

## ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE WELLCOME INSTITUTE LIBRARY

### EARL'S COURT HOUSE FROM JOHN HUNTER TO ROBERT GARDINER HILL

by

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The mansion and gardens which John Hunter constructed as a country residence and biological research station at Earl's Court in London became in due course a private lunatic asylum for ladies, although the building's connexion with Hunter was not one which the later proprietors liked to publicize. A detailed history of the house has never been written, and it may be that the documents for such a history do not survive. The purpose of this note is to introduce two pictures in the Wellcome Institute library which portray the house and gardens, the first as they were in Hunter's time and the second after the property had been turned into an asylum. Like other documents describing the house, the pictures are not neutral depictions but illustrate the partiality of those who commissioned or made them.

#### JOHN HUNTER'S HOUSE

John Hunter first lived in Earl's Court in 1760, but it was not until 1765 that he constructed his own residence, the gardens of which occupied the site of the present Barkston Gardens, on the east side of Earl's Court Road. Between 1768 and Hunter's death in 1793, and again in several stages between 1793 and 1863, the house was probably re-faced and certainly enlarged.<sup>1</sup> The earliest picture of it seems to be a watercolour dated 1821 in Jesse Foot's own extra-illustrated copy of his *The life of John Hunter*, which was originally published in 1794. In this copy, now in the Wellcome Institute library, the original 287 small pages of text are sumptuously bound up in three massive volumes in the company of numerous watercolours, engravings, and miscellanea bearing on various points in Jesse Foot's narrative, each volume being announced by a title-page dated 1822, four years before Foot's death.<sup>2</sup>

The watercolour of "Earle's Court" which appears on p. 524 of the extra-illustrated version (pl. 1) bears the initials of the otherwise unidentified artist "WPS" and the date 1821. It must surely have been made at Foot's request specifically to illustrate his text, for its portrayal of the house concentrates on features mentioned by Foot but not all

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<sup>1</sup> *Survey of London*, volume 42, Athlone Press for the Greater London Council, 1986, pp. 196-197, plates 86b-c. Mr P. A. Bezodis, author of the relevant part of the *Survey*, kindly made it available before publication and provided much other information which is here acknowledged with thanks.

<sup>2</sup> Jesse Foot, *The life of John Hunter*, London, T. Becket, 1794, extra-illustrated copy in 3 vols., 1822.

visible from the same viewpoint. On the front of the house, according to Foot, one could see four figures of lions in lead or stone, two *passant* on the parapet above and two *couchant* at ground level guarding the entrance to the double flight of steps leading up to the vestibule. These are shown in the watercolour, together with other features mentioned by Foot, a gaping crocodile over the front door and, ascending from the gables, two lightning conductors.<sup>3</sup> However, we also see in the same view some features of the garden at the back of the house, notably the wooded eminence in the centre foreground. This was “the Mound” which contained subterranean byres for Hunter’s three buffaloes.<sup>4</sup> The “elk”, the giraffe, and the other animals representing Hunter’s menagerie are also placed in the back garden, while the beehives on the left allude to Foot’s remark that Hunter’s paper on bees must have been based on investigations made at Earl’s Court—though Foot’s own, typically sarcastic, words are “Here it was that John Hunter dreamed over many of his projects,—realized experiments on animals,—and laid the foundation of his *Fable of the Bees*.”<sup>5</sup>

Here the illustration, like the text, is slanted to expose what the malicious Foot regarded as Hunter’s unjustified pretensions to deep and varied knowledge, pretensions to the status of a savant. The incongruity of the exotic animals in an English garden is underlined by verses written by hand beneath the watercolour (not reproduced in our plate): four lines of mock-epic Latin ridicule this Asia and Africa of Earl’s Court with its tigers, wolves, and lions.<sup>6</sup> But while one should not mistake such a selective portrayal for a topographical record, it does appear to depend to some extent on first-hand knowledge of the house, for the structure is substantially the same as in later lithographs and engravings, though without the added wings which they show on either side of it.<sup>7</sup>

#### EARL’S COURT HOUSE ASYLUM

After John Hunter’s death in 1793, the house passed through various owners. The young Lord Byron stayed there while his quasi-guardian John Hanson owned the property (1795–1802). Later owners include the Duke of Richmond on behalf of his mistress who lived there, and the Earl of Albemarle. In 1829 the then owner, Robert Gunter, let the house to one Mrs Bradbury for development as a private licensed asylum, which came to be called Mrs Bradbury’s Establishment for Ladies Nervously Affected. The house opened for business in 1832.<sup>8</sup>

About Mrs Bradbury we know only that she claimed to have twenty years’ experience in managing a similar asylum elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> Her first collaborator was W. B.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1794, pp. 240–241.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Pasmore, *John Hunter in Kensington* (Hunterian Society Oration, 1977), reprinted from the *Transactions of the Hunterian Society*, 1976–78, 35–36, London, Metropolis Press, 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Foot, *op. cit.*, note 2 above, p. 242 referring to John Hunter’s ‘Observations on bees’, *Phil. Trans.*, 1792, 82: 128–195.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Hic Africa ridet, / Asia hic—hic rabidae tigres, et saeva luporum/agmina; cum pedibus pernicibus urgent arenam/iratusque leo, et fulvâ cervice leaena.’ Virgil used the phrase *fulva cervice leaena* (*Georgics* IV. 408), but the verses are not by him, nor by Horace, Ovid, or Statius. Could they have been composed by Foot?

<sup>7</sup> Many such prints are in Kensington and Chelsea Public Library (Local Studies Collection).

<sup>8</sup> *Survey of London*, *loc. cit.*, note 1 above. The date of opening of the asylum is given in the ‘Statistical appendix to the Report of the Metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy’, cited in full in note 19 below, pp. 65.

<sup>9</sup> The claim appears in the prospectus discussed below.

Neville, presumably a surgeon, who published in 1836 a short book *On insanity; its nature, causes and cure*. Whatever its merits, this was no disinterested monograph. The title-page announces the author as “William B. Neville, Esq., of Earl’s Court House”. The obsequious dedication is addressed to the Governors of the Bethlehem Royal Hospital, the Governors of the Hanwell County Lunatic Asylum, and the Metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy. The author’s progress from the nature of insanity to its cure culminates in an unctuous tribute to asylum-keepers, which would have been followed by an account of Neville’s own successful cures had he not been restrained by “feelings of delicacy”.<sup>10</sup> The author then moves from covert to overt advertising, for in complete copies of the book the text *On insanity* is followed by a pamphlet, printed by the same printer in the same typeface, bearing the title: *A prospectus of Earl’s Court House, Mrs Bradbury’s establishment at Old Brompton, for the recovery of ladies labouring under affections of the mind*, and the imprint “London: to be had of all the respectable booksellers throughout the Kingdom, 1836”.<sup>11</sup> This pamphlet is a typical example of the asylums’ advertising-literature of the time as it has been described by W. L. Parry-Jones:<sup>12</sup> it mentions the cheerful situation of the house, the mildness and salubrity of the air (Old Brompton is renowned as “The Montpelier of England”), the reasonableness of the terms, and the opportunities given to patients for religious consolation and for “cultivation of original acquirements in literature or the fine arts”. The house’s connexion with John Hunter was not mentioned in the prospectus, as the fact that he used the grounds as zoological gardens would not have been conducive to attracting patients, but advertisements in the *Medical Directory* and other books consulted by medical men did include references to “the immortal Hunter”.<sup>13</sup> The prospectus contains testimonials from Sir Henry Halford PRCP and other eminent physicians, which would be more impressive if one were reliably assured that the authors of these tributes had no commercial interest in the house. Finally, there is a series of eight lithographs showing various aspects of the house in its new role. The first lithograph shows a ground-plan with a vignette of the façade, while the remaining seven show what are termed “Sectional views as taken from the grounds,

<sup>10</sup> W. B. Neville, *On insanity*, London, Longman, 1863, p. 191.

<sup>11</sup> The prospectus exists in several different forms. The first edition is presumably the one with lithographs by Madeley which was published as a supplement to Neville’s book of 1836, e.g. in the British Library’s copy of Neville and in Newcastle University Library (a microfilm of the latter copy of the prospectus is in Kensington and Chelsea Public Library). After the publication of Neville’s book, a new edition of the prospectus appeared with a smaller typeface to allow inclusion of extracts from the book and from reviews of it. At the same time, the lithographs were replaced by smaller wood-engravings (by J. J. Jackson) and the title is changed to *A prospectus of Earl’s Court House, Old Brompton, Mrs Bradbury’s establishment for the care and recovery of ladies labouring under affections of the mind* (copies in the Guildhall Library (Pam. 2304) and in the Royal College of Surgeons library: the plan of the house in the RCS copy is reproduced by Thomas A. Markus, ‘Domes of enlightenment: two Scottish university museums’, *Art History*, 1985, 8: 158–177, f.p. 160). This contains as an insert a section of “Plans and illustrations of Earl’s Court House, Old Brompton, near London. Sectional views as taken from the grounds, representing the ladies at their respective calisthenic exercises”, consisting of the ground plan (with a revised key) and of engraved copies of Madeley’s lithographs. Copies of this insert exist separately from the prospectus, e.g. in Kensington and Chelsea Public Library (K 69/31 with only three engravings; GC 2435 with all seven engravings).

<sup>12</sup> William L. Parry-Jones, *The trade in lunacy*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, pp. 102–112.

<sup>13</sup> Anon., review of Neville (op. cit., note 10 above), *Lond. med. surg. J.*, 1836, 1: 152. Advertisement in the *Medical Directory*, 1848, part 2, p. 34 (“formerly the residence of the great surgeon, John Hunter”).

representing the ladies at their respective calisthenic exercises". The second, a coloured impression showing ladies playing shuttlecock, skipping, and otherwise amusing themselves, is reproduced as our pl. 2. Other lithographs show the patients walking around Hunter's buffalo-den, practising archery and playing on swings and see-saws. None of them shows the interior of the house.

Like the lithographs, all the other available evidence of the asylum suggests that it was as well-appointed as a madhouse, or indeed any house, could possibly be. "This establishment throughout is in excellent order" pronounced the Metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy in 1834.<sup>14</sup> The key to the ground-plan in the second edition of the prospectus tells us that the house was divided into three areas. The division for "convalescents" contained a drawing room, music room, theatre, and billiards room; an exercise corridor, "fitted up with self-acting and other musical instruments"; and a library "supplied with periodicals, fitted up with bagatelle, intellectual games, mechanical and optical designs &c." There was also, above the seclusion room (so marked in our pl. 3), "a protected Observatory, commanding extensive views with Camera Obscura". A second division for "partial convalescents" and a third division for "ladies under the complete influence of the malady" contained sitting-rooms and parlours adapted to their respective needs. Among the rooms in the third class was a "Room adapted to ladies labouring under severe paroxysms", which lay beneath the observatory. The six acres of pleasure gardens contained swings and Merlin and easy chairs for pleasure and recreation. They were also surrounded by a brick wall fourteen feet high.<sup>15</sup>

Similar claims were made for other private licensed madhouses. William Finch, who ran Kensington House Asylum for men and the Retreat, King's Road, for women, issued a brochure in 1830 with idyllic lithographs of cricket-playing patients, references to the cheerful and spacious apartments, and allusions to the aristocratic owners and neighbours of his properties.<sup>16</sup> The case brought against him by one of his patients, Richard Paternoster, suggests that reality may not have been in all respects so splendid.<sup>17</sup> However, the fact that some houses did not live up to the claims of their advertisements does not mean that none did, and it is surely possible that Earl's Court House was as good, or almost as good, as its public image suggests. It would have been able to be so through having a competent proprietor and carefully selected, well-provided-for patients.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cited in the second edition of the prospectus cited in note 11 above, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Ground plan with details of rooms, acreage, and wall in the prospectus, *op. cit.*, note 13 above. Garden facilities mentioned in an advertisement in the *Medical Directory*, 1846, *adv. p.* 25. On "Merlin chairs" for invalids see *John Joseph Merlin the ingenious mechanick*, London, GLC (Iveagh Bequest Kenwood), 1985, pp. 74–76.

<sup>16</sup> *Kensington House Asylum, Kensington, near London, for the reception of insane patients, under the immediate superintendence of Mr William Finch*, London, J. Mallett, 1830 (copy in the Guildhall Library, Pam. 8760).

<sup>17</sup> R. Paternoster, *The madhouse system*, London, the author, 1841. *Paternoster versus Finch and eight others*, Wellcome Institute library, MSS 5247–5275.

<sup>18</sup> The Ticehurst Asylum is a better-documented example of such a house. See Charlotte Mackenzie, 'Social factors in the admission, discharge, and continuing stay of patients at Ticehurst Asylum, 1845–1917', in W. F. Bynum, Roy Porter, and Michael Shepherd (editors), *The anatomy of madness*, 2 vols., London, Tavistock, 1985, vol. 2, pp. 147–174; and T. H. Turner, 'The past of psychiatry: why build asylums?', *Lancet*, 1985, *ii*: 709–711.

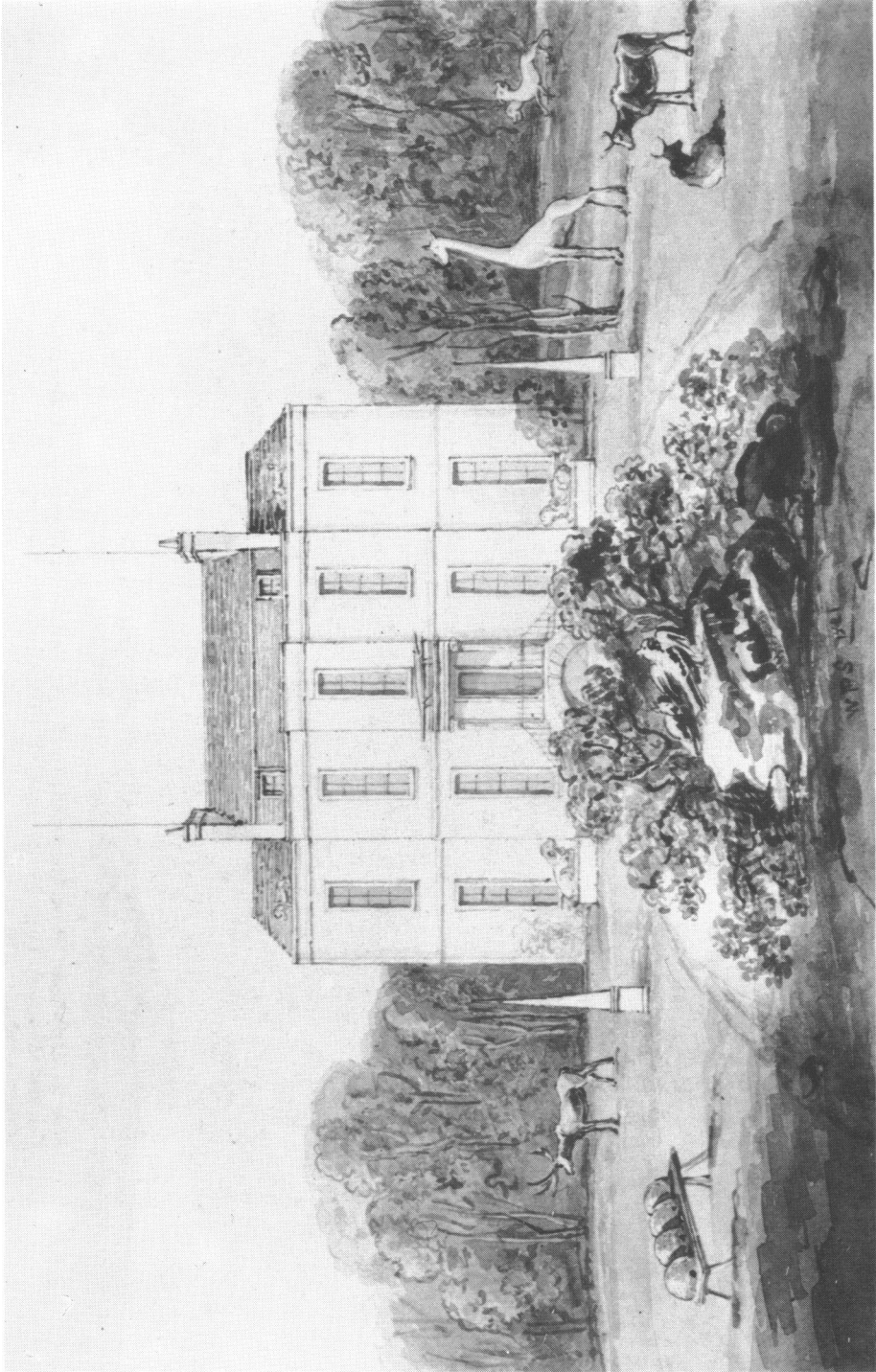
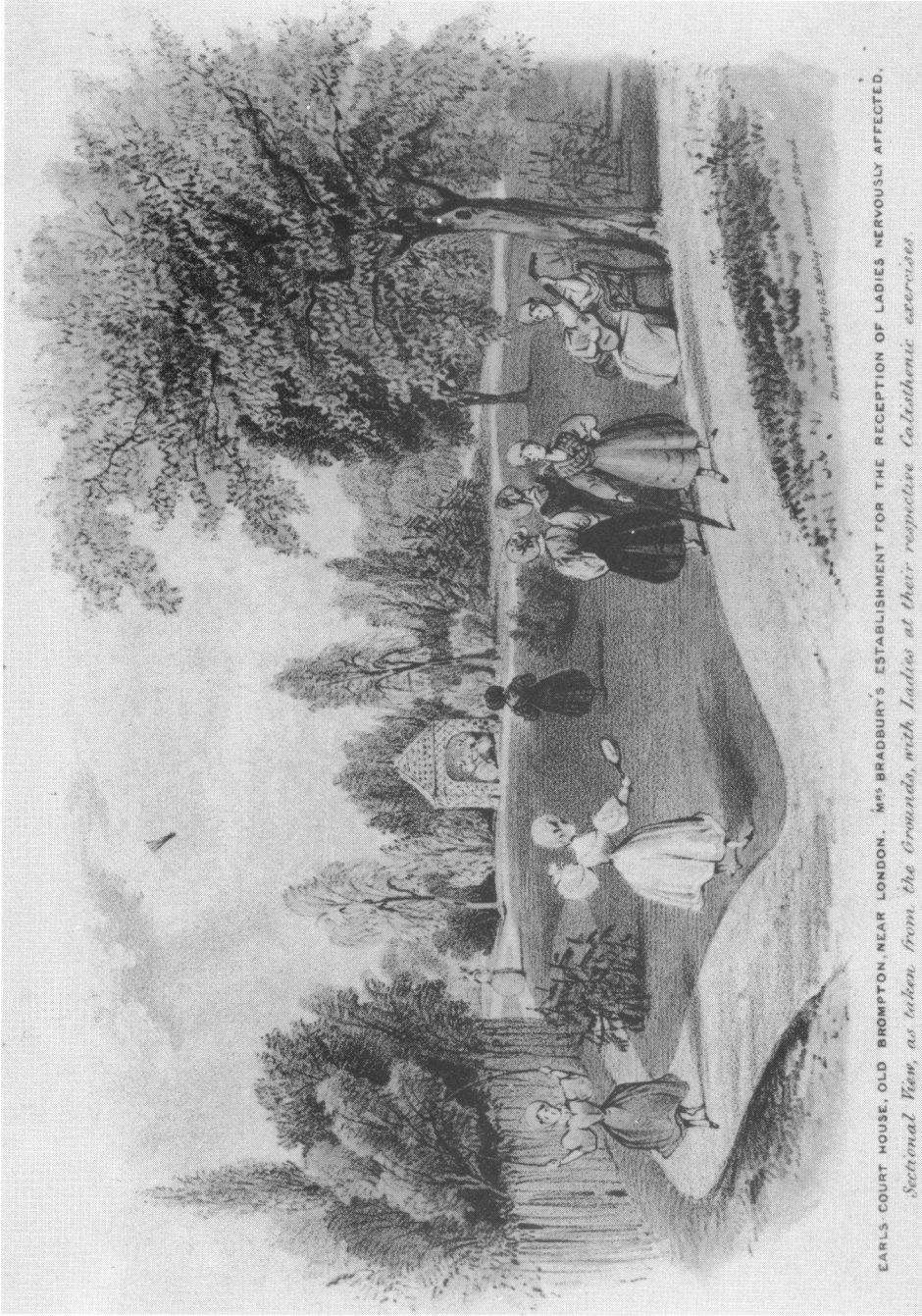


Plate 1 'Earle's Court', John Hunter's house. Watercolour by 'WPS', 1821, 13.2 x 20.3 cms, in Jesse Foot *The life of John Hunter*, London, 1794, extra-illustrated version, p. 524. Wellcome Institute Library, London.



**Plate 2** Earls Court House. Mrs Bradbury's Establishment for the reception of ladies nervously affected. Coloured lithograph, 13.7 x 19 cms., by G. E. Madeley after his drawing, c. 1836. Wellcome Institute Library, London.

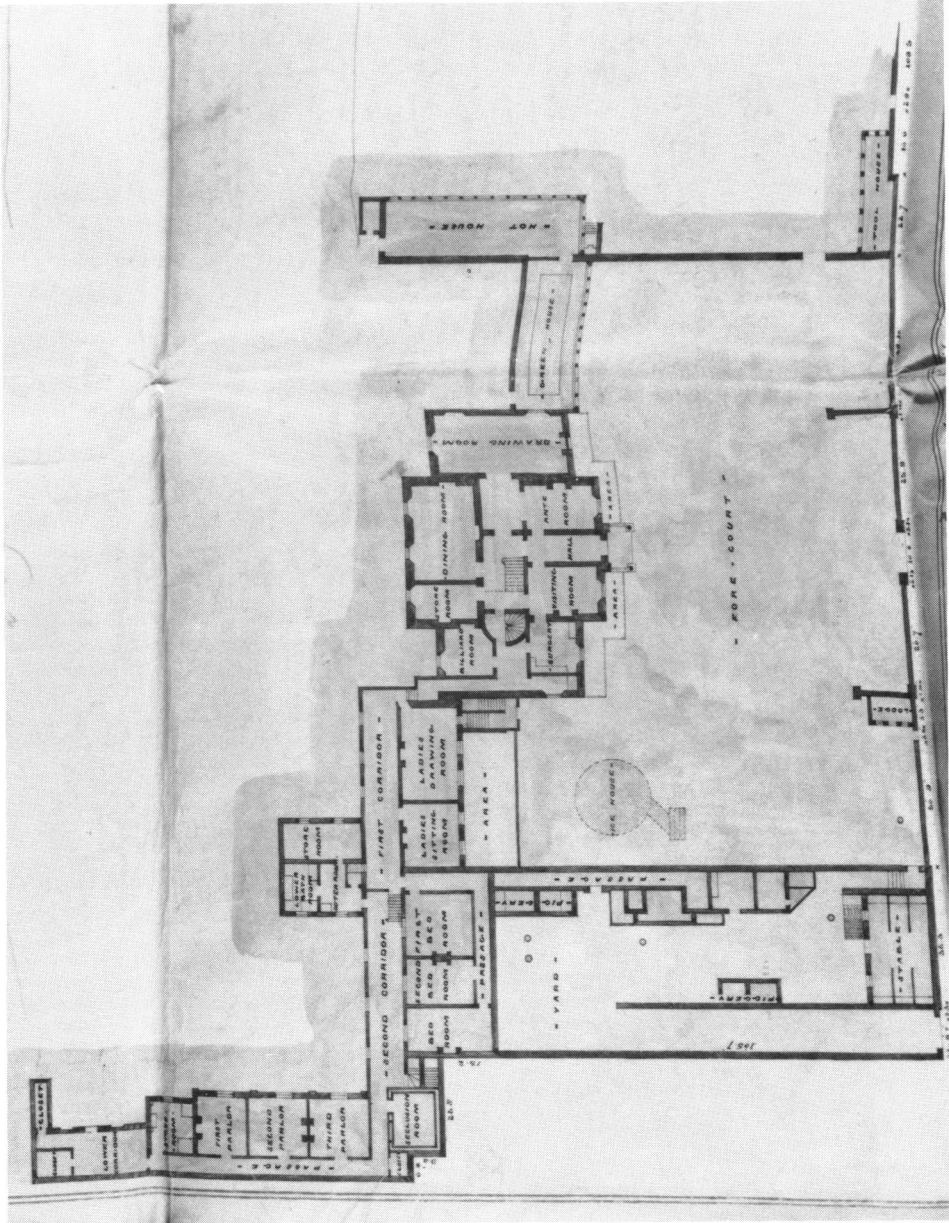


Plate 3 Groundplan of Earl's Court House. Indenture between Robert Gunter and Elizabeth Burney, 1 June 1853, p. 1 (detail). Greater London Record Office (BRA/641/28).

In 1843, Earl's Court House, still under Mrs Bradbury, was examined by the Metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy among the thirty "Metropolitan Licensed Houses receiving private patients only", i.e. those asylums in London which accepted only people able to pay the fees.<sup>19</sup> Of the thirty houses, ten (among them Mrs Bradbury's establishment) received women only, three men only, and seventeen women and men. Earl's Court House was said to have twenty-six patients, all belonging to the "Upper and Middle Classes": it was therefore small by comparison with asylums which accepted paupers, but it was larger than most private asylums, for nineteen of the thirty licensed Metropolitan houses had fewer than twenty patients. The impression given by the lithographs that most of the patients were young is belied by the report that most of the ten deaths in the asylum between 1832 and 1841 were "the natural result of old age". Moreover, ten of the twenty-six patients were widows (three were married, thirteen single). Further statistical information is given in the Commissioners' report, which, however, says nothing about the staff. The 1851 census reveals that the staff then consisted of Mrs Bradbury and her niece, two ladies' attendants, two visitors, ten attendants, a cook, a housemaid, a parlourmaid, a kitchenmaid, a coachman, a gardener, and a weekly servant, making a staff/patient ratio of 23:30, which has an obvious bearing on the economic status of the patients.<sup>20</sup>

The founder of the asylum, Mary Bradbury, died on 10 May 1852 and left personal estate worth £1,500 to her niece, Miss Elizabeth Burney, who had been her assistant at Earl's Court House.<sup>21</sup> Continuity was assured in 1853 when Miss Burney was granted a new lease on the property for twenty-one years provided that she used it for no other purpose than "the business or calling which the said Mary Bradbury and the said Lessee hath hitherto exercised and carried on upon the said premises." The terms of the lease describe the rooms and the fixtures and fittings. The main reception rooms were handsomely adorned with fine furniture and two vast mirrors in gilt frames, but the only details given for the patients' rooms are a mortice lock and a stove, presumably because the furnishings were not the property of the lessor. The exception is the Seclusion Room, which had double doors and had the sides of its walls "lined with girth, webbed, canvassed and painted".<sup>22</sup> A ground-plan (pl. 3) shows the disposition of the rooms.

At some time in the 1840s, W. B. Neville appears to have left the house, and the pluralist consultant Forbes Benignus Winslow (1810–74) took over as consulting physician and medical superintendent, thus adding Earl's Court House to his portfolio

<sup>19</sup> 'Statistical appendix to the Report of the Metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy to the Lord Chancellor 1844. Containing tabular returns from the several lunatic asylums in England and Wales; also, from the principal lunatic asylums in Scotland and Ireland. Being a return to an Address of the Honourable the House of Commons, dated 1 August 1844. (Lord Ashley.) Ordered, by the House of Commons, to be printed, 8 August 1844', House of Commons, *Sessional papers*, 1844, 18 (1): 1–246, pp. 6–7, 65–66. The report to which the statistics are appended is entitled *Report of the Metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy, to the Lord Chancellor. Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty*, London, Bradbury & Evans, 1844.

<sup>20</sup> Public Record Office HO. 107/1469, fol. 93v (1851).

<sup>21</sup> PRO. PROB. 11/2154 fol. 97v (will). PRO. IR. 26/1923, fol. 540 (death duty assessment).

<sup>22</sup> Greater London Record Office, BRA/641/28, indenture between Robert Gunter and Elizabeth Burney.



of asylums.<sup>23</sup> By about 1856, Winslow must have given up his post, for a new prospectus issued by Miss Burney mentions only D. M. Maclure of Harley Street and Messrs Turner and Marsh as the medical attendants.<sup>24</sup>

In 1864, Miss Burney was joined as co-lessee by a celebrated figure in psychiatric history, Robert Gardiner Hill (1811–78).<sup>25</sup> Hill had attracted attention at the age of twenty-eight through his experiment at Lincoln Asylum with total abolition of physical restraint of the insane, an innovation for which not he but John Conolly, superintendent of the Hanwell asylum, received public acclaim.<sup>26</sup> It is presumably no coincidence that Gardiner Hill ended his days as superintendent of an asylum at which the selectness of the patients, the high staff/patient ratio, and the spacious but secluded grounds must have made physical restraint of the patients a rare necessity. After Hill died in 1878, his widow continued to use the house as her residence, but in 1885 her lease expired, John Hunter's house was demolished the following year, and the construction of the present blocks of flats began, leaving apparently no physical trace of Hunter's or Mrs Bradbury's establishment.<sup>27</sup>

On 5 January 1886 a protest against the proposed demolition had appeared in the correspondence columns of *The Times*. The author's indignation was roused solely by the fact that a property associated with Hunter was about to be lost: not that the interior of the house would be worth preserving, for it "has recently been used as a lunatic asylum and has been renovated out of all interest".<sup>28</sup> One hundred years later, we may feel that the preservation of one London lunatic asylum of the period in question would have been at least as interesting even as John Hunter's buffalo-park. In the absence of Mrs Bradbury's Establishment, the much more important Hanwell asylum, now St Bernard's Hospital, Ealing, which retains much of its original architecture, would surely be the worthiest candidate for survival.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> In the volumes of the *Medical Directory* for 1845–48, Winslow described himself as Consulting Physician and Medical Superintendent of Earl's Court House, Old Brompton. Winslow was also proprietor of Sussex House and Brandenburgh House. A. L. Wyman, 'Why Winslow? The Winslows of Sussex House', *Charing Cross Hosp. Gaz.*, 1966–67, 64: 143–147. Roger Smith, *Trial by medicine. Insanity and responsibility in Victorian trials*, Edinburgh University Press, 1981, on Winslow as a forensic alienist.

<sup>24</sup> Copy in Kensington and Chelsea Public library, GC2434, 4 pages with a vignette steel-engraving, latest testimonial dated 1856.

<sup>25</sup> Greater London Record Office, BRA/641/29, Indenture between, first, W. E. Maude and Capt. James Gunter (the Lessors); secondly, Robert Gunter; and thirdly, Elizabeth Burney and Robert Gardiner Hill.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander Walk, 'Lincoln and non-restraint', *Br. J. Psychiat.*, 1970, 117: 481–496. Kingsley Jones, 'Robert Gardiner Hill and the non-restraint movement', *Canad. J. Psychiat.*, 1984, 29: 121–124. Andrew Scull, 'A Victorian alienist: John Conolly FRCP, DCL (1794–1866)', in Bynum *et al.*, *op. cit.*, note 18 above, vol. 1, pp. 103–150.

<sup>27</sup> *Survey of London*, loc. cit., note 1 above.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Farquharson, 'John Hunter's house', *The Times*, 5 January 1886, p. 8. Further correspondence appeared in *The Times*, 7 January 1886, p. 8. The view of Hunter expressed in the letter is explained by L. S. Jacyna, 'Images of John Hunter in the nineteenth century', *History of Science*, 1983, 21: 85–108.

<sup>29</sup> Katrin Fitzherbert, 'A psychiatric landmark at risk', *Illus. Lond. News*, September 1984, 272: 19.