a schizophrenia diagnosis.





Marc Bloch, *The
Historian's craft*,
1949

“Now, more often than is generally supposed, it happens that, in order to find daylight, the historian may have to pursue his subject right up to the present”

“To neglect to organise rationally what comes to us as raw material is in the long run to deny time – hence history itself”

Our project

People with lived experience of mental health challenges

Invited through Dundee Healthy Minds Network

No pre-requisites

Between four and six in the first intake

Currently half way through

Our project



Access to the archives – two orientation and exploration sessions



Workshops - including *Dundee Comics Creative Space* staff and creative storytelling

Part two –
coming soon!



- Orientation to part two of the project - important
- Two further sessions with the archive material
- Exploration and discussion
- Creating a legacy – ‘hearing *my own voice*’



- Creative writing
- Blogs/Vlogs
- Poetry
- Diary entries
- Photographs – perhaps annotated
- Comic strips
- Art

Media which might be used

How Edith Swankie gave us all hope



- Compelling tale of a young asylum patient (14 years old)
- Admitted with symptoms of hypomania linked to hormones
- Soon became very low in mood
- Mum removed her from the asylum
- Here the records end...or do they?

How Edith Swankie gave us all hope



- Edith married James Alexander Brown on 26th April 1911. They went on to have a son, Alexander, who died in 1999.
- There is no evidence Edith experienced mental health issues in her adult life.
- She passed away on 19th October 1955 in Dundee Royal Infirmary, over forty years after she was admitted to the asylum.
- Our participants felt they got to know Edith and felt tremendous empathy for her and her situation
- And yet, they heard only the voice of the person who wrote about Edith in the admissions book

Questions?

Comments?

