

A Brief History of Bethlem Royal Hospital

Beginnings

Bethlem was not founded as a hospital at all. In 1247 Simon Fitzmary, an Alderman of the City of London founded a priory of the Church of St Mary of Bethlehem to serve knights setting off to the Holy Land.

By 1329 it was already being referred to as a hospital and in 1403 there is the first evidence of the hospital being used to house the insane. Bethlem took patients from all over the country, mainly from the poor. Patients were admitted with the expectation that they would be cured but those who didn't recover might stay for many years. A list of patients from 1598 includes one woman who had been in Bethlem for 25 years. Those looking after them would have been largely untrained and it was not until 1634 that the hospital employed a regular physician.

Moorfields

By the second half of the 17th century, new premises were needed and a new hospital was built at Moorfields with space for 120 patients. Great attention was paid to the design of the building with iron railings surrounding it so it would be noticed by passers-by.

On the inside, there were two galleries running the length of the building with an iron grille in the middle separating the male and female quarters. The galleries formed the day rooms for those patients who were well enough and individual rooms opened off them. In addition there were two external exercise yards surrounded by high walls. Violent or dangerous patients were kept locked in their rooms. Sightseers also used the galleries. This practice was only ended in 1770. There was some provision for those who were incurable and could not be cared for by their family but generally patients stayed for a year or less.



St George's Fields

By 1800, the hospital at Moorfields was in need of repairs considered too extensive and costly. The hospital opened on a new site in south London in 1815. Part of the building still stands today and houses the Imperial War Museum. It was designed to house 400 patients but only took half this number at first.

The layout of the hospital was based on that of the old, though a central section now separated the male and female wings. This accommodated the Matron, an apothecary, a visiting room for patients etc.

The long galleries with rooms off them remained but the building was now divided into 4 floors which allowed for further classification of patients. The interior was rather bleak at first, sparsely furnished with small barred



windows high up on the walls. Following an enquiry into the poor conditions of the hospital, reform began in the 1850's and improvements continued throughout the century. Comfortable furniture, flowers, pictures etc were added and the windows enlarged. The building was probably warmer than that at Moorfields. The windows were glazed instead of merely having shutters and

there was a steam central heating system though this was not terribly efficient.

From 1816, the Criminal Department housed those patients charged with criminal offences but found to be insane. They were to be detained 'until His Majesty's Pleasure shall be known'. The department was moved in 1864 to Broadmoor.

Monks Orchard

By the beginning of the 20th century, the building at St George's Fields was outdated. When, in 1930, the hospital moved to the Monks Orchard Estate just south of London, a deliberate break with the old design was made. It was to be built on the villa system with each ward housed in a separate building with its own kitchen, dining room and enclosed garden. There were then separate buildings for administration, nurses home, science and treatment rooms and recreation.

In 1948, under the new National Health Service, Bethlem joined with the Maudsley Hospital to form a single psychiatric teaching hospital and in 1999 joined with other mental health services in south London to form the South London and Maudsley NHS Trust.