

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - June 2014

Broadmoor Hospital in the Victorian Era.

At the June meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, the senior archivist at the Berkshire Record Office, Mark Stevens, gave a most interesting insight into Broadmoor Hospital in the Victorian era.

Mark commented that many people think of it as a place where the "bad and mad" were sent, but that it looks after people who need specialist care. He had come to know it through its archives, although many records are considered closed, and so it is the Victorian era that can be studied.

Before Broadmoor was set up, the care for those considered lunatics was very piecemeal and ragged. The best known was the Bethlem Hospital in London, but the conditions there had become very poor, with patients left chained up, hungry and naked, and visitors brought to see them as if they were animals in a zoo.

A new concept was adopted by William Tuke in 1796, when he opened a mental hospital in York. Those with mental illness were to be respected like the rest of society, and when George III was affected by mental disorder, people realised that such could strike at anyone. It was an incident involving the King (though not his illness) that led to the establishment of Broadmoor. On 15th May 1880, George had gone to the theatre in Drury lane, when James Hadfield had pulled out two pistols and fired at the royal box. James was bundled into the orchestra pit and arrested - claiming to have done it 'for the good of mankind'. When brought to trial, he was considered insane - but such a verdict at that time led to the accused being discharged. As this seemed an unsuitable course of action, Parliament changed the law, and introduced a category of "criminal lunatic", who could be "confined till His Majesty's pleasure be known".

As a result, a secure hospital had in due course to be built. The regulations were that an asylum should be "fixed upon an airy and healthy situation", and the site near Crowthorne was ideal. The Crown already owned the land, which was close enough to London (and therefore the Home Office), it was far from any industry, was not surrounded or overlooked, had a 'cheerful situation', and would have railway access when the station by Wellington College was opened. Convict labourers were used from 1861 to 1868 to construct 8 blocks - 6 to accommodate men, and 2 for women. The latter were finished first, so it was 8 women who in 1863 became the first patients who were transferred from the Bethlem Hospital, by train to Wokingham and then the 'Broadmoor Omnibus'. A similar process twice a week soon saw 90 women there, and from February 1864 the first of the men arrived there being over 300 by the end of the year.

The cause of a patient's insanity was recorded - either as 'moral', such as intemperance, vice or anxiety, or 'physical', such as fever, head injuries or childbirth, although for many patients the cause of their insanity was recorded as 'unknown'. Broadmoor catered for all of England and Wales, and all social classes, so aristocrats would be treated alongside the poor. Most of the men could read and write, although only a third of the women could. Most of the men could read and write, although only a third of the women could. The majority of female patients were of child-bearing age when they were admitted - most of them for having killed their own children. The men had committed a much wider range of crimes, and were of a wider age range - some in their 70s when they entered Broadmoor. George Purcell, the records say, was 78 years and 297 days old when he was admitted in January 1888 for battering his wife of many years to death with an iron bar. He was considered both physically and mentally ill, and died 2 years later. There were also teenage male patients - a 13 year old who had killed his mother, and a 12 year old who had stabbed a young lady who had asked him why he was crying. The youngest was William Giles - aged 10 who had committed arson, and remained in Broadmoor for 77 years. He had what would now be

considered a severe learning disability, but at that time there was no-where else that could take him.

Broadmoor was like a typical Victorian asylum, as it provided 'moral treatment' (which meant it was intended to boost the morale of patients). They would be given a good if basic diet, regular occupation, a healthy environment and an element of routine to their day. The work might be washing or cleaning the wards, or the males who were convalescing might make items such as furniture, whilst the females might work in the laundry or do sewing. Patients were originally repaid for their work by being given an extra meal, but later they were paid 1/8 the value of their work, which they could use to buy themselves 'luxuries'. Work was not compulsory, however, and they were encouraged to take part in other activities - reading, model making, and an asylum band, and a cricket team (the latter, though, only played 'home' fixtures!). Keeping the patients occupied in a positive way was the main treatment - there were no drugs available in those days, nor were there any what would now be called 'therapies'. In due course, 1 in 30 of the men, and 1 in 5 of the women would be totally discharged, whilst others would be sent to less secure institutions nearer to their home. For many, however, was a rural idyll, far from the smoky surroundings they were familiar with.

The original hospital had 2 blocks for women patients - one for those showing 'active signs of being a danger', and the other for those women who were convalescing. For the men, there were 6 blocks in all. Two blocks housed for those men who were considered dangerous or violent, and another block was an infirmary - which could house 100 patients. The daily routine began with the patients rising and washing before a breakfast with bread and butter and tea, followed by morning prayers (although very few took part in those). Those who were workers were provided with a light lunch, and then dinner - the most substantial meal of the day, which would include meat washed down with $\hat{A}^{\frac{3}{4}}$ pint of weak beer - was served at 5pm. After that was 'free time', with more tea with bread and butter served before the patients went to their bedrooms at 8pm. They were either put in dormitories for 8 patients, or in single rooms about 12ft x 8ft. There was no heating or lighting provided for the first few decades, and toilets were basic earth closets, emptied daily.

When the hospital opened, the staff included 2 doctors and 70 nurses. Many staff worked there for long periods - the second superintendent, Dr William Orange, had been there from the opening until 1886, when he too was succeeded by his deputy, David Nicholson. These two men had a profound effect on Broadmoor - having an overwhelming compassion, and wanting to help patients get well again, not to be locked away and forgotten. There was a continuity in staffing, and even now there are people who are the 2nd or 3rd generation to work there. There were risks, however, and each of the superintendents were attacked at least once. The first superintendent, John Mayo, for example, was attacked in the chapel by a man called Hughes who had hidden a stone in his handkerchief. He struck Dr Mayo over the left temple, and he was badly injured. Hughes was put into solitary confinement as a result - like many he suffered from delusions, and had attacked the superintendent for some imagined act he thought the latter had done.

In the first decade that Broadmoor was open, there were 26 escape attempts, and one patient made 3 tries in 1865. After 'lights out', he up-ended his bed, to be used as a ladder, broke the glass in the window, extracted a bolt from outside to then use to make a hole big enough to get through, and dropped to the yard below. Pulling himself onto the 6ft high wall, he walked along the top, then over a 9ft wall, and so to the asylum stables, where he took a horse to ride to Yateley. His careful planning had overlooked that he was dressed in only his nightshirt, and was naked from the waist down! When he hailed the village postman, telling him a story about being drunk and having missed his train, the postman became suspicious, and went to ask Broadmoor if they had 'anyone missing'. The patient was back in time for lunch. Another escapee was James Kelly - a delusional and paranoid murderer. He made a false key in the hospital workshop to get out of his block, and scaled the wall to make his get-away. Several other institutions in the country thought they had found him, but he was next identified in New Orleans, saying he had escaped from Broadmoor and wanted to return. Checks having been made, he was put on a ship back to England, where he would be met by attendants from Broadmoor. However, the ship made good time, and arrived early. Although Kelly waited for a while, he then vanished into Liverpool. But Kelly had not given up his wish to return, and in February 1927, nearly 40 years after making his escape, he turned up at the main gate to Broadmoor asking to be allowed back in!! The staff did not recognise him, but a

retired attendant did, and although the Home Office was not keen, the doctors showed him some humanity and admitted him to the one place he knew he could get food and shelter.

Mark told us about several other patients. Daniel McNaughten was one of the first men transferred to Broadmoor, and died soon after, in 1865. He was a Scottish woodturner, and believed that the Tories were his enemies. He shot and killed Edward Drummond, a civil servant who was secretary to Robert Peel (possibly intending to assassinate Peel himself). When he was tried at the Old Bailey, his defence produced experts that McNaughten suffered from delusions - and so he was sent to the Bethlem Hospital (and hence later Broadmoor) and not to the gallows. The public, however, perceived that McNaughten had been 'let off', and that however mad he was, he was not mad enough to defeat the death penalty. This led the House of Lords to introduce a series of questions (now known as the McNaughten Rules) which have since become the standard test for criminal liability of mentally ill patients - in essence testing the accused's ability to tell 'right' from 'wrong'. If the rules had been applied at McNaughten's trial, he would have been found guilty.

The artist, Richard Dadd, the artist, had gone on the Grand Tour in 1842, and when he became unwell, believed he had been taken over by the Egyptian god Osiris, and had to battle the demons. When he saw '2 stars in the heavens', he believed it was a sign that he should kill several people. He had lured his father to his death in August 1843, and on escaping to France, attacked several of his fellow travellers. He was subsequently found to have a list of people he thought should die - with his father at the top of the list. He was another of the first men to be transferred from Bethlem to Broadmoor, where he was content, and continued to paint. He died of tuberculosis at Broadmoor in 1886.

William Chester Minor was born in what is now known as Sri Lanka, and then went to America, where he graduated as a doctor. However, whilst serving with the army, he became insane and was discharged. His delusions forced him to take part in 'sinful sexual practices'. He had a substantial income, and in 1871 set out on the Grand Tour, and travelled in London. Whilst staying there, he imagined that he saw a man who he thought had broken into his room. Going out into the street, he saw George Merrett and believing him to be the imaginary figure, shot him. Following his trial, he was sent to Broadmoor. He was able to have money sent to him from America, and so was able to employ other patients as servants. Minor also had a day room in Broadmoor, where he could study his library of some thousands of books. He then set about compiling lists of word usage for the Oxford English Dictionary - in the manner of the period such an occupation being considered a 'moral treatment'. He still suffered from delusions, however, and would call out each evening for the attendants to stop people getting into his room. Eventually, at the age of 75, he was discharged from Broadmoor to be escorted back to America, to the Washington asylum, where he died soon afterwards.

Christina Edmunds from Brighton was known as the 'chocolate cream poisoner'. She lived a life of "boredom and mischief making", and at the age of 40 fell in love with Charles Beard, a local doctor who was already married. She wrote many letters to him, and when he asked her to stop, Christina visited Dr Beard's home and gave her some chocolates. Mrs Beard then became very ill, although she recovered afterwards. There then followed a number of cases where people became ill having chocolates, even when bought from a local shop, Maynards. Analysis then showed that the chocolate creams contained strychnine. The police asked for information to help them solve the case, leading to Christina being arrested. It transpired that she had been buying large amounts of the chocolate creams - sometimes using local boys as runners to avoid suspicion - and then either returned the sweets to the shop as unwanted, or left them for unsuspecting passers-by to pick up. Dr Beard had thought that his wife's illness may have been caused by the chocolates, but was thought reluctant to say so for fear of revealing his affair. Christina had continued to poison chocolates in the hope of pinning the blame for poisoning Mrs Beard on 'someone else'. She was sentenced to death, but reprieved by the intervention of Dr Orange. Once at Broadmoor, she continued her mischief making, by getting other patients to do things, such as getting them to have contraband sent into the hospital, writing clandestine letters to others and so on, whilst she painted and made herself up in ways deliberately designed to get the attention of the (male) doctors. A more 'ordinary patient' was Margaret Davenport. She was one of many unremarkable people, who one day have an irrational desire to do something. Margaret was born in Shropshire in 1862, had married Joseph

Davenport, and they had had 4 children. The two boys died in infancy, and the eldest of the girls was disabled. Twice Margaret had been found wandering at night - once naked. In 1872, she had filled a pan tub with water, and held each of her girls' heads under the water until they drowned. She then tried to drown herself, and when that failed, to hang herself. Failing again, she laid out the girls in her bedroom - and went to make tea. In her defence, she claimed that she had been very much provoked before she killed her children. Whilst in Broadmoor, she would write to Joseph - continuing to do so long after he died.

Broadmoor worked so well to provide for its patients that it was expanded in the 1880s, and housed about 800 patients by the end of the century, and plans then followed to build a branch hospital in the Midlands, which in 1912 became Rampton Hospital. Originally administered by the Home Office, Broadmoor later came under the control of the Department of Health. The well-known warning siren at Broadmoor was introduced much later than the Victorian era recalled above. John Straffen had killed two children in 1951, but was not considered mentally fit to answer the charge, and so sent to Broadmoor. A year later, he escaped, and tragically killed again. It was decided that it was a freak incident, but has tainted Broadmoor's reputation ever since. As the authorities decided that 'something had to be seen to be done', the siren was installed, and is still tested every Monday morning. In more recent times, however, much of the old Broadmoor has been demolished, and within the next 5 years there will just be 2 blocks for men left, all the women having been moved away by 2007. Mark has written a book, *Broadmoor Revealed*, which tells much more of the Victorian patients that were treated at Broadmoor.

More details of his talk including some of the pictures he showed can be found on the Berkshire Record Office website [here](#). This also includes a link to a recording of a similar talk Mark gave to the National Archives which you can listen to [here](#).

The Society will have its annual visit to a place of historic interest on Wednesday, June 25th - this year to Bentley Priory - an 18th century house that was the Headquarters of Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain in 1940. Following the summer break, the next meeting will be on Tuesday, September 9th, when well-known local historian Joan Dils returns to tell us about Tudor and Stuart Feasts, using contemporary accounts to reveal something of life in Berkshire at that time.