

People and places

Rainhill Hospital

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The future of the former Lunatic Asylum at St Helens, Merseyside is now hanging in the balance. Pilkington plc, who are in negotiation to buy it, want to demolish it to make way for a new headquarters and a decision on their application for listed building consent is expected in the near future.

The complex consisted of two distinct parts until recently; the Sherdley division, a complex erected in the 1840s, and the Avon division which was built in the 1880s by G. E. Grayson. All of the Avon buildings except the chapel and some staff housing were demolished in recent years following a public inquiry where the inspector allowed the demolition of the (unlisted) Grayson portion but

directed that the Sherdley division, listed grade II, should remain.

Now known as Rainhill Hospital, the surviving portion was designed by Harvey Lonsdale Elmes (1814–47) who was one of England's most talented architects. He is best known for St George's Hall, Liverpool, which has been described as the finest neoclassical building in Europe. At Rainhill the hallmarks of good architecture are evident in the strength of the design, with the attention to detail and dramatic use of many water towers which punctuate the ranges of low buildings around a severely symmetrical main block. The buildings stand in a beautiful setting full of mature trees and this was an



Rainhill Hospital, Merseyside. (Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England).



Cheadle Royal Infirmary, Manchester. (Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England).

important part of the original scheme. The hospital was erected when the quality of the environment was considered to be important, and access to spacious grounds and a rural setting, with fresh air and natural light was thought to be therapeutic.

This generation of asylums marked a break with treatment based on incarceration and restraint.

Rainhill approximated to the ideals of John Conolly (1794–1866) who was a pioneer in the field of asylum design and the humane treatment of patients. The design makes an interesting comparison with the former Manchester Lunatic Asylum (now Cheadle Royal Hospital) by Richard Lane which was completed in 1850 and is based on a similar pattern of long low blocks radiating from a central administration building. This allowed the architect to combine the advantages of tranquil views and access to sunlight and fresh air with the convenient segregation of patients by age, sex and type of condition. Elaine Harwood, author of a study on the history and plan forms of lunatic asylums, believes that Rainhill is one of the most innovative asylums erected at a time when the building type was at its most interesting. She also points out that Elme's sketch designs, which are in the RIBA Prints and Drawings collection, illustrate the contemporary dilemma over the relative suitability of classical, Elizabethan or Gothic styles for hospitals.

The buildings now lie empty while the wheels of bureaucracy turn. They are in generally good condition, although the security guards have to work hard to curb theft and vandalism. There seems to be no reason why the complex could not be converted to sheltered accommodation or flats, like St Mary's House in Portsmouth. One thing is certain – if they are demolished it will represent a grievous loss to the tiny stock of works by one of our finest neo-classical architects, and a loss also to the history of hospital planning, design and architecture.

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Conference briefing

Marcé Society, Sixth Biennial Meeting*

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Although a novice might be forgiven for believing that the Marcé Society was an organisation dedicated to the study of the effects of marching or regular exercise on nervous disorders, anyone with more than a passing interest in post partum disorders would know that it was named after the famous 19th century French psychiatrist, Lewis Victor Marcé,

*Held from 2–4 September 1992 at the Herriot Watt University.

who wrote a big book (regrettably, all in French) on the psychiatric sequelae of childbirth.

Professor Paykel, the president elect, introduced the retiring president, Dr Margaret Oates, who opened the conference with an attack on the government's health reforms and highlighted the risks the changes had for the management of post partum disorders. Case registers were being axed as districts were meant increasingly to shoulder the responsibilities of central government and so less accurate