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“What I need my hands need to talk about”: Mental health and making, the Graylingwell Heritage Project.

“craft’s relationship to time is complex ...When the potential of this temporal structure is realized, craft can be a powerful mediator between the present and the past, and therefore between the individual and the collective.”
(Adamson, 2013, 210)

“What I need my hands need to talk about” are words taken from an archive of art therapy made in 1952 and are a reflection on the power of art and making by a patient during her recovery from illness. The archive emerged during the course of the HLF funded Graylingwell Heritage Project (GHP) a collaboration between local organisations which aimed to research the social and cultural history of the former West Sussex County Asylum in Chichester. This paper will reflect on the art and making processes used in this project and the ways in which research into patterns of craft and making from the past might allow us to consider what might be of value in the present.

Rosy-tinted nostalgia has no place in a consideration of the history of mental health care and then, as now, those with mental health issues were often pushed to the margins of society. The GHP aimed to challenge preconceptions and stigma around mental health, using a reflection on the past and engaged activities in the present to allow stories to become visible. From its foundation in 1897, making activities were embedded in the day-to-day life of Graylingwell Hospital and we drew inspiration from these historical processes in our work with patients, staff and the wider community - making magic lantern slides, knitting and planting were used to explore contemporary experiences of the mental health care system and to gather stories. The resonances between past and present were constantly under scrutiny - the conversation began in the past, but the personal narratives and artwork that arose existed very much in the present. The activities were led by artists who had their own experiences of the mental health system and who had received training in workshop delivery through Outside In’s ‘Step Up’ scheme based at Pallant House Gallery. As Michael Polanyi (1966) says, “We can know more than we can tell” and the value of making experience visible is nowhere more apparent than in working with art in mental health care settings.

In ‘The Invention of Craft’ (2013), Adamson describes the perception of craft in the era after industrialisation as “ameliorating”, but says “we should embrace it as a dynamic cultural force in which claims to cultural memory... are intermingled with more active, self-consciously modern, and therefore potentially disruptive forces.” (Adamson, 2013, 210). Often making and art are seen as peripheral to the main activities of care, but a reflection on the past during the GHP brought into focus the importance of engaged activity; a profound sense of need and a desire to be connected to the self and to others through the tangible processes of production emerged - to make “touches on something at the heart of our embodied experience.” (Leader, 2016), or perhaps “what my hands need to talk about”.