

# Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - June 2018

## Fair Mile Hospital - History of a Victorian Asylum

Ian Wheeler, the author of a recent book on Fair Mile Hospital, at Cholsey, gave an illustrated talk on the history of this Victorian Asylum. Ian's ancestors back to his great grandparents had worked at Fair Mile, as he did himself for a short while, and he lived for a while with his grandparents there. He discovered pictures of family members in the hospital's photographic archive, and these led to him researching the hospital's history, using documents at the Berkshire Record Office, and anecdotal evidence from former staff.

Under the 1845 Lunacy Act, responsibility for caring for people with mental illness was assigned to the counties. The latter provided Victorian pauper lunatic asylum - pauper meaning those without large funds to provide for care, lunatic being the common term for those who had a mental illness, and asylum a place of safety and security - these county asylums being meant to be a helpful and therapeutic way to look after people. The administration at that time was through the county courts, in Berkshire being by a union between the boroughs of Reading and Newbury. They did not provide any facilities, however, but contracted the Littlemore Asylum in Oxford to take on the task. By the mid 1860s, Littlemore was reaching its capacity, and so the Moulsoford Asylum was created (later to be called the Berkshire County Lunatic Asylum, the Berkshire Mental Hospital, and finally Fair Mile Hospital). The 67 acre site (later extended to 100 acres) was set in a rural landscape, with a river frontage, views of the Chilterns. It had easy access, being  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile from Moulsoford railway station, and a good underground water supply. The architect, C H Howell, was a specialist in such buildings, and it was 'built to suit its purpose'. It opened in September 1870, with provision for 285 patients (approximately equal numbers of males and females). The objective was to make it as self-sufficient as possible, so as well as water supply, it had its own gas works and electricity generator, a kitchen garden, orchard and a mixed farm, sports fields, a chapel, etc. It aimed to provide 'peaceful surroundings' - seen as important in the treatment of the mentally ill. With that in mind, the walls around the exercise yard were kept low, so the patients could enjoy the views of the Chilterns etc - but with a deep ha-ha to make it difficult for anyone to climb over the wall.

Early treatments were based on giving patients decent hygienic living conditions, an adequate diet, and providing for their physical health, and efforts were made to 'bring the comforts of home into the asylum' - some patients being more comfortable there than at home). Recreation and entertainment were provided for, and the patients were occupied with 'gainful activity as a way to give them self-respect'. It was the best kind of treatment that the experts of the time knew about. Over time, additions were made to cater for up to 650 patients, later raised to 850, and reaching a maximum of 1400 by the end of World War I.

The senior staff, until the 1930s, were predominately male. For many years staff lived on-on the ward, and had a 'reasonable standard of living'. The female attendants often had a general nursing background, but the male attendants tended to be ex police or servicemen. This was because the science of psychiatry was very young at the time, and patients could be difficult, but there were no drugs available to help calm them. Many of the staff stayed for long periods - the chaplain, Revd Philip Raynor, for example, appeared in photographs in 1917 and was still working there in the 1950s. Between the gate and the main entrance to the hospital was a driveway surrounding an oval lawn, and it became the 'tradition' for male staff to enter the gate and go round the left hand side of the oval, whilst female staff would go round the right hand side to reach the doorway!

By the early 1900s, sedatives such as laudanum could be used, and early barbiturates (anticonvulsants) became available soon after. From the 1940s, electro-convulsive treatment could be used - although not pleasant, it was seen as effective (and still available as a 'last resort' process). There was little advance in drug treatments until the 1950s, when anti-psychotics were developed, followed in the 1960s by anti-depressants. Fair Mile Hospital had been designed without specialist treatment facilities, so these would be administered on the wards, with just a screen around the patient. This situation was alleviated in the 1950s, when a dedicated facility - the George Schuster Hospital - was provided nearby which had admission and treatment wards. Fair Mile also became one of the pioneers of group therapy for patients, whilst occupational therapy offered a wide range of crafts that they could participate in.

In the 1920s a Registered Mental Nurse qualification became available to staff, and the Moultsford Manor School of Nursing, set up in 1956 in a house in the village, became one of the major teaching hospitals for those working in the field of mental health, with multi-national students.

In due course, modern medical treatments meant there was less need for patients to be housed in the hospital, and - after a period of decline - it closed in 2003. The historic buildings were subsequently made into desirable residences.

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The next Society event will be a visit to Dorney Court in July, whilst the next meeting takes place on Tuesday, September 11th, when Joe and Joy Haynes will recount the history of the Wargrave Theatre Workshop.