

Conversation with Jean Stone at Stoke Mandeville

Interviewer Jon Newman, April 2012

I remember that when I left school in Edinburgh in the 1950s I didn't know what I wanted to do – except that I knew I didn't want to go to university. I didn't really know what Occupational Therapy (OT) was and when I ended up doing the training for it I thought that I would probably want to work with children. It was still a slightly new career then and wasn't easy to get work in. But I had a friend who found me this job with the Thistle Foundation, which was a centre for disabled ex-servicemen. Because of this there were all types of disability: not just paraplegics but amputees and others. It had a gym and a pool and a workshop. There was a big emphasis on getting the men in Thistle back into employment and the main purpose of the OT there was to find things for the men to do that might also make themselves and the centre a bit of money. I remember lots of the men used to sit at knitting machines all day making socks for the army. We tried to help the men set up work projects. I always remember one ex-Scots Guardsman there who had set up a little business making these golden-coloured cuddly teddy bears; they were always in demand and he had a full order book.

The physiotherapists there organised wheelchair basketball, there was a 20 metre hydrotherapy pool that the men could swim in and there was table tennis, archery and field sports. I think I must have started in 1959 which was the year they had first gone to Stoke Mandeville for the National Games in the June. They had all come back saying how awful they had all been that year. So the next year in 1960 they were going back to the Nationals to try and qualify for the Rome Olympics later in the summer. Just two weeks before the Thistle team was set to go, one of our physios fell down the stairs and broke her arm. They needed to find someone else to go to Stoke with the team and someone said, "What about you?"

Stoke Mandeville Hospital in 1960 was an eye-opener. I was horrified by the accommodation and the shabby huts. For myself and the physios who were looking after the team what the games mostly seemed to mean was endlessly having to go round to the main hospital, get hold of a trolley, load it up with the food for the meal, then push it back, by which time it was probably cold. Then you had to wash up everyone's dishes and there was no hot water in the hut! And we had to do that three times a day. As I say, it all seemed very basic compared with the Thistle. Quite quickly we discovered the transport café down the Lower Road at the edge of the village and we soon decided that we would take the team there each day for breakfast; we also got the men to push into Aylesbury or, in the evening, to the Bell pub.

When the games were on it was quite extraordinary the way that everyone was packed in. There were beds everywhere; I remember one lot even ended up in beds put all around the old hydrotherapy pool. Other teams got sent further out to places like the Rivets' sports hall which would be filled up with beds. I remember one year I spent the entire time of the games sleeping on Charlie Atkinson's office floor in the hospital along with Norma Newton.

Back then the hospital was still surrounded by what were largely fields; there were just the two basketball courts with the wooden seats at each end; and I think the three concrete bases where they used to put up the table tennis tables are still out there. The archery was done on one of the fields – they used to shoot towards the railway line. Back then all the major participants at the Stoke Mandeville games came from all the different spinal units around the country. When you were a

paraplegic in the 60s it meant being in hospital for up to a year, so most of the participants were hospital teams rather than club teams. Staff from each hospital would organise and bring their own team: Lodgemoor sports club, Southport Promenade club, Chaseley near Eastbourne, The Duchess of Gloucester (known as the Dog House) at Isleworth. There were three teams that came from Scotland: Thistle Foundation, Eaton Hall Hospital and the Miners' Rehabilitation Centre at Philip Hill. Later on, and particularly after the 1962 Commonwealth Games at Perth which encouraged the development of separate national teams (rather than everyone participating as Great Britain) these clubs formed themselves into the Scottish Paraplegic Association, the Welsh Paraplegic and Tetraplegic Sports Club and the Northern Ireland Paraplegic Sports Association.

It was very obvious to me that back in the 1960s people were mainly participating in wheelchair sport for social reasons. There were people who were notionally in local, regional or even national teams and competing in national and even international games who then wouldn't touch their javelin, or whatever, from one year to the next. It wasn't taken as seriously as sport then; it was often just something they did each year with their mates. When I came back from that first games at Stoke Mandeville I said "I will only stay and help with this if people train properly".

I went to the Rome Olympics later in 1960. I was supposed to be there as a member of the British team, but I clearly wasn't important enough to be given a uniform or even a track suit. I do remember all the British team were given these green blazers to wear and that at the end of the games they would have to hand them back in, presumably so they could be used again at whichever next international games by whoever was in the team. I seemed to spend an awful lot of time at that games doing manual lifting: getting athletes up stairs and onto planes – though fortunately I always used to get the smaller, lighter ones. At Rome airport we spent an enormous amount of time carrying people off the plane, going back and finding the right wheelchair and then helping them up the ramp onto the buses. Then we got to the Olympic village! Not only were all the rooms built on stilts and on the first or second floors with dog-leg stairs with 18 steps on each flight; but these stairs had incredibly high risers, so even when we tried putting plywood panels on them to push the chairs up it was just too steep – and far too dangerous for people to descend them in their chairs. So we ended up having to pull people up the steps backwards, while they managed to bump themselves going down. And what made it worse was that the games organisers had not provided anyone to help the teams get up and down to their rooms. I don't think I have ever lost so much weight in such a short space of time.

There was good social side to the Rome games; there were plenty of cafes and restaurants. Also the games then were nothing like such an intensive programme as they are now; nowadays you can go to a city for the games and you are all so busy that you end up seeing nothing of the place. In 1960 there was plenty of time for socialising and sightseeing and we ended up being the escort for all the girls on the team.

One thing you did notice then was just how badly rehabilitated many of the athletes were. It was really quite surprising just how many of the athletes in the British team still fell out of bed in the night – because they had not yet got used to sleeping out of a cot bed or with chairs along the side and no one had said to us that they would need this. I really hadn't expected that I would have spent so much time helping people in and out of the hotel. Sport really just seemed to be incidental for some of them.

Long distance air travel for people in wheel chairs was still in its infancy; I remember until quite late on the Argentine team would always come to the Stoke Mandeville International Games by boat; it must have taken them weeks. It was the 1962 Commonwealth Games at Perth in Western Australia that was the British team's first experience of long-haul flights for wheel-chair athletes. We stopped off on the way at Bahrain, Colombo and Singapore. It really was pretty primitive; going along the aisle with a bucket to empty the catheter bags; and there was Guttman walking down the plane encouraging people to keep moving their limbs to avoid them swelling. Two of the athletes ended up having to be put up in the overhead baggage racks so they could lie flat; one had a broken leg while the other was so swollen that we had to get him flat to relieve the pressure in his legs.

It hadn't got much better by the time we went to the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. On the way there we stopped over at Anchorage Alaska and then we were transferred onto two KLM flights which we shared with the Dutch and Israeli teams. Lots of the athletes were drinking, it was quite common then, and we were going over the North Pole when we hit a massive air pocket and the plane suddenly dropped hundreds of feet. One of the nurses, Jimmy Brennan was going round with a bucket to empty the catheter bags just as this happened and I remember there was one poor man who ended up with the contents of the bucket all over him; he was dripping yellow; and he said, "I don't know if that's urine or whisky running down me!" The other plane had come off even worse; when we got to Tokyo there were people coming off that flight in stretchers because they had banged their heads so badly.

There were a lot of really big men in the British team that year at Tokyo, tall and broad and all sitting for some reason at the back of the plane. And I remember when we arrived at the airport four very small men in the uniform of the Japanese Defence Force came onto the plane, ostensibly to carry off the athletes. They really were all very small, they saw all these burly men sitting on the back row and they turned and looked at each other and just started laughing; there was no way they were going to be able to carry them. The Japanese had at least worked out that they would need to help us unloading the team and the chairs – they just hadn't realised some of them would be so big.

Again there was time out for tourism; I can remember going with Ida Bromley, one of the physios, on a tour of Mount Fuji when we had a day off. We took the underground some of the way and I remember when we got on the train standing at one end – and neither of us being particularly tall, yet seeing right over everyone's heads the length of the carriage.

By 1962 I had become the Scottish team manager. In 1964 at Tokyo I was an escort and helping with the archery for the British team. By 1972 I was the British women's team manager at Heidelberg. In 1976 I remember it was the first year where the categories had been extended to include blind and 'Les Autres' for the games and I was organising the Scottish team who had to fly to Heathrow and then change planes for Toronto but we were flying out the next day from Gatwick with an overnight stopover at a hotel there. Well there were three blind athletes in the team and by the time we got off the plane at Heathrow and everyone onto the bus, I couldn't find these three anywhere. Someone said I think they've gone, and sure enough they had; they made their own way to Gatwick and got there before us. That was a shock; you were so used to having to assist wheelchair athletes onto transport that the idea of another sort of disabled athlete just taking things into their own hands had never crossed your mind.

In my own professional career the OT department at the Thistle Foundation moved to a new rehabilitation centre at Ainslie Hospital from 1962 and I ended up as head of OT there and then for the whole South Lothian Health District. The Ainslie served the whole of east Scotland and took in all sorts of neurological patients especially head injuries and some spinal patients – although not the acute ones; they went via A&E units to end up in the Eaton Hall hospital, an ex-military institution where all the staff still used to wear a blue uniform.

In the various Scottish hospitals in which I worked it was always the OT staff who had responsibility for doing sports with the patients. Archery was seen as very important because it was a good way of strengthening the lumbar muscles in the back, particularly after surgery like laminectomy, which was more common then for spinal patients. And we encouraged hill climbing for patients who had had knee surgery; typically on a Friday afternoon we would tell them all to go up Black hill and back before supper. The other difference was that lots of the OT departments would have men on the staff who used to get involved in the different sports. For example at Eaton Hall one of the remedial gymnasts there just happened to be a fencer, so as a result all the patients going through rehab there got to do fencing. Physiotherapy was still largely a woman's profession; I think Guttman's model at Stoke Mandeville where the physiotherapy department – rather than the OT – was responsible for all the sports rehabilitation was quite unusual at the time. But then Guttman could never see the point of OT and didn't invest in it in the same way at Stoke.

I got into the sport side mostly through doing it in my spare time. I don't think I had any real motive for doing it. I think maybe I was just a bit of a mug. When the patients at Eaton Hall formed the Scottish Paraplegic Association and they were looking for a secretary I went and offered to help. And of course that was a stupid thing to go and say as I ended up as secretary of the SPA for years and years. I think I would have given up much earlier in my career. I remember I was very involved in organising the 1970 Commonwealth Games at Edinburgh and as a result I was given the MBE at the end of that year. I had said I was packing it in after Edinburgh, but after I got that award everyone told me that I couldn't possibly give up now as that was why I had been given the MBE; so I stayed on.

1984 Stoke Mandeville Games I had taken early retirement from my job in Scotland in early 1984 and I came down to help Joan Scruton and the BPSS with organising the games. I had an office in the corridor. My main memory of the Stoke Mandeville Olympics was trying to find the money. I was quite used to talking to Rotarians and the Round Table had agreed to campaign to help raise money, so from January to July I addressed an awful lot of their meetings, including one at an Edinburgh hotel where because the conference room was out of action I had to talk to 30 men who were squeezed into my hotel bedroom. On another occasion I remember we chose Martin McElhatton (as one of the more presentable young men in the British team) to go and collect a cheque from some Girl Guides who had been fund raising. I took him to receive the cheque and there were all these little Girl Guides, crawling all over him like ants.

I think there was a much closer connection between the town and the hospital back then. Lots of Buckinghamshire organisations and local businesses supported Stoke Mandeville. I remember the Braziers family business did a lot and John Jacobi helped with PR and was there at events socialising; Cllr Xenia Williams from Aylesbury District Council was another big supporter as was Rita Mallalieu. And then there were the Rothschilds at Waddesdon Manor. I remember meeting Lady Rothschild at

one of the events in the lead up and her asking me “Have you got all the money that you need?” and I must have explained to her that no we hadn’t really, that there was still a long way to go. Anyway, the next day this cheque arrived from her addressed to me for £5,000. I was a bit shocked and showed it to Joan Scruton. “Where did you get this?” she wanted to know. I explained that I had simply met Lady Rothschild and asked. She was really a bit put out as she felt that was her job and I shouldn’t have got involved. But it was a nice example of the local connections that were in place back then. I remember it was the bandmaster at RAF Halton who composed the Stoke Mandeville anthem for the games and he and the band turned up to play it for the opening ceremony; and of course all the RAF apprentices had already been helping with erecting the flagpoles.

Everyone had thought first of all that 1984 would just be like the regular International Games that happened every fourth year at Stoke Mandeville. But then we realised that we were expected to pull out all the stops and that this one had to be bigger and better with more razzmatazz than anything previous. There were entertainments, there was the Canadian Mounties on their horses, there was even the games paper Pursuit which came out every day. They built the covered grandstand and all the extra seating. Of course it still wasn’t big enough and lots of the sports had to be farmed out – there was table tennis at the Civic Centre and archery and fencing in various schools. But even the beer tent went up a notch or two. The Guttmann Supporters Club ran that; lots of local people like Tony Higgs, Betty Crook, the Eatwells and Sandy Green were involved.

Once the games actually started then I was finished; my work was all done and up and running. I was on the way down and finishing off, just checking that what I expected to be in place was actually happening. I got round and watched some of the fencing and I went out to High Wickham and saw some of the swimming.