

## Sketches from the history of psychiatry

### The early years

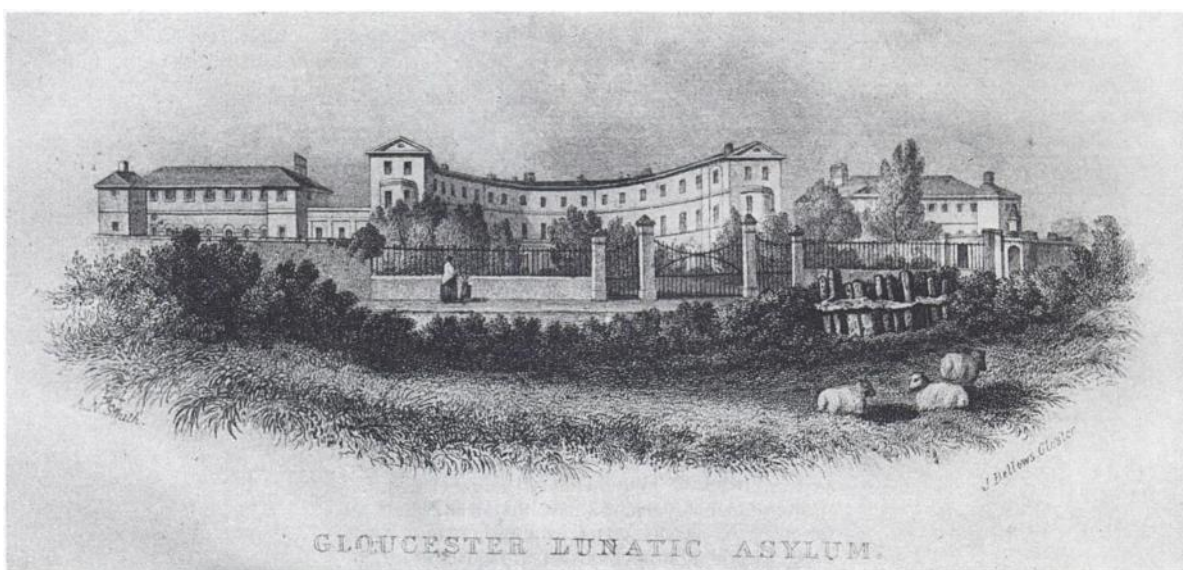
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By 1841, advances in communication and education, coupled with an increasing number of medical staff attached to mental asylums, made the idea of a formal grouping of such asylum staff a viable proposition. Although, as the following paragraphs indicate, such a group took many years to become established, the body whose early years are described briefly here, is the direct ancestor of the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

The first step towards the formation of the Association of Medical Officers of Lunatic Asylums was taken in June 1841 when Samuel Hitch, Resident Physician at Gloucester General Lunatic Asylum sent a circular letter to 88 “medical gentlemen” in England, Scotland and Ireland (there were no asylums in Wales) proposing that an association should be formed. Only 44 positive replies were returned and of these only 6 men eventually attended the first meeting on 27 July 1841 at Gloucester Asylum. Nevertheless, these founder members (Samuel Hitch, F. Wintle of Oxford, S. Gaskell of

Lancaster, J. Thurnam of York, T. Powell of Nottingham and H. Shute of Gloucester) declared the meeting “competent to establish the Association” and passed a number of resolutions, including the main objective to work for “the improvement in the management of institutions and of the treatment of the insane and the acquirement of a more extensive and more correct knowledge of insanity”.

The first Annual Meeting of the Association was held at Nottingham Asylum the following November under the chairmanship of Andrew Blake, Visiting Physician to the Asylum. Discussion concentrated on constitutional matters of the Association and resolutions were passed on membership, elections and annual subscriptions (these were set at 1 guinea). Samuel Tuke of the Retreat in York was elected the first Honorary Member of the Association. Twelve members and three visitors attended this meeting. However, this encouraging increase in interest was not to continue for, although poorly attended Annual Meetings were held in the subsequent three



*Gloucester Lunatic Asylum, venue for the first meeting of the forerunner of the Royal College of Psychiatrists*

years, there is then no further record of any meeting until 1847, when several members met at Oxford.

In 1849 the Association minutes record a letter of congratulation which was sent to Samuel Gaskell on his appointment as a Commissioner in Lunacy. It is signed by 31 members, presumably the full membership.

There were no further meetings until 1851 and it was not until the mid-1850s that the Association became firmly established when the membership increased as a result of the building of more asylums.

Although the Association itself made little impact during its first ten years, the 1840s was a progressive decade of change and improvement in the care and treatment of the mentally ill. A description of some of these developments is best left to Dr Daniel Hack Tuke who, 40 years later, in his Presidential Address of 1881, reminded members of the Medico-Psychological Association of the progress made in the 1840s.

“Let me recall to your recollection that when this Association was formed, the care of the insane in England and Wales was regulated by the Gordon-Ashley Act of 1828 [9 Geo IV., c. 40] which, among other reforms, had substituted for the authority of five Fellows of the College of Physicians who performed their duties in the most slovenly manner, fifteen Metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy. I find, on examining the Annual Report of these Commissioners issued in 1841, that it does not extend over more than one page and a half! It is signed by Ashley, Gordon, Turner, Southey, and Proctor. They report the number confined in the 33 asylums within their jurisdiction as 2,490. Their verdict on inspecting them is expressed in half-a-dozen words, namely, that the ‘result is upon the whole satisfactory’. . . . That a state of things in which such an occurrence was possible, should be described as on the whole satisfactory is somewhat remarkable.

“ . . . An important advance was made in 1842 by the Act 5 and 6 Vict., c. 87, which provided that Provincial

Houses were to be visited by the Metropolitan Commissioners as well as those in their own district. They were also to report whether restraint was practised in any asylum, and whether the patients were properly amused and occupied. Not only was a great step forward made by thus extending the inspecting power of these Commissioners to the provinces, but their memorable Report on the state of the Asylums in England and Wales in 1844, led to the highly important legislation of the following year (introduced by Lord Ashley) – the Act 8 and 9 Vict., c. 100, which along with the acts of 1853 (16 and 17 Vict., c. 96, 97) and 1862 (25 and 26 Vict., c. 111) form, as you are well aware, the Code of Lunacy Law under which, for the most part, the care of the insane is determined and their protection secured. I should like to have been able to state the number of recognised lunatics in England and Wales forty years ago, but no return exists which shows it. The nearest approach is to be found in the Report just referred to of the Metropolitan Commissioners (1844), in which the number of ascertained lunatics in England and Wales is stated to be about 20,000 of whom only 11,272 were confined in asylums. . . . It is difficult to realise that there were then only some 4,000 patients in county asylums, these being 15 in number, and there being 21 counties in England and Wales in which there were no asylums of any kind, public or private.”

Dr Tuke spoke of the “renaissance of humane treatment”, referring to the work of Dr R. Gardiner Hill and his experiments in removing instruments of restraint at Lincoln Asylum. He praised Lord Shaftesbury and John Conolly, “the layman and the physician, each in his own sphere having a common end in view, and animated by the same spirit, gave an impetus to the movement, the value and far-reaching extent of which it is almost impossible to exaggerate”.

An exhibition commemorating these important developments and the early history of the College has been prepared for the Annual Meeting to be held in Brighton, 2–6 July.



**Robert Gardiner Hill (1811–1878)**  
House surgeon (resident medical officer) Lincoln Asylum, 1835–40; joint owner of Eastgate House Asylum Lincoln, 1840–63, and from 1863 Earls Court House Asylum, Old Brompton, London, Wyke House and Inverness Lodge, Brentford, Middlesex. Originator of the non-restraint system in lunacy.