The Mad Houses of Hook Norton

There was a time when Hook Norton was known not for its brewery, but its lunatic asylums. In the 1730s the only asylum in Oxfordshire was here; just over a century later, in the 1840s, there were four in the county, two of them in Hook Norton. As a result, throughout the region generally until very recently it was commonly held that just coming from Hook Norton was ample evidence of lunacy! This was unjust, for the simple reason that, at the period we know most about (1828-1854), not only did most of the asylums’ inmates not come from Hook Norton but over 60 percent didn’t even come from Oxfordshire. The asylums existed here because someone in the village in the early eighteenth century had the initiative to start an asylum to fill a perceived need, and made it a successful family business.

The First Century

Our earliest evidence of the asylum comes from an advertisement that appeared in Jackson’s Oxford Gazette on 31st October 1778. It reads:

A HOUSE for LUNATICKS.  
THIS is to inform the Public in general, and the Friends of Persons disordered in their Senses in particular, That Joanna Harris, Daughter of the late Mrs. Sarah Minchin, dec'd., of Hook-Norton, Oxfordshire, intends keeping on the Business, which her late Mother kept with a distinguished Reputation for upwards of Half a Century. She, the said Joanna Harris having been an Assistant to her Mother for upwards of 30 Years, and having for several Years past had the Management of it herself, and having now a proper Licence according to Act of Parliament for the same, the Friends of her present Boarders, and all Others who may have Occasion for her Assistance, are hereby informed, that they may depend upon the utmost Tenderness being used, that such unhappy Cases will admit of, by their humble Servant, Joanna Harris.

N.B. Her Son, who is a Surgeon and Apothecary, is an Assistant to her in the above Business.

This evidence suggests that the first asylum was started in the early 1720s by the Minchin family. For over fifty years it was run by Sarah Minchin, assisted for thirty
years by her daughter Joanna, who married into the Harris family and later took over the management. When Parliament passed a law in 1774 requiring everyone who held more than one lunatic in confinement to secure a licence from the magistrates, Joanna Harris was granted the first and only licence in the county in 1775.

Over the next fifty years the asylum continued in the hands of the Harris family, with son James succeeding his mother, and then his widow and son succeeding him in due order, as the following list of proprietors shows:

The asylum was licensed to hold up to ten inmates until 1817, when the number was increased to twenty.

Little is known about the conduct of the asylum in a period which has a reputation for treating its lunatics harshly and unsympathetically. But we do know that the Minchin family had long included apothecaries and surgeons, a tradition Joanna Harris's son continued, at a time when apothecaries were considered men skilled in correcting the balance of “humours” in the body, which were considered the secret of good health, physical and mental. Unlike “idiots”, who were considered incurable but harmless, “lunatics” were regarded as having developed disordered
minds that could, in theory, be reordered. Joanna Harris advertised her concern to use “the utmost tenderness that such unhappy cases will admit of,” though the qualification obviously opened the way to some of the shock treatments fashionable at the time. Most revealing is Eliza Harris’s brief letter to the magistrates in 1818:

_I have at this time 14 Patients, nine men and five women. Most of them are placed with me for life, having had every assistance, but in vain. Sometimes I have twenty in my house, not being able to take more, but that number I can comfortably accommodate. In the last three years I have had about fifty under my care._

Quite apart from her stated concern to “assist” patients, which she must have expected to play well with the magistrates, she reveals that most patients over the last three years have stayed with her for only a short time. Clearly this asylum was not a place in which most people with mental problems were confined for long periods.¹

**1825-1854**

After 1825 the character of the asylum changed fundamentally. Firstly, attitudes to the insane were transforming as reports circulated of the success of a Quaker asylum in York which used only moral influence to cure its patients. Secondly, Parliament, moved by concern for the patients, was aroused by reports of abuses in many private asylums to pass an act in 1828 for their better regulation and frequent inspection. Thirdly, the new proprietors of the Hook Norton asylum, first Henry Tilsley and then Richard Mallam, transformed it in scale, clientele, and character.

The asylum had always been housed in Bridge House, at the foot of Brick Hill just across the stream in Southrop. A plan lodged with the local justices in 1828 showed that the lunatics were housed mainly in outbuildings at the back of Bridge

¹ Eliza Harris to Clerk of the Peace, March 12, 1819, Quarter Sessions Records, Oxfordshire Historical Centre.
House and in new western and forward extensions. Then over the next six years Tilsley demolished the outbuildings and one of the ugly forward projections in front of the house, transforming the building with new windows, an extra floor and a tiled roof into the handsome house we see nowadays.

The buildings on Brick Hill now called “Bedlam” and “Bridge House Cottage” (seen stretching to the left in the above view and also in the plan below) had been enlarged to house domestic service rooms and provide some accommodation for patients. Most of them could be accommodated in the upper floors of these
buildings and in the western extension of the house, as shown in the plan below. Tilsley now applied for a new license for up to thirty inmates at Bridge House.

**Down End**

At the same period Tilsley also acquired a new property in Down End. This seventeenth-century house stood across what is now the entrance to Well Bank, until it was demolished in the 1960s to give access to the new estate. Between 1835 and 1854 this asylum probably handled more patients in nineteen years than Bridge House in the whole of its 130-year history.

*The former Down End Asylum, with two trees outside the front door, taken from Bells Lane, c.1930.*

Photograph by Percy Simms (Packer Collection).

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As developed by 1841, the house provided accommodation for the staff and a sitting room for the least troubled female inmates. The above plan, dated October 1841, shows the frontage at the extreme right, and at the back four large yards, two for each sex, surrounded by a twelve-foot high wall and separated from each other by an eight-foot wall. In the yards there were further buildings providing day rooms and dormitories for the patients, together with strong-rooms for any patient who had to be isolated. The provision for each gender was divided into three sections, and the dormitories for each were above their day rooms.

The two asylums took in very different sorts of patients, though they otherwise operated as a single business under one licence. Bridge House was the “upper house”, catering to private patients, especially gentle folk; after 1842 it became exclusively male. The Down End house was the “lower house”, taking in some poorer private patients and many paupers. The paupers came from the new Union Workhouse in Banbury, set up under the infamous new Poor Law of 1834, with their fees paid out of the Poor Rate in their home parish. At its peak in the 1840s Down End had seventy inmates while Bridge House had twenty.²

² It should be noted that Parry Jones, in the basic book on the subject, The Trade in Lunacy, is confused and confusing on the distinction between the “upper” and “lower” asylums in Hook Norton, not recognising that the distinction was social and not geographical.
Decline and Fall, 1846-1854
In the 1840s growing concern about the treatment of lunatics in private asylums led to the 1842 and 1845 Lunatic Asylum Acts: the first required closer regulation and inspection and the second made it compulsory for every county to build and fund public asylums for the insane. Oxfordshire obeyed by building the Littlemore asylum three miles south of Oxford—and promptly, in 1846-47, withdrew all the county’s pauper lunatics from Hook Norton. Deprived of his major source of patients, the new proprietor, Richard Mallam, replaced them with pauper patients from counties that had not yet built asylums or were suffering from overcrowding. In 1847 and 1848 loads of new patients arrived mainly from Gloucestershire and London, including one Italian and one Swiss.

Still as late as 1850 the Down End asylum had fifty inmates, but its days were numbered as more counties built public asylums and gradually withdrew their paupers from Hook Norton. Moreover, the private business at Bridge House had suffered a slow decline in numbers and by 1850 had only two residents. Recognising the commercial reality, Mallam allowed his licences to lapse in 1854.

Internal Conditions
We have a good idea of life inside the asylums because after 1828 they were inspected twice a year by magistrates and a doctor from outside the parish. After 1842 the regime became stricter when experienced “metropolitan commissioners” also made inspections twice a year and left full and conscientious reports. These reports treated the two asylums as being a single institution and were, on the whole, highly favourable, with Mallam’s management in particular being singled out for praise.

Life in Bridge House was easier and more relaxed than Down End, with proportionately more assistants. The low walls show the mildness of the patients’ behaviour: some were allowed to go on country walks by themselves and even went
to church unaccompanied. Patients had private rooms. Leisure activities were encouraged, especially billiards and bagatelle.

By contrast, life in the lower house was more disciplined, but conditions were not harsh by the standards of early Victorian England. Safe inside their high walls, the inmates were not physically restrained, except occasionally for their own safety and that of the staff. They slept in dormitories, and the inspectors expressed their gratification that although half of the inmates were “dirty” (i.e. incontinent?), there was no smell detectable. The dormitories were cold in winter and the blankets often worn and thin, and the patients had to be told to pile their day clothes in top of themselves in bed. As the dietary for Down End reproduced below graphically shows, the food was substantial, heavy in character and quantity, but washed down with lots of soup, milk, and homemade beer:

![The Dietary Scheme at Down End](image.jpg)

From Parry Jones, The Trade in Lunacy.

**Outcomes**
Surprisingly perhaps, most of the patients did not stay in the asylum for very long. Of the 634 patients admitted between 1828 and 1854 (497 of them pauper), 62 per cent stayed there for less than a year. Of the 137 private patients, 68 per cent stayed less than six months. But anyone who did stay there for more than a year was likely to stay for a very long time: ten per cent stayed more than five years.

Of the 634 who were admitted, one in five (22%) died in the asylum. Many, especially of the paupers, were admitted in poor physical health; in fact, a third of pauper deaths occurred within four weeks of admission. This was especially true of the inmates brought in from London in the last years. Many who died were aged between fifty and seventy and seem to have been suffering from dementia.

14.5 per cent of the 634 were transferred from Hook Norton to other asylums. Most of them went to the county asylums in Hook Norton’s last years. But a handful (about one per cent of the total) was composed of “incurable” paupers who were returned to the Banbury workhouse because it was cheaper to look after them there.
Of the remaining 63% of the 634, only 13 per cent went back into the community “uncured”. The rest - 50% of the 634 - were discharged either as recovered (22%) or partially recovered (28%). Quite what recovery meant is not clear, but it was apparently measured by the calmness of their external behaviour. Clearly the asylums were more than places of confinement, for a real attempt was made to cure their mental illness or at least reduce the external expression of insanity.

In retrospect, it is difficult to diagnose the mental health problems that led to the patients being categorised as lunatics nearly two hundred years ago. Over half of those admitted had initial symptoms combining excitement, delusions, incoherent speech or violence. Some of these, as well as many of those termed melancholic, probably suffered from bipolar disorder (depression, mania). Others would be considered, today, as psychotic. A minority, classified “epileptic”, suffered from recurrent seizures. Many of the large number of paupers probably had a combination of physical and mental disorders, similar to that found today in malnourished substance abusers. Some of the older patients would be suffering from dementia. and some probably from the late brain damage of tertiary syphilis.³

Treatment

Under Tilsley and Mallam the asylums practised the principles of “moral treatment” first used by the Quakers. Traditionally people had distinguished between “idiots” and “lunatics”: the former were regarded as being congenitally backward, nothing could be done for them, and they were usually excluded from asylums. The lunatics were categorised into different groups: men and women were kept separately, as well as members of different social classes. But on top of that, patients were also classified according to their mental and physical condition. The worst cases, those considered suicidal or dangerous or dirty, were kept separate from less serious cases and those who were quiet or convalescent. Hence each gender was divided into three groups, each with its own day room and dormitory.

³ I am grateful to Roy Meadow for this, and the final, paragraph.
All patients were expected to follow a regular, predictable orderly routine, avoiding stress. That meant no visitors - certainly not family members - until release approached. That routine included work and exercise for those in the lower house. About a third of men did agricultural work, farming the three acres that ran across the stream from Down End up to Park Road (long after still known as Mallam’s or Madman’s Yard). About half the women did needlework, knitting and general housework. Sports and games were encouraged, notably skittles for the men at Down End. Overall, a quiet and orderly regime was maintained, in which socially acceptable behaviour was constantly encouraged without physical coercion.

Conclusion

Overall, the Hook Norton asylums avoided the worst abuses that undoubtedly marked many contemporary institutions for the mentally ill. For its reputation’s sake, Hook Norton was fortunate to come to a peak, be so well recorded, and then close just when it did. The reasonably considerate treatment that it gave to its patients between 1828 and 1854 must not be read back into the earlier period when records are skimpy. “Moral treatment” did not become fashionable until after 1815, and it is to the credit of the proprietors of Hook Norton that they adopted and applied its more humane principles as quickly as they did.

Most of the county asylums created in the same era initially followed the same policy, but within twenty years, certainly by 1870, they were already retreating from the ideal of a curative, therapeutic asylum back to the old view that their job was to confine and protect. The county asylums could not keep up the ideal of “moral treatment” because they were too big and impersonal, insufficiently financed by cost-conscious local authorities, and could not afford to maintain the numerous, well-paid and well-trained staff that a curative system needed.

As Hook Norton closed, so the number of lunatics confined in asylums elsewhere rose hugely and so did the size and number of institutions. Hook Norton ceased to exist before the development of the modern asylum and the rise of clinical psychiatry in the late nineteenth century produced the abuses of the twentieth. Our asylum belonged to a different world, a different country where they did things
differently. All was far from perfect there, but the Hook Norton asylums did represent an honourable attempt to grapple with a real human and social problem.

Those who were admitted to Hook Norton’s mad houses would have different options nowadays. Many, for instance with depression or seizures or even psychosis would be cured with modern drugs, and others with more complex mental health problems would cope well with the help of community-based out-patient care. Littlemore Asylum, which developed to house over a thousand patients, finally closed in 1996. However, together with its partner, the Warneford hospital in Headington (which opened in 1826 for “lunatics from the higher classes of society”), it still provides a small in-patient psychiatric service. In 2013, anyone in our locality needing in-patient psychiatric care would probably receive it in those units or, if more elderly, at the Fiennes Centre in Banbury.

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For further reading:


Other references:


Quarter Sessions Records, Oxfordshire Historical Centre.