Bethlem Royal Hospital

Originally founded in 1247 as St. Mary of Bethlehem, Bethlem Royal Hospital (*herein* Bethlem) is Britain’s oldest hospital for the treatment of mental illness and a contemporary National Health Service (NHS) psychiatric facility. Bethlem was immortalized in Hogarth’s 1735 engraving *The Madhouse* in *Rake’s Progress* and subsequently became known as *Bedlam*. Thus Bethlem became synonymous with madness itself.

Early hospitals such as Bethlem were essentially religious not medical establishments and they served as places of rest for pilgrims and places of respite for the poor. During its early years, Bethlem gradually came to specialize in the care of the insane. As intellectual and medical interest in the problems and meaning of insanity developed over the seventeenth and eighteen centuries, so too did public curiosity. Bethlem was a place where the public could view the people confined there. This viewing was stopped in 1770 which Scull (2011) argues represented 'a shutting off as well as a shutting up of the patients that ironically would end up exposing them in time to yet greater abuse' (p.43). In the absence of any centralised state provision for the insane, the alternatives were the private madhouses which flourished during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see Bartlett 1998). These institutions often relied on paupers sent by parish authorities. Insanity however continued to be viewed very much as a domestic problem and wealthy people usually preferred to care for their insane relatives at home, as was Bertha Rochester in Charlotte Bronte's (1847) *Jane Eyre* for example.

Contrary to the image of people being held in manacles in filthy conditions like animals as depicted by Hogarth, throughout its history Bethlem has been an acute hospital for short stay patients, with work and care provided for people according to need. If people could not be helped within twelve months, they were discharged back to their families. For the few that could not be discharged, an extra wing was added in the 1730s where they could remain indefinitely. This option was removed in 1919. In 1816 the Home Office agreed with the governors of Bethlem for a criminal lunatic asylum to be built at the site of the hospital. Unpopular with the governors of Bethlem because of increasing numbers and a lack of control over admissions and discharges, this facility for the criminally insane was replaced in 1864 by a new institution at Broadmoor in Berkshire.

In 1857 Bethlem stopped admitting pauper patients as they were now provided for in county public lunatic asylums required by the 1845 County Asylums Act, which with the simultaneous 1845 Lunacy Act changed the face of provision for, and status of, mentally ill people in Britain. Bethlem remained a charitable hospital but in 1882 began accepting fee paying patients. These fees were, however, means tested and free admission remained an option. With the creation of the NHS in 1948 Bethlem joined Maudsley Hospital to form a postgraduate psychiatric teaching unit. In 1999 they were incorporated into the South London and Maudsley NHS (now Foundation) Trust. Bethlem Royal Hospital continues to provide specialist psychiatric care and treatment.

Further Reading:

Archives and Museum Bethlem Royal Hospital. Retrieved 7/5/2013 <http://www.bethlemheritage.org.uk/aboutus.asp>

Bartlett, P. (1998). The Asylum, the Workhouse, and the Voice of the Insane Poor in 19th-Century England. [*International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/01602527), [21(4](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/01602527/21/4)): 421–432.

Scull, A. (1999). The History of Bethlem. *Medical History*, 43(2): 248–255.

Scull, A. (2011). *Madness: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, United Kingdom; Oxford University Press.