

Workhouse or asylum: the nineteenth century battle for the care of the pauper insane

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Throughout the 19th century some 20–25% of all known pauper lunatics in England and Wales were accommodated in workhouses. Early on, the lunacy commissioners considered that all pauper lunatics should be admitted to asylums and were highly critical of the conditions under which they were kept in workhouses. As the century progressed the lunacy commissioners were forced to compromise because of the lack of space in asylums and diminishing confidence in the results of asylum treatment. By the end of the century the lunacy commissioners were reconciled to the accommodation of feeble-minded, imbecile, idiot, chronic psychotic and demented paupers in workhouses, but held to the view that the acute pauper insane should be admitted to asylums.

Before the asylum era, pauper lunatics were confined in poorhouses, houses of correction or bridewells. Some were confined within their own homes in circumstances varying from the most humanitarian to the most cruel and some, the harmless and inoffensive, were allowed to wander at large. With the emergence of private asylums in the mid-17th century, a number were admitted to these institutions where the parish was prepared to pay the required fee. The number requiring admission increased rapidly in the early 19th century resulting in the building of public asylums into which it was intended all the pauper insane should be admitted as early as possible with a view to treatment. At the same time, Parliament, concerned with the rising number of able-bodied paupers receiving outdoor relief, passed the New Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, enabling parishes to join together to build workhouses into which were to be received all able-bodied paupers who could not exist without relief; no more outdoor relief was to be permitted for such persons. Conditions in the workhouse were to be harsh and unattractive so as to discourage all but the most desperate from wanting to be admitted.

The New Poor Law Amendment Act made only one reference to the pauper insane. This was to the effect that no dangerous lunatic, insane

person or idiot was to be detained in any workhouse for longer than 14 days. This was interpreted to mean, with doubtful legal validity, that any non-dangerous lunatic, insane person or idiot could, on the say-so of the master, guardians or medical officer, be kept in the workhouse indefinitely. As a result, throughout the 19th century, the number of insane inmates in the workhouses never fell much below 20 per cent of all known pauper lunatics in England and Wales (Table 1).

Lunacy commissioners

Lunacy commissioners were first appointed in 1774; they were five in number, all Fellows of the Royal College of Physicians, and their duties were to visit, report upon and license all private asylums within the cities of London and Westminster and within the County of Middlesex. Outside the metropolitan area, these duties were to be carried out by the justices at Quarter Sessions. The Lunatics Act of 1845 replaced the Metropolitan Commission with a new Commission which included five laymen, three medical men and three lawyers whose remit was extended to cover all asylums, both public and private, throughout the whole of England and Wales (Jones, 1993). This lunacy commission remained the body responsible for visiting and reporting to the Lord Chancellor on all matters relating to the asylums until its replacement by the Board of Control in 1913. The lunacy commissioners were concerned that all pauper lunatics (the word 'lunatic' at this time including the imbeciles and idiots together with the insane) should be admitted to the newly provided public asylums but the Poor Law Unions preferred the cheaper option of maintaining their lunatic members in workhouses (where in 1847 (Lunatic Return of Stoke-on-Trent Union, Public Record Office MH12 11463) it cost three shillings (15p) per week compared with eight shillings (40p) per week in the asylum) and thus commenced the battle between the two authorities.

Table 1. Lunatics chargeable to Poor Law Unions in England and Wales 1842–1910¹

Year	Asylum	Workhouse ²	Licensed house/ registered hospital	With relatives in lodgings	Total ³
1842	3274	3829 (28)	2188	4579	13870
1860	15595	8219 (25)	1454	5980	32993
1865	20626	9756 (24)	1627	6557	40160
1870	26029	11358 (23)	2061	7086	48433
1875	30497	15376 (27)	1842	6856	56430
1880	37815	16464 (26)	1335	5980	63470
1885	45392	17282 (24)	1130	5896	71370
1890	50241	17825 (23)	1568	5811	77026
1895	59152	16898 (20)	1457	5869	83370
1900	70833	17460 (18)	1243	5847	96865
1905	82851	17806 (16)	1219	5562	109100
1910	92587	18258 (15)	626	5639	117120

1. Reports of Poor Law Board (1842–1870) and Local Government Board (1871–1910).

2. Numbers in brackets after workhouse figures are the per cent total in workhouses.

3. Includes up to 2000 paupers maintained by county/borough rates.

Early on, the Poor Law Commissioners agreed that:

“with lunatics, the first object ought to be their cure, by means of proper medical treatment. This can only be obtained in a well-regulated Asylum; and therefore the detention of any curable lunatic in a Workhouse is highly objectionable, on the score both of humanity and economy” (Metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy, 1844).

They went on, however, to say that they believed that “most of the persons of unsound mind detained in Workhouses are incurable, harmless idiots”. The lunacy commissioners, while entirely concurring with the opinion that the detention of any curable lunatic in a workhouse was highly objectionable, considered that the Poor Law Authorities were nevertheless,

“under some misconception as to the condition of lunatics in workhouses, when they represent them as being in general incurable harmless idiots, and their detention not objectionable on the ground of defective medical treatment”.

In those workhouses that they had visited the lunacy commissioners had found “not only incurable harmless idiots but numerous maniacal and dangerous lunatics of every class” (Metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy, 1844).

An increasing number of workhouses began to provide separate lunatic wards for their insane inmates. The lunacy commissioners described this as ‘mischievous’. In 1859 the commissioners produced a supplement to their Report, strongly critical of the condition, character and treatment of lunatics in workhouses, whether mixed with other inmates or placed in distinct wards (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1859). The latter, they maintained, had none of the advantages for treatment or safeguards against abuse that

obtained in the asylums; no record was kept of restraint or seclusion, both of which could be carried out without the sanction of a medical officer; there were no registers or records of accidental occurrences. The attendants were unqualified, often themselves pauper inmates, and there was no authoritative official visitation. The rooms were gloomy and prison-like, there was little provision for occupation or amusement and little space for exercise. The law directing that every person thought to be a lunatic should be taken before a Magistrate and then, if the latter agreed, admitted to an asylum, was ‘almost universally’ ignored and, instead, the pauper was taken to the Union workhouse where, “if he appears to be quiet and harmless, he is suffered to remain”. Such patients were often melancholics, urgently requiring treatment and receiving none. The motive of the parish authorities in detaining insane patients in workhouses, instead of placing them in county asylums “has undoubtedly been that of economy” (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1859).

Policy changes

As the asylums became progressively overcrowded the lunacy commissioners were forced to rethink their policy with the result that in 1862 an Act was passed making it legal for the visitors of any asylum to make arrangements with the guardians of the district for a limited number of chronic lunatics to be transferred from the asylum to the workhouse; stringent requirements for the care of such lunatics were laid down and the patients remained on the books of the asylum and subject to all the legal protection that they would have had if they had

remained in the asylum. It is, however, doubtful whether many lunatics were transferred under this provision. The same Act also granted the commissioners the authority to transfer to the asylum any lunatic in a workhouse whom they thought was inappropriately placed there (Hodgkinson, 1966). The existence of this power had the effect of preventing "any frequent necessity of resorting to it". Guardians and workhouse medical officers not only acted readily on suggestions for removal of acute and curable cases but even anticipated them "by observing in this respect more carefully the requirements of the law" (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1864).

In spite of its illegality, cases of certifiable insanity continued to be brought to and detained in workhouses. The lunacy commissioners were in a difficult position. Much though they would have liked to insist on all such cases being admitted to asylums they were forced, because of lack of space, to compromise. In addition, much of the optimism of the early to mid-19th century that, if only the insane could be admitted to asylums early enough, they would all be cured, had evaporated. Thus Arlidge (1859) described the large asylum as a "manufactory of chronic insanity", Boyd (1870) was concerned that asylums were becoming "places of detention for confined lunatics rather than hospitals for the cure of the insane", Maudsley (1871) wrote of the "asylum-made lunatic" and Bucknill (1880) pointed to the "considerable numbers of cases of actual insanity [that] run a short course and recover in domestic life with no great amount of treatment" as evidence of the fallibility of the belief that insanity could only be curatively treated in asylums. The lunacy commissioners' reports of the last quarter of the 19th century were increasingly less critical of workhouses and this was reflected in the 1890 Lunacy Act which made it legal, for the first time, for a lunatic to be detained beyond 14 days in a workhouse if the medical officer certified that the pauper was a lunatic, that he was "a proper person to be detained in a workhouse as a lunatic" and that the accommodation in the workhouse was "sufficient for his proper care and treatment". And in 1892 the commissioners reported that they had visited 332 workhouses in 1891, containing 13 763 patients and that "these patients are on the whole kindly treated and the arrangements for their care are on the whole

satisfactory" (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1891). The battle for the detention of all certifiable lunatics in asylums had been lost but that the commissioners had still not given up the hope of curing acute insanity in asylums is evident from their comment in 1910 to the effect that they were,

"well satisfied on the whole with the condition of the ordinary workhouses visited by us during the year under review. Whatever views may be held as to the advisability or propriety of detaining persons of unsound mind in workhouses, at the present time, apart from the lunatic institutions, there is no other kind of establishment in which insane paupers can be received; and we consider that in many of the workhouses very suitable accommodation is provided, with obvious limitations, for patients who are not suffering from acute insanity" (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1910).

The asylum had lost its role as the sole accommodation for the non-recoverable insane.

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