

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR



David Austin, 47, student archivist and author, Littlehampton

I began volunteering at the County Records Office in Chichester last year. I was already volunteering at Littlehampton Museum and taking a post-graduate course in Archives Administration and I was looking for ways to help my future employability. My previous career had been as a Methodist minister, but I found I wasn't really suited to pastoral work. I had something of a breakdown and had to rethink my professional life.

At the moment I am looking for distinctive entries in an old vestry minutes book dating back to the early 19th century in the parish of Balcombe. Rather than just the room within the church that we know today, the Vestry was originally an administrative body, a sort of a forerunner to parish councils. People from the Vestry were appointed Overseers of the Poor, arranging medical treatment and dealing with children of poor

families, for instance. A lot of the writing is hurried and so difficult to transcribe.

I am very interested in rescuing lost voices. History preserved is that of the powerful, so recovering what history books don't tell us and revealing hidden stories is something I find fascinating.

Delivered Unto Lions, my first book, was published towards the end of last year. A novel intended to raise awareness about children's mental health care in the 1970s, it was based on my own experiences of being sent to a children's unit to be treated for depression. I spent four-and-a-half years there, on and off, from the age of 12. It was extremely traumatic, but there were some children for whom it was far worse.

Not many people are aware that such institutions existed for

children; they are a hidden part of history. I found the unit I was in, a place called Merrifield in Somerset, through a website about derelict buildings. There was a comments page and here I found comments left by young patients, including some I had known. I had already made some notes on an idea for a book, but this spurred me on to write it in full.

I don't feel bitter about my experience, but I did feel I needed to speak up for those who perhaps couldn't articulate how they were affected. It was painful to write. The hardest bit was revising and polishing the manuscript after I'd written the first draft. But getting my feelings down on paper and organising my thoughts was helpful in putting my past into perspective.

Some people who had similar experiences to mine have contacted me having read the book

to say they found it helpful. The attitude to mental health is better today, especially in the treatment of children, but there is still room for a lot of improvement.

My volunteer work is very helpful. It means I am contributing something useful, which is very important to me.

■ Located in Orchard Street, Chichester, the County Records Office is a brilliant resource for the community. It's much in demand from local historians and family historians. For details of opening times and for more information 01243 753602 or visit www.westsussex.gov.uk

■ To find out more about *Delivered Unto Lions* visit www.davidaustin.eu

As told to Vicky Edwards
Picture by Louise Adams
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