

## Statement of intended research – Mst in Local History

### Care for the insane poor in nineteenth-century Northamptonshire

From 1815 parish overseers were required to submit annual returns of all pauper 'lunatics' and 'idiots' in their parishes to the clerk of the Peace (after 1842 this responsibility passed to the clerk of the Guardians of each Poor Law Union). While none of the returns for Northamptonshire have survived from this early period, from 1828 onwards these documents run in an almost unbroken series until the late 1920s. They contain a remarkable amount of data about the county's insane poor and the provision for their care both over time and place.

The Lunacy Returns comprise a wealth of information not only about the numbers of pauper insane receiving relief within any given parish or union, but where they were being cared for, whether in a public 'County' asylum, a registered hospital or 'licensed' house, in the workhouse or in lodgings, or living with family or friends. The compilers were also required to classify each individual listed as either a 'lunatic' or an 'idiot', and to indicate whether they were dangerous—either to themselves or others—if they were of 'dirty habits', and how long they had been 'disordered in their senses'.

My intention is to analyse this information in order to trace the changing patterns of provision for pauper lunatics over a 50-year period from 1828 to 1878. This would involve the transcription of a sample group of returns from this period into a format (such as an Excel spreadsheet) in which it would be possible to interrogate the information using simple quantitative methods. While the returns reveal the variety of ways in which the mentally ill poor were cared for, the collective data also allows for a whole range of questions regarding the typicality of gender and age, the implications around the categorisation of individuals as lunatic/idiot, dangerous/harmless, as well as the financial cost of supporting these most vulnerable members of society.

The period 1828 to 1878 has been chosen for several reasons. Firstly, the available returns are more or less continuous for these years, while a 50-year period is felt to afford a manageable amount of data and level of detail. Also, the period 1828-1878 roughly coincides with the high period of asylum-building, when provision for the insane poor was—and is—typically seen to have been one of increasing incarceration/institutionalisation both in Britain and elsewhere. In this last respect, Northamptonshire provides an interesting case-study, since it did not obtain a publicly-funded County asylum until 1876. This was largely because a public subscription asylum had been built at Northampton in 1838, with provision for both private and pauper patients. The Northampton General Lunatic Asylum (NGLA), as it was known, effectively came to function as a 'county' asylum, thus allowing the county to delay construction of a public, rates-funded facility until nearly three decades after the 1845 County Asylums Act.

The NGLA's provision for paupers was limited, however, despite rising from 50 patients in 1838 to approximately 240 by 1859, and frequently short-term, with around 50 per cent of patients being discharged within 12 months of admission (Smith, 2007). Thus, the majority of the mentally-ill poor must have spent a significant amount of time being cared for outside the asylum system—in familial or other households, by paid-for carers, or in the local workhouse.

Much of the existing historiography of madness sits within what Bartlett and Wright have dubbed an 'institutionally-oriented tradition' (Bartlett & Wright, 1999), with numerous studies focussing on the private and public asylums which sprang up around the country (e.g. the York Retreat, Ticehurst Asylum in Sussex or the Middlesex County

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Pauper Asylum at Colney Hatch), or the eighteenth-century ‘trade in lunacy’ conducted by private madhouses (Parry-Jones, 1972). The reason for this, as Bartlett and Wright point out, is chiefly archival. Such institutions provide a relatively well-organised and easily accessible source of primary records with which historians can work. Research on Northamptonshire to date is no different, with historians such as Cathy Smith focussing largely on the records of the NGLA in her studies of pauper insanity in the county.

Yet, as Bartlett has shown, this institutional bias within the existing historiography largely overlooks the important role which the Poor Law and its officers continued to play in the provision of care for the mentally ill/disabled during this period (Bartlett, 1993). Furthermore, studies such as those in Horden and Smith (1998) and Bartlett and Wright (1999), which look to the wider loci of mental health care available in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain, reveal a far more complex and shifting ‘patchwork’ of provision in which the asylum was one of many options open to pauper families and their local communities.

Surprisingly, there has been very little use of lunacy returns as a primary source in the existing body of research, despite their contemporaneous importance to central government policy on mental health care during the nineteenth century and their value as records of provision at the local level. It is therefore hoped that in using these relatively underexploited documents, my proposed study will be able throw more light on the changing nature of care for the insane poor during the mid-nineteenth century, and its implications for those being cared for, their carers, and the local communities/institutions that supported them.

## Bibliography

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