

In 1865, when he was 58, Sam was knocked down in a road traffic accident and, although he did not suffer any neurological damage, did complain of persistent symptoms which led him to resign his commission, and retire to Church House, Weybridge, Surrey. He lived a very quiet life for the next 20 years, and died at the age of 79, on 7 March 1886.

Sam never married, but he was close to Elizabeth Gaskell and her family. He kept a fatherly eye on Meta Gaskell when she was at school in London, and Meta attended his funeral. In later life, he also made many visits to Elizabeth Holland, and her large family in Wallasey.

Gaskell's only paper in a learned journal was the result of his evidence to a Select Committee of Parliament in 1859 when he drew attention to the lack of provision for many non-violent mentally ill people who were deliberately overlooked by the local authorities required by the Poor Law to provide them with accommodation, in order to save costs. The paper included evidence of a similar sequestration of mentally ill relatives at home to avoid the expense of admission to hospital. He suggested a greater range of facilities catering for different levels of disturbance, and that patients could be voluntarily admitted.

Gaskell's readiness to adopt new ideas, his intelligence, his ability to get down to basics, and especially

his practical concern for others would have stood him in good stead today. He was not inspired by the literary skills of his brother, sister, and sister-in-law to publish and we should be grateful to Elizabeth Holland for not only enriching the College, but for memorialising a psychiatrist whose distinction in public service would otherwise have been forgotten.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Miss Reddy, Librarian, Manchester Royal Infirmary; to the medical librarians of the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester; to Dr Berrios, Librarian of the Royal College of Psychiatrists; to the Archives Department, Warrington Borough Library; and to the Administrator, Lancaster Moor Hospital for assistance. I am also grateful to Mr Guest-Gornall for permission to use his father's unpublished manuscript on Dr Gaskell.

This paper is derived from a talk given at the Autumn meeting of the College in 1987, the centenary year of the founding of the Gaskell prize. A fuller version, with notes and references, is to be published in the *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*, and I am grateful to the editor for permission to publish this extract.

Psychiatric Bulletin (1989), 13, 188–189

Sketches from the history of psychiatry

The fire at Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum, 1903, remembered

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On the night of 16/17 November 1903, fire destroyed a male ward at Friern Barnet Hospital in North London. Two patients died in the conflagration and one was injured.

This tragedy was in effect an action re-play on a very reduced scale of that which, in 1903, overtook the hospital, then known as Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum. The disaster then was of such magnitude that newspapers and professional journals competed with each other in their graphic descriptions of the harrowing events, not only making it "the worst ever disaster in English asylum history" (Hunter

& MacAlpine, 1974), but one which "occasioned the greatest loss of life of any in the metropolis since the great fire of 1666" (*Journal of Mental Science*, 1903).

In comparable vein, the opening paragraph of a long first leader in the *Lancet* of 31 January 1903, reads:

"In the early hours of the morning of January 27th there occurred a tragedy so appalling in its suddenness and heartrending by reason of its attendant circumstances that the barest and briefest record of the event brings horror to the mind. The temporary wards at Colney

Hatch Asylum, which contained some 330 persons of unsound mind, together with 40 members of the asylum staff, were destroyed in a very short space of time by fire, the loss of life being 52, all women".

There followed the most searching enquiries, and at the formal inquest the jury blamed the disastrous construction of the temporary buildings equally on the London County Council, the Home Secretary and the Lunacy Commission. The London County Council, however, could plead in mitigation, that so hard pressed were they to meet the ever increasing demands for accommodation for their patients that temporary buildings had to be erected as a matter of expediency. The Home Secretary could have, but for his own reasons, decided not to veto the plans. The Commissioners in Lunacy, in their own defence, made it abundantly clear that "the inflammable character of the buildings in which the disaster occurred is therefore in direct antagonism to the principles of construction which the Commissioners have habitually demanded". (*Journal of Mental Science*, 1903).

But, whoever was blameworthy, the repercussions of the tragedy were immediate and included drastic alterations to the plans for the building of mental hospitals. At this precise time the estate of Horton Manor, Epsom, Surrey, was being developed as a

complex of psychiatric facilities. Horton Hospital itself was being planned and the appropriate committee had opposed the replication of the plans used for the building of Bexley Hospital in Kent. They favoured the more imaginative design of the Maryland State Asylum in the USA; but to put this into effect would have necessitated the use of temporary buildings which, in the light of the Colney Hatch fire, would have been wholly unacceptable. A compromise was reached: the Bexley design would be used, but with specific modifications. Perhaps the most lunatic of these was to leave the interminable external corridors running round the semi-circular exterior of the hospital unglazed and totally at the mercy of the elements. And in the winter, the winds that blew and the snow that fell could be more unkind than man's ingratitude. I know, because for more than a quarter of a century I suffered them.

References

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This is the first of a new series.

Psychiatric Bulletin (1989) 13, 189-190

Conference report

Psychoanalytic psychotherapy services in Europe – London, 11–13 November 1988

The Association for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy in the British National Health Service*

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It is often from a conference a little peripheral to one's day-to-day work which we learn most, so it was when I attended this meeting. I was attracted to it partly because it was cosmopolitan and my knowledge of psychiatric services in Europe was limited.

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Secondly, although my clinical work is as a general psychiatrist, my orientation is firmly psychodynamic (Tait, 1988). Lastly as Physician Superintendent in Murray Royal (yes we still have them North of the border!) I have on my agenda how best to develop psychotherapy within our own service.

The meeting certainly was cosmopolitan, with about 130 delegates from 16 countries. Particularly well represented were the Scandinavians (always of