

Sketches from the history of psychiatry

Meanwood Park Hospital, Leeds

Seventy years, 1919–1989: a chronicle

DOUGLAS A. SPENCER, Consultant Psychiatrist and Senior Clinical Lecturer,
Meanwood Park Hospital, Leeds LS6 4QD

In August 1989 Meanwood Park Hospital, Leeds, the biggest hospital for mental handicap in the Yorkshire Health Region, reached the seventieth anniversary of its foundation. Like other hospitals for mental handicap. Meanwood Park is coming to the end of an era. The parkland of 134 acres, which has been the hospital's estate, and has existed for over 200 years, is to be sold in phases for housing schemes. Now is an opportune time to record the history of this hospital.

The name 'Meanwood' means 'common wood'. The great advantage of Meanwood Park Hospital (MPH) has been its situation only four miles from the centre of Leeds. It has always provided for the Leeds conurbation. In addition, at different times, it has served Huddersfield and parts of West Yorkshire extending to the border with Lancashire. During the '60s it was the main hospital for a population of 1,200,000. In recent years the hospital has served both Leeds East and Leeds West Health Districts, a total population of 700,000, England's second largest local authority.

The local authority period, 1919–1948

The Mental Deficiency Act of 1913 placed on town councils a duty to care for the mentally defective. For this purpose in 1919 Leeds City Council rented the Meanwood Park estate, which comprised Meanwood Hall and 74 acres of land, on a short lease from the owner, Sir Hickman Beckett Bacon, Bart, of a family of bankers. After the lease was entered into the City Council was able to buy Meanwood Park and adjacent land, an area of 175 acres, for £14,000. The Hall accommodated 35 male and 52 female cases.

Patient Number One, born in 1909, was admitted on 25 August 1919. He lived at the hospital over 60 years until his death in November 1979. Meanwood Park Colony was ceremonially opened on 3 June 1920 by Sir William Byrne, KCVO, CB, Chairman of the Board of Control. Eighty-seven patients lived in the Hall and 16 in a nearby block.

In 1928 a limited competition was held and the plans of Messrs J. M. Sheppard & Partners, architects of London, were selected for a colony which provided for ultimate extension to 900 places, divided into male, female and children, grouped round central buildings. The first section was opened by Councillor Arthur Hawkyard, MD, LLD, JP, Chairman of the Mental Health Committee, on 3 October 1932 and provided for the accommodation of 328 residents in ten villas, to bring the total number to 433.

On 20 November 1934, during the Chairmanship of Councillor Dr Z. P. Fernandez, the Council approved the second part of the scheme. It comprised seven additional villas, a hospital villa, a villa for the most dependent cases, a recreation hall for 600, a nurses' residence of three storeys with 70 bedrooms, six staff houses, central kitchen, stores, workshops, and a house for the Superintendent. These extensions provided for an additional 410 patients, to give a total of 841. The water supply allowed 40 gallons per head per day. The cost was £206,650. Dr Alexander H. Wilson, the first Superintendent, was appointed in 1939. Her Royal Highness, the Princess Royal, opened the extensions on Monday, 23 June 1941. A feature of Meanwood Park was the 'villa system' of separate blocks accommodating patients instead of one large institution.

On 2 June 1938 an annexe, Crooked Acres, overlooking Kirkstall Abbey, was opened. It has been used as a half-way house to discharge for patients working in the community. A large house called 'Meanwood Towers', within sight of Meanwood Park, and a house named 'Kepstorn' also accommodated patients at one time.

In wartime, 1939 to 1945, Meanwood Park was an emergency hospital. The mentally handicapped patients were crowded into certain villas or moved elsewhere. Wounded soldiers, British and German, and civilians were treated. The operating theatre used then has remained and, with various refurbishments, had continued in use for dental surgery.

Fantail pigeons were kept on the lawns and the mansion, used for administration, was reputedly haunted by a grey lady.

In 1946 student nurses were paid £3 for a 60-hour week. They attended lectures in their own time to gain the qualification of the Royal Medico-Psychological Association. Male nurses lived in the villas, the farm or a hostel. Female nurses resided in the nurses' home.

Relatives were allowed to visit patients once a month on a Saturday. Villas were locked. Patients' mail was censored. Each patient was issued with one free stamp per month. Some patients had weekend parole. Others visited the local village one afternoon each week.

Male patients cultivated the land. Acres of potatoes, oats and vegetables were planted. Female patients performed domestic duties or worked in the laundry, nurses' home or kitchen. Parties of patients, escorted by nurses, helped to lay out the grounds, making a concrete car park and building a two arched 'folly' recording 'Victory 1945'.

Patients received six old pence per week or a bar of chocolate. Male and female patients mixed only at dances and church services. A man was not allowed to dance more than twice with the same woman. A weekly cinema show was held.

All domestic work was done by patients. In the men's workshops furniture was repaired. Basket and leather work were done. There was an active Guide Company, and a Scout Troop with a drum and bugle band which gave displays and led the local Methodist Church Parade each month. Day trips to seaside resorts were arranged. Patients went to a holiday camp.

All patients were certified. Mental testing was done by the Superintendent and his Deputy. The Board of Control paid an annual visit. The hospital always received a satisfactory report.

Most villas accommodated 50 or more patients. Three meals were provided each day, food for these being collected from the kitchen. Male patients had to be in bed for 8.00 p.m. The nurses cut patients' hair. Epileptic patients had weekly enemas; many wore protective headgear. A weekly dose of white medicine was given on Sunday evenings. Paraldehyde draught was used as a sedative.

The National Health Service era from 1948

In the '50s the Board of Control report stated that Meanwood Park Hospital consisted of modern well-built buildings. Dr A. H. Wilson, the Medical Superintendent, held an out-patient clinic in mental deficiency at the Leeds University Department of Psychiatry in Hyde Terrace, Leeds. Sixty per cent of admissions were classified as idiots and imbeciles.

During the '60s the Industrial Therapy Department was extended. A new single storey villa for 40 mentally and physically handicapped children was opened in May 1964 by Dr Alexander Wilson, who had retired in 1961, and named after him. Villa 1, used since the war for medical patients with arthritic diseases, was returned to mental handicap services to relieve overcrowding as Villa 13 accommodated over 70 patients in one big dormitory. Visiting became unrestricted.

The bed numbers, at a peak of 841 through the mid '60s, began to fall. Evening classes for in-patients, provided by Leeds Education Authority, were introduced in September 1965. In 1969 the Leeds Regional Hospital Board converted the original infirmary block into an admission, assessment and short-stay unit, with a psychology department, pharmacy, X-ray room, laboratory, consulting rooms and dental suite. The medical staff consisted of three consultant psychiatrists, a senior registrar training in mental handicap, a registrar and six clinical assistants. Nursing training in mental handicap continued.

When Sir Keith Joseph visited Meanwood Park in 1971 he said, "This could be a place of pilgrimage". A programme of refurbishing villas began. Two new prefabricated wards were erected. To reduce numbers, 72 patients with homes in Wakefield and Huddersfield were transferred to the new Fieldhead Hospital at Wakefield, opened in 1972. A 'Gateway' social club for in-patients was established. A new occupational therapy centre which incorporated a physiotherapy department was built. Additional staff were appointed for social work, psychology and occupational therapy. Over 300 nurses were employed.

The quality of life and amenities for in-patients were enhanced. A patients' clothing store, shop and hairdressing salon were opened. An adult activities centre was built in 1976. A Parents and Relatives Association was formed. In 1978 a pilot day-time Continuing Adult Education scheme, financed by Leeds Education Authority, was inaugurated. This was expanded, became highly regarded, and could claim to be almost unique. New standard NHS case records were adopted, case conferences were routinely organised and a medical library was developed. Regular out-patient clinics were held and day-patients were received. A community nursing service was originated.

By 1980 the number of in-patients had fallen to 566. A new special school was built adjacent to the hospital. To assist rehabilitation a villa was converted into four suites of four flatlets. Some other villas were subdivided to create living units of eight or ten patients. A Resettlement Officer was appointed and the relocation of suitable in-patients outside hospital continued. Small houses for three to five residents were preferred. Other patients went to

residential homes including projects run by housing associations. Priority was given to establishing nine community mental handicap teams with bases in Social Services premises across Leeds. A hospital dietitian was appointed in 1984. A new Staff Education Unit was opened.

In the mid-'80s three villas and the large recreation hall were closed as part of a plan to sell sections of the hospital land. At the same time a villa was refurbished to make a new Leisure and Recreation Centre. One villa was allocated to a special service for mentally handicapped people with violent and dangerous propensities, in the charge of a new consultant with half-time NHS and half-time senior lecturer commitments.

In 1989 the number of beds is 340. It is likely to take a few more years to resettle a majority of the residents. A small residue of dependent and disturbed patients will need continuing NHS care.

Research

Research at Meanwood Park has been done by members of the staff and by visiting professionals with special interests. In the '60s the blood groups of Down's Syndrome patients were examined. Copper in hair was measured. A series of 777 in-patients was screened for inborn metabolic errors. The new Psychology Department initiated research on operant conditioning. During the '70s papers were published on the use of the ICD-8 and the admission and discharge of mentally handicapped people. Chromosomal analysis was carried out on Down's Syndrome cases. In the '80s in-patients and staff were tested for hepatitis B. Studies of resettlement have continued.

Teaching and training

Meanwood Park Hospital has participated in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching on mental handicap. It has been a regional base for senior registrar training. It had the only registrar post in mental handicap in the Yorkshire Region. In 1980 this was integrated into the Leeds Rotational Training Scheme. A

case conference has been held on each patient at least once a year. Since 1985 a system of regular monitoring of patients, medicines has been operated, taking the villas in turn for a weekly meeting of the staff pharmacist, doctors and nurses. Instructional and information notes relevant to patients' conditions have been included in the ward case files.

The voluntary contribution

One of the most significant developments in the life-story of Meanwood Park Hospital was the founding of the League of Friends in December 1965. This enabled citizens from the community to bring their time and talents to benefit the hospital. Known as "The Friends", the league has remembered patients on their birthdays and at Christmas, regularly donated money to the villas, and provided numerous amenities. In addition, the Friends have raised well over £100,000 for eight major projects: the building of the Visitors' Tea-room, twice extended; the Adult Activities Centre; the Leisure and Recreation Department; and three minibuses. For 20 years an annual garden party in the grounds, opened by a celebrity, attracted hundreds of visitors and raised thousands of pounds.

Acknowledgements

A Chronicle of Meanwood Park Hospital must pay respects to the long-stay residents for whom it has been the only permanent home they have known. Over the years staff, parents, relatives, friends and patients have initiated innovations and improvements. Many wish to see the irreplaceable hospital site remain as a village community offering a range of residential choices to people with handicaps. Since 1970 a monthly hospital news report has been kept and these are now an invaluable archive of the hospital's life. Gratitude is due to staff and volunteers who have found their reward in up to 20 and more years of service at Meanwood Park Hospital given with dedication, determination and devotion, humility, humour and humanity.