

## Sketches from the history of psychiatry

### Beginnings: The Bethel at Norwich

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In the centre of Norwich stands a red brick building which has a rare place in psychiatry. Its history began on 12 December 1712 when a lease on a small piece of waste ground was granted by the Corporation of the City of Norwich to four men. The men were acting as trustees for an elderly widow, and the deed specified the purpose of the lease: it was to build a house, or houses for “the benefit and use of such as are lunatics.” The term of the lease was 1,000 years at an annual rent of one peppercorn. The widow was one Mary Chapman. Born in 1647, she was the daughter of Thomas Mann, Mayor of the city and one of the richest and most influential men in Norwich. It is thought that she grew up close to the city’s Bridewell, where many difficult lunatics would have been housed, and she is known to have had immediate

experience of mental illness in her own, and her husband’s families. In 1682 she married a widowed cleric, Samuel Chapman, some years her senior and the vicar of a local parish. Together they made plans for the Bethel but in 1700 she was widowed and left childless. Despite this she continued to develop her charitable project. The final choice of name, Bethel, or house of God, was her husband’s.

The building was erected under the supervision of one of the trustees. Our only record of the original building is its image on the first seal. It was a simple two storey building with two wings, set back a short way from the street. The foundation stone records the year 1713, and expresses the wish of the foundress that the Master should be a man who lived in fear of God, followed the true Protestant religion, and who



*The original Bethel in Norwich, seen from the garden. The building is now surrounded by more recent additions, and houses the Department of Child, Adolescent and Family Psychiatry.*

would care for the souls under his care as well as their bodies. This spiritual dimension was further expressed in various texts chosen by Mary Chapman to hang in the rooms. Our knowledge of its earliest years is negligible. We do not know how many people were cared for at this time, nor for what reasons or for how long. We do know that Mary Chapman appointed at least two Masters to supervise the house, and that at some time before her death, when already in her 60s, she moved in to live in the house.

Our knowledge of the Bethel becomes clearer after 1724. Mary Chapman died on 8 January 1724, and her house might have "died" with her were it not for her will. Only four years after the founding of the Westminster Hospital and a quarter of a century before that of St Luke's, her will established a trust to be managed by seven named trustees, all men of substance and position in Norwich, who were given full authority over the Bethel. Their duty was to manage her estate in order to provide for, and maintain, the institution. The means to be employed were not defined but their purpose was. This was to offer care within the Bethel to those "afflicted with lunacy or madness (not such as are fools or idiots from their birth)"; their priorities in this were laid down in the will. First preference was to go to poor lunatics of Norwich who were to be admitted free and with all necessities found, "on the Foundation". Next in order of priority were those of some means, who were to pay as they could afford. Finally came those with ample means, whose fees were expected to supplement the funds of the Bethel. Mary Chapman's will also laid down some small details. The trustees were to buy a book to record proceedings. This, with any other papers, was to be kept in a chest with at least four locks, each key being held by a different trustee. The will reveals a devout woman of means, whose aim was to establish and provide for a charity for the mad of Norwich, both physically and spiritually.

Whether her trustees fulfilled her wishes is impossible to say, but they presumably set out to run the trust in the most prudent way. Records were kept from the first meeting of the trustees on 12 January 1724 and give an indication of their priorities in management. Most important was the investment of capital in property and loans, and the resulting income from rents and interest. Next in order of priority was the development of the Bethel; building took place within three years to increase the ward accommodation. The residents warranted little official comment unless they were to be kept on the Foundation; only nine names are mentioned in the first 20 years. The physician at this time was Sir Benjamin Wrench, who had gained his MD from Cambridge, and was both physician and trustee from the start. He is known to have presented a fire-engine to the city after a devastating fire, but we have no

record of his medical skills. What was recorded was the misconduct of the Master, who abused the residents, made money from visitors and was rude to the trustees, all within the first six months. The committee swiftly restored order, restricted his privileges and cut his salary.

The mid-18th century saw the start of change at the Bethel. Sir Benjamin retired in 1747. His replacement by a younger man, Dr Kervin Wright, was followed by a dramatic increase in the number of residents from about 25 to 50 over a ten year period. A simultaneous burst of building provided yet more accommodation for patients and a handsome committee room for the trustees, a room which remains essentially unchanged from 1756. Two years later Dr Wright resigned, and was replaced by Drs Beevor and Manning. Almost immediately the quantity of records increased and indications of outcome began to appear. These categories became more detailed with time. Starting with "recovered" and "incurable", they eventually included "relieved", "unfit" and "not likely to receive any further benefit". The trustees, and presumably the physicians, were increasingly concerned with outcome in the latter half of the 18th century. Analysis of the minutes reveals recorded "recovery" rates of 60% to 80% during this period. The earlier concern with care changed to concern with cure, and this, together with recurrent problems of accommodation, was reflected in a decision taken by the trustees in 1783 to limit the length of admissions to two years.

A second phase of expansion occurred at the end of the century and brought patient numbers up to about 80. At this time the records developed a more "medical" tone. The term "patient" appeared regularly from 1800 and referred predominantly to residents who did not recover; those who did were "lunatics". Before this, a number of medical conditions had been recorded, usually as a reason for discharge. Most common were fits and pregnancy, but consumption, fever and smallpox also occurred. The physicians at the Bethel were well qualified. They included graduates from Edinburgh and Leyden, and when the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital was opened in 1771 both Dr Beevor and Dr Manning were appointed to it, an indication of their standing in the local medical establishment. Dr Beevor also had an interest in a private madhouse at Lakenham; Dr Manning was appointed visiting physician to it.

The role of the Bethel changed in 1814 when the local county asylum was opened at Thorpe St Andrew's. This institution, funded by local rates, grew rapidly and soon overshadowed the Bethel in size. Ironically, this coincided with the appointment of Joseph John Gurney as a governor in 1828. A member of one of Norwich's leading Quaker families, he served conscientiously as Visitor to the Bethel in the late 1820s. During this period two intriguing events

took place. The first was a visit in 1828 by Samuel Tuke of the York Retreat; the second was a visit by a magistrate from Middlesex in the same year, three years before Hanwell Asylum opened. These events suggest that the Bethel had active contact with developments beyond Norwich, but their extent cannot be gauged.

The management of the residents was not explicitly recorded. Inventories taken in the 18th century list chains, padlocks, waistcoats, and "chairs and staples", all items of restraint. The earliest surviving rules, dated 11 December 1797, reminded the Master and Mistress of "the duty and humanity" they owed to the patients, who were to be controlled not by "blows or . . . any weapons" but by "the most gentle and humane means". Sadly, by 1881 the Governors were seeking estimates for two padded rooms.

From 1814, the Bethel lost its unique position in caring for the mad of Norwich, even more so after the city asylum opened at Hellesdon in 1880. It seems to have grown into a small, comfortable private asylum. One of the physicians died in 1814. Perhaps as a sign of relative decline, his post was not filled until the appointment of an RMO was made mandatory by the Lunatics Act of 1845, the requirements of which were unsuccessfully opposed by the governors. The reports of the Commissioners in Lunacy were not always complimentary. In their first report of 1844 they felt it was "ill-adapted . . . for the reception of the insane"; in 1849 they felt that the Bethel was "very deficient in many essentials" for the restoration of health, noted that the linen was worse than in the workhouse, and recommended that the institution should be moved into the country.

Hopefully, the first two observations were acted upon. The last was not, and the Bethel remains on its

original site to this day. It was founded at a time of increasing concern for the relief of the poor in one of the two leading provincial centres; Bristol has established a similar facility in 1696. Content with simple care for 30 years, the increasing medicalisation of madness was mirrored in the changing records from the early 1750s. The Bethel's first century witnessed the beginning of the modern profession of medicine, with its emphasis on hospital care and physical treatments. The quality of medical care was generally high at this time and continued into the 19th century. Although it had no lasting influence outside Norwich, the Bethel served its community faithfully until overtaken by social and political developments elsewhere. Surrounded by Victorian and later buildings lies the original heart of the first purpose-built provincial establishment for the mentally ill, the oldest such building to survive, and one which still plays an important part in the mental illness service of Norwich.

### Sources

- BARCLAY, C. V. (1963) An eighteenth century mental hospital. *British Journal of Psychiatric Social Work*, 7, 21–26.
- BATEMAN, SIR F. & RYE, W. (1906) *A History of the Bethel at Norwich*. Norwich: Gibbs & Waller.
- NORFOLK RECORD OFFICE *Minutes of the Bethel Hospital, 1724–1895: BH9–15, BH16–20*.
- *Visitors Book, 1828–1850: BH25*.
- (An extensive collection of other manuscripts is held in the Norfolk Record Office; these include continuous minutes from 1724, disbursement books from 1730, account books, registers (some extending back to the late 18th century, albeit damaged), casenotes from the 19th century, and miscellaneous bills and correspondence).

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## Miscellany

### Merck Awards – Scotland

The winner of the 1990 Merck Award in Scotland was Dr Robert Kehoe, a senior registrar at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. The award will enable him to visit emergency psychiatric services in the USA. On his return he will present a paper at a quarterly meeting of the Scottish Division of the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

### New publication

The Centre for Policy on Ageing has published a report entitled *Living Dangerously: risk-taking, safety and older people* by Deidre Wynne-Harley, price £7.80 (64 pp).

Further information: Nick Hayes, Centre for Policy on Ageing, 25–31 Ironmonger Row, London EC1V 3QP (telephone 071 253 1787).