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The Asylum, the Workhouse, and the Voice of the Insane Poor in Nineteenth Century England

by Peter Bartlett*

*M.A., LL.B., Ph.D., of the Bar of Ontario. Lecturer, Department of Law, University of Nottingham.

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The history of psychiatry is not merely the history of psychiatrists; it is also the history of patients. While this ought in the late 1990s to be uncontroversial, the view of users tends to be overlooked in psychiatric history. This is not merely the case in histories where psychiatrists search for the roots of their profession and its specialised knowledge; it is if anything re-enforced in the post-modern revisionist histories, where the patient is often understood as an object of knowledge, a theoretical construction in a rarefied medical universe.

The reality is of course quite different. Users have always been made of flesh and blood, with wills of their own. There is no reason to assume that patients in history were any more complacent or passive in their attitudes to their fate than their twentieth-century counterparts.

History from this perspective is admittedly not easy. Court records provide some insights into the views of those allegedly insane persons who challenged findings of incapacity, but the cost of these procedures limited them to the wealthy. For the vast bulk of the population, the laws of lunacy and idiocy in the nineteenth century involved care, not property. For these people institutional records may exist, but there are few records actually created by the users themselves. In this paper, admission records and case notes of a county asylum will be used to consider the attitudes of those confined within it. First, it would be appropriate to place these documents within the administrative structure of nineteenth-century lunacy.

Loci of Care in the Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century created a number of mechanisms for care. David Wright has persuasively argued the family was the primary caregiver in the nineteenth century.¹ Once the family was no longer able to cope, a variety of institutions were available: private care in the home, private madhouses, charitable hospitals, county asylums, and union workhouses. The reality was that relatively few could afford the fees of the madhouses and hospitals, and fewer still the costs of private care in the home.

¹"A Beam for Mental Darkness: A History of the National Asylum for Idiots, Earlswood, 1847-1886", (Diss, Oxford University, 1994) ch. 2; "Childlike in his Innocence", in Wright and Digby, eds, From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency (London: Routledge, 1996) 118.

For the bulk of the population, state support was therefore a matter of necessity, and the first port of call was the poor law relieving officer. That individual could provide relief in three ways. Funds might be provided for additional support in the home (‘outdoor relief’). This might allow a nurse or attendant to be hired, or allow a family member to spend less time at paid employment and more time in care of the insane individual. Alternatively, if an institutional solution were required, the individual would be sent to the local union workhouse or the county asylum. These, effectively, were the choices.

The facts regarding the development of the county asylum are well-known to historians of lunacy. An 1808 act allowed Quarter Sessions in each county to construct an asylum for the insane poor. These became mandatory in 1845,² and by 1890, 52,931 people, overwhelmingly paupers (i.e., whose upkeep was paid by the poor law authorities), were contained in these establishments.³

It is appropriate to spend a little more time noting the continuation of workhouse care, since this is generally perceived as a side-show in nineteenth century care of the insane. It was not. The official record indicates that roughly a quarter of the insane poor were kept in workhouses, a figure which remains remarkably stable through the second half of the nineteenth century. In real terms, this represented an increase from 3,829 in 1844 to 17,825 in 1890.⁴

²8/9 Vic. c. 126.

³I argue at greater length elsewhere that the county asylum system in nineteenth century England is to be understood in the context of the poor law: see "Poverty and lunacy in mid-nineteenth century England: an argument about context", in Casselman et al, Law and Mental Health, Proc. of the 17th International Congress of the International Academy of Law and Mental Health, 26-30 May 1991 (Leuven: IALMH, 1992); "The Poor Law of Lunacy", diss. University of London 1993, esp. at chapter 1; The Poor Law of Lunacy (forthcoming, University of Leicester Press/Cassells).

⁴Figures drawn from annual reports of Commissioners in Lunacy, reflecting returns of local poor law officials. In fact, provision may have been higher, since the Lunacy Commission tended to complain of under-reporting. Thus in 1847, the Commission estimated that there were 6,000 insane persons in workhouses, well above the official figure contained in the annual reports.

The remaining insane poor were on outdoor relief, where numbers peaked in 1872 at 7,436 before falling to 5,811 in 1890. Proportionally, their significance fell throughout

Much historical scholarship has followed a selective view of the Lunacy Commissioners' opinions of workhouse care, treating it as mere warehousing, an abhorrence used only by poor law officials too parsimonious to provide proper asylum accommodation. Certainly, the Lunacy Commissioners could be scathing about this care. The supplement to their Twelfth Annual Report contained a litany of complaints regarding the absence of legal safeguards for patients, lack of qualified staff, inadequate medical treatment, prevalence of restraint, improper diet, filth, lack of space and amusements, and lack of proper records.⁵

Certainly, the Lunacy Commissioners might be critical of workhouse care of the insane, but the particular context of the 1859 Report ought to be noted. There was pressure for a complete review of lunacy law and policy in England and Wales. The government was moving in a direction of allowing greater regulation of county asylums by poor law medical officers, an action perceived by the Lunacy Commissioners as a threat to their authority.⁶ It is thus not surprising that the Commissioners attacked workhouse care of the insane, which was under the direction of these same poor law medical officers. Perhaps equally unsurprisingly, the poor law officials took strong exception to the 1859 report.⁷

At other times, the Commissioners had been less antagonistic. In their 1847 Supplementary Report, they had estimated there to be 6,000 insane people in workhouses, "not more than a few hundreds -- probably not a tenth of the whole [being] proper persons to be confined, in the narrow and technical sense of the term, that is to say, as patients in a Lunatic Asylum."⁸ Particularly if the insane were able to mix with the remainder of the individuals in the workhouse, the Lunacy Commission seemed

the last half of the century, from 20 per cent of pauper lunatics in 1859, to 8 per cent in 1890.

⁵PP 1859 1st. sess. (228) ix 1.

⁶For position of government, see comments of the Home Secretary, Walpole, in Hansard, vol. 152 (1859) 405. For reaction of Lunacy Commissioners, see testimony of Lord Shaftesbury to the Select Committee on Lunatics, PP 1860 (495) xxii 349 at q. 282.

⁷The testimony of Poor Law Inspector Andrew Doyle before the Select Committee on Lunatics convincingly challenges much of the Lunacy Commissioners' report: see PP 1859 2nd sess. (156) vii 501 beginning at question 1690.

⁸PP 1847 [858] in octavo 1847-8 xxxii 371, Appendix (A), at 249.

quite content to leave them there. Even in their critical mode, the Commissioners' comments might betray acknowledgement of a real attempt to make workhouse care of a standard not dissimilar to that of the county asylum, as in the following extract from their Fifteenth Annual Report:

In many Workhouses the Lunatic Wards are evidently intended to supersede the County Asylum. The Patients are under the care of experienced attendants. The buildings are specially constructed for the Insane, and include baths, padded rooms, &c. The dietary is on a more liberal scale than that of the ordinary inmates; and the general treatment of the Patients is in some measure assimilated to that adopted in County Asylums, although some of the most important provisions are wanting. The class of Patients found in these wards differs little, if at all, from those met with in County Asylums; and the changes of Patients which take place (and which is shown in some of the Workhouses by a record of the admissions, discharges, and deaths), are as frequent as those met with in ordinary Asylums.⁹

After the crisis of the 1859 Select Committee had passed, the Lunacy Commission sometimes took pride in its co-operation with local poor law officials in establishing specialised workhouse accommodation,¹⁰ and occasionally advocated the transfer of individuals from county asylums to these workhouses when the asylums were nearing capacity.¹¹

The view of the Lunacy Commissioners was that workhouse care should be restricted to those insane persons who had no prospect of cure. How much this was followed is an open question: at least some workhouse insane wards could boast

⁹Lunacy Commissioners, Fifteenth Annual Report, PP 1861 (314) XXVII 1 at 47 f.

¹⁰See their relations with Mile End Union, discussed in their Seventeenth Annual Report, PP 1863 (331) xx 437, at 24.

¹¹See, for example, their Twenty-First Annual Report, PP 1867 (366) xviii 201 at 70. Such transfers had also been recommended before the pressure of the Select Committee arose: see, for example, Report of the Metropolitan Commissioners (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1844) at 92, reprinting PP [HL] 1844 xxvi 1, and Supplementary Report, PP 1847 [858] in octavo 1847-8 xxxii 371 at 36.

comparable cure rates to the county asylum,¹² and some people argued that because of their smaller size and the resulting possibility for individual attention, they actually provided better care than the large county asylums.¹³

If the insane person were to be removed from family care, therefore, the options were likely to be the county asylum or the workhouse. Admission to the workhouse was a relatively unbureaucratic matter. Upon arrival at the institution, the pauper would be medically examined, classified and placed in one of the workhouse wards, but written records do not appear to have been kept of that process. Unless a pauper brought a grievance to the Board of Guardians who administered the asylum, they would be little more than a statistic in workhouse recordkeeping.

Admission to the county asylum was much more intensively bureaucratic. From 1808 to 1890 and beyond, admission of paupers to these facilities was by order of a Justice of the Peace, upon application by the local poor law official (called an 'overseer' before 1834, and a 'relieving officer' thereafter).¹⁴ This application was to be supplemented by a medical certificate commencing in 1811.¹⁵ Commencing in 1853,¹⁶ these could be signed by the local poor law medical officer, and this quickly became the norm. Admissions thus involved no specialised medical expertise, but were instead essentially a function of the poor law. Upon admission, however, the pauper would be examined by the medical superintendent of the asylum, and the findings of that examination were recorded in a casebook.

Analysis of the criteria used by poor law relieving officers and medical officers, workhouse officials, and Justices of the Peace to determine which insane persons belonged in workhouses and which in county asylums is a topic unto itself.¹⁷ Instead, the remainder of this article will address the two institutions from the inmates'

¹²See, for example, the statistics relating to the St. Pancras workhouse, contained in the Lunacy Commissioners' Fifteenth Annual Report PP 1861 (314) XXVII 1 at 48.

¹³See, for example the evidence of Dr. George Webster to the Select Committee on Lunatics, 4 August 1859, rpt at PP 1859 2nd sess (156) VII 501 at beginning at questions 2308 and 2317.

¹⁴This process is first formalised in 48 George III c. 96, s. 17.

¹⁵51 George III, c. 79, s. 4.

¹⁶16 & 17 Vict. c. 97.

¹⁷See Bartlett, "Poor Law of Lunacy", (diss, U. of London, 1993) at chapter 5; Poor Law of Lunacy forthcoming Cassell's/University of Leicester Press.

perspective: which institution would they prefer to be sent to?

To gain insights into that question, the paper relies primarily on patient histories contained in the case books of the Leicestershire and Rutland County Asylum.¹⁸ These documents are in no way "objective". They were read by the Lunacy Commissioners who inspected the asylum, the Justices of the Peace who ran it, and, perhaps, the poor law officers who paid for the inmates' maintenance. The histories were thus structured to show the asylum in the best possible light, and to present a justification of the committal of the pauper. The methodological difficulties of removing the accounts from that context are openly admitted. The alternative, however, is to say nothing about the motives of the paupers at all, to condemn them to a passivity through silence. Such a response may be methodologically pure, but it is not intellectually satisfying.

Pauper Lunatics' Choice of Facilities

How dynamic were the paupers themselves in the choice of facilities? The image of the insane poor as helpless is based in part in the nineteenth century itself. Andrew Scull cites a variety of such descriptions: the inmates were "worn-out old demented, imbeciles and aged people", "contorted harmless specimens of humanity ... senile dotards and hemiplegic wrecks".¹⁹ These descriptions are open to a sceptical interpretation. The portrayal is consistent with the paternalist justifications for the asylum: asylum legislation was successful in part because of this image of "vividly involved the helpless",²⁰ and particularly those asylum advocates of an Evangelical bent could be expected to emphasise that aspect. At the same time, many may well have been as helpless as the descriptions suggest. The fact that only about half of those in the asylum appear to have been involved in any employment during their confinement is consistent with such a view.

¹⁸Regarding the use of this sort of document more generally for the writing of history from the perspective of the confined individual, see Geoffrey Reaume, "Keep Your Labels Off My Mind! or 'Now I Am Going to Pretend I Am Crazy but Don't Be a Bit Alarmed': Psychiatric History from the Patients' Perspectives", 11 Canadian Bulletin of Medical History (1994) 397.

¹⁹The Most Solitary of Afflictions: Madness and Society in Britain, 1700-1900, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993) at 370 ff., esp. in notes 99 to 114.

²⁰David Roberts, Paternalism in Early Victorian England, (London: Croom Helm, 1979) at 206.

The case of David Perkins provides a countervailing image to that of the passive and inactive pauper: asylum admission procedures were commenced on him when he hurled a brick through the window of a local Justice's house. Perkins was at this time, according to the case book, suffering from melancholia caused "chiefly from a want of Employment, and its concomitant want of food."²¹

The Perkins case provides an enticing image, but the documents provide insufficient evidence to make claims as to what exactly Perkins thought he was doing, or what if anything he wanted to induce the Justice to do. The case books are more forthcoming about Francis Kirk, whose discharge note reads as follows:

There being no doubt but that this poor woman's symptoms of irritability were really assumed for the sake of getting into the asylum, she was this day discharged Relieved.²²

It is rare that such the documents were so clear; usually, the motivations of the patient are left to surmise. Thus Mary Matts apparently left the asylum with regret in 1845, "having frequently expressed a wish to remain with us in the capacity of a household servant."²³ Jane Roby "returned home quite recovered, often expressing a wish to return and remain with us."²⁴ William Burton was "pleased to find himself once more under the protection of the asylum."²⁵ Eliza Hardwick's readmission was triggered after she "had been up to the asylum gates to beg a meal."²⁶

Cases of this sort are not limited to persons living in the community. The case books also show manipulation of the system by paupers wishing to be removed to the asylum from the workhouse. Robert Capenhurst, admitted to the asylum in 1868,

²¹See case book, LRO DE 3533/186. Adm. 24 October 1851.

²²Adm. 29 November 1856. Case book LRO DE 3533/188. See also the case of William Lord, admitted 25 January 1864. Kirk's ruse, if ruse it was, was not unsuccessful, as the asylum kept her for two and one half months (thus through much of the winter) notwithstanding that her counterfeit was suspected at the time of her admission.

²³Adm. 17 May 45. Case book LRO DE 3533/185.

²⁴Adm. 30 January 1845. Case book LRO DE 3533/185.

²⁵Adm. 27 July 1853. Case book LRO DE 3533/187.

²⁶Adm. 22 November 1854. Case book LRO DE 3533/187.

provides a clear example:

He appears to have passed the greater portion of his life in the workhouse. It is stated in his certificate that he has attempted on several occasions to commit suicide. He says he tried it once in order to be removed from the workhouse.²⁷

A similar speculation can be made of William Thompson, who in the workhouse was "a refractory and troublesome pauper, but the officer who conveyed him from thence to Leicester informed me that when he knew his destination he became tranquil and quite cheerful. ... Within an hour of his admission he was usefully employed."²⁸

Thompson, Burton, Hardwick and Kirk were all re-admissions, and therefore knew precisely what to expect at the asylum.

There is much in asylum life which paupers might have found attractive. A brass band organised among patients and staff in 1854 survived through the 1860s.²⁹ Periodic excursions were made, to the Leicester Forest, to the Crystal Palace in London, to the circus, and to agricultural fairs. The Leicester Dramatic society presented theatrical entertainment. There were weekly dances at which the sexes were permitted to mix, and in the summer, bowls and quoits were played on the asylum lawn. Employment, mainly gardening or farming for the men and laundry work and sewing for the women, was for six hours per day. Airing grounds were to be accessible to the patients at least six hours per day.³⁰ Anecdotal evidence would suggest a significant degree of freedom enjoyed by the inmates of the institution. In 1866, forty-five men and twenty-two women were permitted to walk beyond the asylum unattended, being roughly seventeen per cent of the asylum population at that time.³¹ And when in February 1864, an aged patient was assaulted on a road near the asylum and robbed of

²⁷Admitted 23 March 1868. Case book LRO DE 3533/191.

²⁸Adm. 3 September 1853. Case book LRO DE 3533/187.

²⁹Re formation, see Superintendent's Journal, 9 May 1854, LRO DE 3533/83.

³⁰"Leicestershire and Rutland Lunatic Asylum. Rules for the General Management of the Institution, with Prefatory Remarks by the Committee of Visitors." (Leicester, 1849), section 8. Copy contained as LRO DE 662/27.

³¹See Eighteenth Annual Report of the United Committee of Visitors of the Leicestershire and Rutland Lunatic Asylum, (1866), LRO DE 3533/1.

twenty-five shillings, the response of the asylum management was not to tighten supervision and restrict patients' movement, but rather to improve the street lighting along the road.³² Escape does not seem to have been an impossible proposition even for those patients relatively closely confined: one boy managed to escape simply by jumping over the wall of the airing court.³³ It is thus perhaps a measure of the satisfaction of the inmates that the superintendent's journal notes only twenty-six escapes or attempted escapes from 1853 to 1870.³⁴

This image of desirability is re-enforced by the life which was faced by some of the insane poor prior to their admission to the asylum. Consider Harriet Burbidge, for example, whose "diminutive appearance has led to her being exhibited as a Talking Monkey about the country,"³⁵ or Elizabeth Windram, who suffered from puerperal mania and whose "recovery in the narrow confined yard in which she lived was jeopardised by the fact that the neighbours assembled in large numbers to hear the poor woman's cries,"³⁶ or Richard Wright who prior to his admission was "subjected to mechanical restraint of a severe character, and ha[d] abrasion of skin upon both wrists and ankles."³⁷ Poverty was considered by the asylum staff to be one of the chief causes of madness, and striking numbers of patients admitted were shown in the case books as underfed and clad in little more than rags. To these people, a life of farm work, sewing, quoits on the lawn and dances every week coupled with three square meals a day must have appeared almost idyllic.

This is consistent with the way in which the asylum chose to portray itself. In his 1862 report to the asylum annual meeting, medical superintendent John Buck stated:

There is now but little reluctance felt by the poor in availing themselves of the advantages of your asylum; so that when, in the natural progress of organic disease, some mental disturbance is revealed, admission is more readily sought than heretofore; and we are bound to add, that this is a

³²See Superintendent's Journal, 10 February 1864, LRO DE 3533/84.

³³See superintendent's journal, November 1853, LRO DE 3533/83.

³⁴See LRO DE 3533/83 and /84. Three of these were by the same person, in a one month period in May, 1859.

³⁵Case book, adm. 20 February 1864. LRO DE 3533/190.

³⁶Case book, adm. 14 July 1866. LRO DE 3533/191.

³⁷Case Book, LRO DE 3533/191.

state of things which in our opinion seems not unlikely to increase.³⁸

When patients were eventually transferred to the new borough asylum in 1869, Buck reported, "Many of the older patients appeared to feel very much their removal from an Asylum which they had long considered their home."³⁹

An implied alliance can perhaps be seen between relatively able paupers actively pursuing admission, and the asylum staff. An internal economy reduced asylum costs. From May 1845 to March 1846, George Harrison, a tailor committed as a pauper, had worked constructing clothing, and apparently saved the institution about ten pounds.⁴⁰ By the late 1860s, all clothing and shoes were made in the asylum.⁴¹ The farm turned a profit of about £500 p.a. in 1870,⁴² up from £211 in 1865. By comparison, in 1865, income from unions for maintenance charges totalled £7284. Occasionally, some of this benefit reverted to the patients. Thus Thomas Bettoney, a pauper, was apparently paid £2 for the work he performed building the new workrooms,⁴³ and Buck encouraged the committee of visitors in 1866 to give "some pecuniary acknowledgement" to Mr. Hale, a charity patient, for the work he performed while a patient.⁴⁴ Consistent with the practice in other poor law institutions, payment was more usually in the form of increased rations, and the dietary approved refers specifically to increased rations for those employed.⁴⁵

These selections portray the asylum in its best light. A contrary image is equally defensible from the documents. The apparent openness of the asylum is not easily reconciled with the fact that the rules precluded anyone from taking letters to or from

³⁸Superintendent's Journal, 20 January 1862. LRO DE 3533/84.

³⁹Twenty-First Annual Report of the United Committee of Visitors of the Leicestershire and Rutland Lunatic Asylum, (1869), LRO DE 3533/14.

⁴⁰Adm. 10 May 1845. See comments in case book, LRO DE 3533/185.

⁴¹Eighteenth Annual Report of the United Committee of Visitors of the Leicestershire and Rutland Lunatic Asylum, (1866), LRO DE 3533/13.

⁴²Nineteenth Annual Report of the United Committee of Visitors of the Leicestershire and Rutland Lunatic Asylum, (1870), LRO DE 3533/14.

⁴³See case book, LRO DE 3533/187. Adm. 28 September 1855.

⁴⁴See superintendent's journal, 10 January 1866, LRO DE 3533/84.

⁴⁵Regarding the similar reliance of workhouses on pauper labour, v. M.A. Crowther, The Workhouse System 1834-1929, (1981; rpt. London: Methuen, 1983) at chapter 8 and particularly at pp. 196-201.

patients without the leave of the asylum superintendent.⁴⁶ The asylum was increasing in size, the average number of patients in the year increasing from 182 in 1849 to 484 in 1869, before falling back to 411 in 1870 with the opening of the borough asylum. In 1867 the asylum was housing about seventy more than the 342 it was designed for. A temporary building was constructed to house part of the increase, but crowded conditions remained. The superintendent's journal, particularly in the 1850s, contains periodic complaints about cesspools fouling the drinking water, and there also occurred bouts of diarrhoea, smallpox, influenza, and typhoid.

In addition, the benefits of entertainment and the occupation of work in the asylum did not fall on all patients equally. On 28 March 1860, only seventy of the men and 104 of the women were employed, being roughly forty-one per cent of the men and fifty-five per cent of the women.⁴⁷ One is left to wonder how the remainder filled their time.

It is difficult to compare conditions in the workhouse with those of the asylum. There was no attempt to portray the workhouses as attractive: quoits on the lawn were simply not a matter of discussion. Workhouses were supposed to be unpleasant. Deterrence was at the basis of the post-1834 poor law ideology for the able-bodied poor. While the poor law did not in practice ignore the needs of the non-able-bodied by any means, the theoretical conflicts with the policy of deterrence did mean that no countervailing image was forthcoming for the non-able-bodied.

How much of this is a matter of competing mythologies is an interesting

⁴⁶Leicestershire and Rutland Lunatic Asylum, "Rules for the General Management of the Institution", contained in LRO DE 3533/415 at section 85; Leicestershire and Rutland Lunatic Asylum, "Rules for the General Management of the Institution", 1873, LRO DG 24/752/2, at section 102.

⁴⁷On 28 March 1860, thirty-six men were employed on the asylum farm, (a number which peaked at forty on 26 September, being harvest, and was as low as three on 26 December, during winter) sixteen employed in the house and garden, eight in workrooms, and ten assisting on the wards. On that same day, forty-four women were employed in workrooms and in sewing and mending, thirty-seven in the laundry, five in housework and in the kitchen, and eighteen on the wards. On the first of January that year, the asylum had contained 170 men and 188 women: Twelfth Annual Report of the United Committee of Visitors of the Leicestershire and Rutland Lunatic Asylum, (1860), LRO DE 3533/13, at table 4.

question. Certainly the workhouse was unlikely to enjoy the beautiful views and large airing grounds which were at least part of the asylum mythology, but as for the work required in the two institutions, particularly for women, it is difficult to see that the sewing and laundry required in the workhouse would be that much different a workload from that of the asylum. Certainly the workhouse might be overcrowded, as was the case in Leicester, particularly in the late 1840s, but so might the asylum be.

There is evidence that some people did not want to leave the workhouse. When an outbreak of fever in the workhouse induced the Ashby guardians to offer outdoor relief to forty-four inmates in 1842, only thirty-seven took up the offer. Notwithstanding that the outbreak was serious-- at the time of the offer of outdoor relief, forty inmates were ill, and five people eventually died-- seven of the forty-four preferred to remain in the workhouse than accept payment to live outside it.⁴⁸

A comparison of the two quantifiable categories of dietary and visiting rights do not suggest that life in the asylum would have been significantly better than life in the Leicester Workhouse. The dietary of insane inmates of the workhouse was under the control of the medical officer. The discussion of workhouse dietaries in 1867 cites "universal opinion" that the insane were to receive the enhanced diet of the aged and infirm,⁴⁹ and it seems likely that they were in general in receipt of this dietary well before this time. Neither workhouse nor asylum dietary is particularly appealing. Dinners at the asylum look by and large more palatable, but if it is the actual amount of food which is at issue, breakfasts and suppers were more generous in the workhouse.

As for visiting hours, the Leicester workhouse rules were clearly more lenient,

⁴⁸Minute book, Ashby-de-la-Zouche Union, 9 February 1842. LRO G/1/8a/1. While this situation did not refer specifically to the insane inmates of the workhouse, there is no reason to believe that the insane were kept in worse surroundings than the general population; if anything rather better, being offered better diets and accommodation.

The problem of paupers reluctant to leave the workhouse does not appear to be a situation unique to Ashby. The indices to the correspondence between the poor law central authorities and the local boards of guardians show a steady trickle of queries as to what to do when people refused to leave the workhouse, generally in cases where they was an offer of work: v. PRO MH 15.

⁴⁹Twentieth Annual Report of the Poor Law Board, PP 1867-8 [4039] xxxiii 1 at app. 2. The quoted material is at page 60.

again assuming that the insane received the same treatment as the old and infirm. These inmates could be visited on two afternoons per week, and if they wished to see anyone, the master or matron of the workhouse was under an obligation to send for the individual.⁵⁰ By comparison, asylum visits were limited to once per fortnight.⁵¹ Visits might be much more practical for those living in the local workhouse than in the county asylum, simply by reason of distance. Some parts of Leicestershire were more than thirty miles from the asylum, a distance which would pose real practical problems for relatives of modest means wishing to visit persons confined.

In some cases, the inmate's family might also be resident in the workhouse. It is perhaps possible to see as a kindness the decision of the Justices not to remove Mary Bevan to the county asylum in 1844, notwithstanding pressure from the Lunacy Commissioners and the Poor Law Commissioners:

though the said Mary Bevan appears to be insane yet according to the evidence of the Matron and Surgeon she is perfectly harmless. It also appears that she is strongly attached to her mother who is with her in the Workhouse and is blind, and that they are a material comfort to each other; for these reasons we do not think it a proper case to send to the Lunatic Asylum.⁵²

Along with the evidence of highly unpleasant conditions of the poor living outside institutions, one must consider the outdoor relief which was afforded to the insane. Thus a number of persons categorised as paupers in the asylum had nurses prior to their admission.⁵³ It is difficult to believe that they all paid for these themselves. Instead, they were presumably provided by the unions, suggesting that some of the insane in the community may have enjoyed a relatively decent life.⁵⁴

⁵⁰Minute Book, Leicester Union, 19 January 1869. LRO G/12/8a/13.

⁵¹Leicestershire and Rutland Lunatic Asylum, "Rules for the General Management of the Institution", (1849) LRO DE 662/27 at rule 13. This rule remains essentially unaltered for decades: see the 1873 rules for management of the institution, LRO DG 24/752/2 at rule 93.

⁵²A copy of these reasons is contained in the correspondence between the Leicester Guardians and the Poor Law Commissioners for 26 December 1844, PRO MH 12/6470, #19730/44.

⁵³See for example Eliza Williams, adm. 14 July 1868, in admission documents, LRO DE 3533/229. See also comments in notes on PRO MH 12.

⁵⁴This is not necessarily to be understood as opposed to medical opinion. Thus one

Consistent with this view, a number of patients clearly did not want to be admitted into the asylum. Prior to his admission, Francis Philpott apparently said to his father "I am the strongest man in Leicester. I will knock you and Mother down if you go to fetch anyone to me."⁵⁵ Sarah Homes "had taken a strong dislike to the person who brought her [to the asylum], and treated him with most unmitigated abuse."⁵⁶ Catherine Conroy was "very full of complaints at being kept here. She says she will bring actions against all the guardians for allowing her to be deprived of her liberty."⁵⁷ And when Frances Garfoot discovered it was proposed that he would be sent to the asylum, he ran away from home.⁵⁸ Again, both Homes and Garfoot were re-admissions, so they acted in the knowledge of what the asylum actually had to offer. Thus the manipulation of the system by the paupers could operate in favour of, or against asylum admission.

Similarly, notwithstanding Buck's optimistic comment about the willingness of people to send their family members to the asylum, there are indications that the poor were loathe to commit their relatives. The removal of Mary Carpenter from Westminster workhouse to the asylum in 1866 prompted a complaint to the Poor Law Board, reading in part as follows:

The order was made without any intimation to the board or Parish officers and without any inquiry or intimation to the friends or relatives of the pauper who were residing in the Parish and who would as the board is informed rather have taken her from the Workhouse than submit to her being sent to a Lunatic Asylum.⁵⁹

Broader discontent can be seen in Leicester in 1867, when a relieving officer was prevented by a mob from executing an order removing a pauper to Birmingham Asylum.

of the medical certificates relating to Caroline Barfoot in the mid-1840's stated that she was a harmless idiot, and would be better under the care of her Mother at home than in any establishment where numbers are congregated together: quoted in letter, Poor Law Commissioners to Leicester Guardians, 15 December 1843. LRO G/12/57d/1.

⁵⁵Adm. 19 December 1868. Adm. documents LRO DE 3533/229.

⁵⁶Adm. 25 January 1853. Case book LRO DE 3533/187.

⁵⁷Adm. 16 May 1868. Case book LRO DE 3533/192.

⁵⁸Adm. 30 August 1847. Case book LRO DE 3533/185.

⁵⁹PRO MH/51/768.

The pauper in this case was eventually released into his wife's custody.⁶⁰

The implication is that the poor were far from convinced of the benefits of the asylum. Scull asserts that changed economic circumstances made it increasingly difficult for families to care for their unemployed and unemployable relations at home.⁶¹

This is a reasonable inference. Numbers of able-bodied men in the workhouse on 1 January, when there was little agricultural work to be had, tended to be roughly twice the numbers on 1 July.⁶² This would suggest that poor people had little excess income to take care of themselves, let alone their incapacitated relations. A resort to the poor law of lunacy may well have been imposed by economic necessity. In this situation, a finding of lunacy would have had particular attractions. Committal to the asylum did not involve committal of the entire family of the pauper, as regular admission to the workhouse might. Instead, if the lunatic were the father, the remainder of the family was eligible for outdoor relief.⁶³ If the lunatic were another family member, the asylum admission would at least not result in the institutionalisation of the entire family, as indoor relief to the able-bodied would, at least in theory.

The involvement of paupers in the operation of the system is both tantalising and frustrating. The paupers themselves left virtually no documents. The documents left by the officials admit of vastly divergent explanation. The following comment in the case book regarding Eliza Mosebey is typical of many asylum patients: "she was most grateful for the kindness she had received, and as soon as she was strong enough to work employed the whole of her time for the benefit of the Institution."⁶⁴ Was this report coloured by a desire to portray the asylum in a positive light? Was the desire for work motivated by a desire to make herself indispensable to the asylum, and thus extend her stay? Was it rather to provide self-respect to a woman admitted to a poor law institution? As work was a part of moral management, was it to show that she had been

⁶⁰Cited in Kathryn M. Thompson, "The Leicester Poor Law Union, 1836 - 71", diss. University of Leicester 1982 at 232.

⁶¹Most Solitary of Afflictions, *supra*, at 332 f.

⁶²The figures for women are less extreme, January figures being close to fifty per cent higher than July figures. Out relief also increased, although it is difficult to assess how much of those increases were caused by unemployment, as an "able-bodied" person on outdoor relief might nonetheless be relieved on account of illness.

⁶³Such relief was to be provided to the wife "as if she were a widow": 7 & 8 Vict., c. 101, s. 25.

⁶⁴LRO DE/3533/186, adm. 07 May 1851.

cured of her lunacy, and thus to promote her early release? Or was it simply because she was bored? The documents do not provide clear answers.