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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/colli



Liverpool “lunatic asylum”: A forgotten chapter in the history of Australian health care

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 June 2017

Received in revised form 3 August 2017

Accepted 29 August 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Asylum

Convict

Lunatic

History

Mental health

Nurse

ABSTRACT

Background: Historical accounts of Australia's early colonial lunatic asylums often neglect to mention the asylum that operated in Liverpool, NSW between 1826 and 1839.

Aim: To find and explore the earliest available evidence of the mental health care provided within Liverpool lunatic asylum.

Methods: A literature search was followed by manual searches of primary sources held by the State Records Authority of New South Wales, the State Library of NSW, Liverpool Library and Liverpool Regional Museum. International records available through Ancestry.com were also accessed.

Findings: Contrary to previous historical accounts, Liverpool lunatic asylum was located within the parsonage of St Luke's Church in Liverpool. This building was better suited to mental health care than the disused military barracks previously home to the patients of Australia's first asylum at Castle Hill.

Discussion: Despite the substantial challenges of delivering mental health care in the early colony of NSW, the lunatic asylum at Liverpool retained long term staff who worked there throughout the 13 years of its operation. Payment of wages to a nurse within the Liverpool lunatic asylum indicates a shift in approach to nursing in colonial mental health care that makes an important contribution to the historical identity of nursing in Australia.

Conclusion: Clarifying historical information using primary sources that illuminate care within Liverpool lunatic asylum is important because history has the potential to inform and contextualise modern approaches to health care.

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1. Introduction

Historical accounts of Australia's early mental healthcare often neglect to mention the lunatic asylum that operated in Liverpool, NSW, between 1826 and 1839 (Coleborne & MacKinnon, 2006; Edward, Munro, Welch, & Robins, 2014; Happell, 2007). Alternatively, some articles briefly mention Liverpool before focusing on Australia's first purpose built asylum that opened at Tarbun Creek in 1838 (Kirkby, 1999; Parkinson, 1981). Some historians have asserted that Liverpool lunatic asylum was housed within Liverpool courthouse and this idea has been used to suggest that the care it delivered was heavily custodial (Bostock, 1968; Cummins, 1979; Neil, 1992; Smith, 2005; White and Kealy-Bateman, 2016).

This paper reviews newly uncovered primary documents held by the State Records Authority of NSW. Previously misfiled in the 'Slaughterhouse' files of the archives, these sources reveal that Liverpool lunatic asylum, which operated during the 13 years following the closure of Australia's first asylum at Castle Hill in 1826 and prior to the opening of Tarbun Creek asylum in 1838, was actually located in the parsonage building of St Luke's Church in Liverpool. Clarifying such information and exploring documents that illuminate care within Liverpool lunatic asylum is important because history has the potential to inform the context and development of modern approaches to mental health care.

1.1. History of the term 'lunatic'

Reference to the term 'lunatic' in this paper is in no way meant to be stigmatising towards people who experience and live with mental illness. Rather, the word lunatic is used because it is his-

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**Summary of relevance
Problem**

- Little is known about Liverpool lunatic asylum that operated between 1826 and 1839. As recently as 2016, publications have stated that there were no primary documents retained from within Liverpool asylum.

What is already known

- Apart from its existence and the names of the superintendent and Doctor who worked there, historians have mistakenly located the asylum inside Liverpool courthouse, apparently due to heavy reliance on secondary sources.

What this paper adds

- New information regarding the location and care provided within the Liverpool lunatic asylum based on previously misfiled primary documents held within the archives of the State Records Authority of NSW.

torically accurate as it was the term used by people in the early 19th century to describe people who experienced mental illness and the services that cared for them (British Government, 1786; Macquarie, 1814b). The words 'lunatic' and 'lunacy' were derived from 'lunaticus' meaning 'of the moon' or 'moon struck'. People of the time held a belief that the full moon could be associated with mental illness. Prior to the advent of modern lighting, the moon was a significant source of nocturnal illumination that affected people's sleep-wake cycle, at times causing sleep deprivation around the time of full moon. Such partial sleep deprivation may have been sufficient to induce mania/hypomania in susceptible people and seizures in people with epilepsy. People's experience of mental illness was therefore often linked to the effects of moonlight (Micale & Porter, 1994). The term 'lunatic asylum' also serves to differentiate the service under investigation (i.e. Liverpool lunatic asylum), from other services of the time which were referred to as 'asylums'. These included the 'Benevolent Asylum' which opened in 1821 and was a more generic social welfare institution run by the Benevolent Society of NSW (Rathbone, 1994).

2. Background

Australia's first lunatic asylum had been established by Governor Macquarie at Castle Hill, NSW, in 1811 (Sydney Gazette and NSW Advertiser, 1811) but it had constant problems with administration and staffing due to struggles for power between a variety of superintendents and surgeons. The first superintendent had been Reverend Samuel Marsden but he spent little time at the asylum due to his church work in Australia and New Zealand (Suttor, 1859). A new superintendent William Suttor was appointed in 1814. Suttor had strong beliefs about the importance of religion in asylum care. He insisted on regularly reading prayers to patients and this caused problems in his relationship with asylum surgeon Dr William Bland who feared such methods might compound symptoms of religious mania among some patients (Suttor, 1815). Bland promptly resigned in 1815 and was replaced by surgeon Henry Ravenscroft (NSW Government, 1815). Soon after his assignment Ravenscroft was accused of stealing patients bedding and transferred to Newcastle (NSW Government, 1815). The next surgeon involved at Castle Hill was Thomas Parmeter who fought Suttor for power within the asylum and their struggles spilled over into a variety of letters to Governor Macquarie.

In a letter to the colonial secretary superintendent Suttor accused surgeon Parmeter of improper use of medications, withholding soap from patients and only visiting the asylum weekly (Suttor, 1817a). Dr Parmeter countered with his own claims that Suttor had been using patients from the asylum as labourers on his personal farm (Parmeter, 1818). In the midst of these administrative quarrels, care became lax. Patient escapes from Castle Hill were common (Bigge, 1822) and worse yet, murder was committed when a patient given access to an axe to chop firewood attacked and killed a fellow patient (Bigge, 1822; Parmeter, 1818). Eventually superintendent Suttor and surgeon Parmeter were dismissed and a new superintendent William Bennet was appointed in 1819 (NSW Government, 1819). Substantial government inquiries conducted by commissioner John Thomas Bigge (1822) and a Grand Jury (1825) reported problems at Castle Hill, highlighting that its building was overcrowded and that a new, purpose built mental healthcare facility was needed. In spite of this, the colonial government would not commit funds to build a purpose built mental health asylum until the late 1830s. In the meantime, Castle Hill was shut down by Governor Darling in 1826 and a new temporary lunatic asylum was opened in Liverpool.

3. Method

A literature search was conducted using CINAHL, PubMed and Google Scholar. Primary sources held by the State Records Authority of New South Wales were manually searched as were archived sources at the State Library of NSW, Liverpool Library and Liverpool Regional Museum. International records available through Ancestry.com were also accessed. A range of original documents including reports, patient lists, letters and church records were found and reviewed for relevance. In the following section key findings are discussed.

3.1. The location of Liverpool lunatic asylum

A letter written by Governor Darling (1828) stating that the Liverpool lunatic asylum was located in a 'renovated courthouse', has previously been interpreted by historians as referring to the Liverpool courthouse building (Bostock, 1968; Neil, 1992; Smith, 2005; White and Kealy-Bateman, 2016). This location is contradicted by primary sources which were misplaced until recently within the State Records Authority of NSW. In fact, documents from 1825 onwards reveal that the Liverpool lunatic asylum was located in the parsonage of St Luke's Church Liverpool, which had previously been rented by the NSW government as a temporary courthouse.

The first evidence of St Luke's church parsonage being used for a purpose other than accommodating a clergyman and his family appeared in a letter written by Governor Brisbane's private secretary, John Ovens (1825). The letter outlined an agreement between the NSW government and the Reverend Robert Cartwright to pay 300 Spanish dollars or equivalent in pounds per annum to rent St Luke's church parsonage as a temporary courthouse. The building continued to be used for that purpose until September 1826 when, following the closure of the Castle Hill lunatic asylum, the governor decided to reassign the use of St Luke's parsonage as the colony's new lunatic asylum (Cartwright, January 1827).

Evidence that the Liverpool lunatic asylum was located in the parsonage building at St Luke's church is confirmed by a letter signed by Governor Darling dated January 1827 (Darling, 1827) and a receipt for rent signed by the local church pastor, Cartwright, 1827. The receipt states:

The government of New South Wales,

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