

**Submission to the Journal of Victorian Culture:**

**Comfort in Small Things? Clothing, Control and Agency in County Lunatic Asylums in  
Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century England**

**Jane Hamlett and Lesley Hoskins**

**28/02/2012**

**Please note that this is a draft version of this article, made available under Open Access policy requirements. For the final version, edited after peer review, and with illustrations, please see:**

**<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13555502.2012.744241>**

**Biographical notes and contact details:**

Dr. Jane Hamlett (corresponding author)

Lecturer in Modern British History, Royal Holloway University of London.

Address: The History Department, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham, Surrey, TW20 0EX.

Email: [jane.hamlett@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:jane.hamlett@rhul.ac.uk)

Jane Hamlett works on space and material culture in nineteenth and twentieth-century Britain. Her first book, *Material Relations: Middle-Class Families and Domestic Interiors in England, 1850-1910* was published by Manchester University Press in 2010. She has also published in a range of journals including *Cultural and Social History*, *The Journal of Consumer Culture*, *The Journal of Family History*, *Gender and History*, *Home Cultures* and

*Women's History Review*. She is currently principal investigator on the ESRC-funded project 'At Home in the Institution? Asylum, School and Lodging House Interiors in London and South East England, 1845-1914'.

Dr. Lesley Hoskins

Visiting Research Fellow, School of Geography, Queen Mary, University of London

Email: [l.hoskins@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:l.hoskins@qmul.ac.uk)

Lesley Hoskins works on the material culture of nineteenth- and twentieth-century homes. She recently completed her PhD using household inventories to investigate domestic cultures and subsequently worked as a research fellow in the History Department at Royal Holloway, University of London, on the ESRC-funded project 'At Home in the Institution? Asylum, School and Lodging House Interiors in London and South East England, 1845-1914'. Her most recent publication is 'Stories of Work and Home in the Nineteenth Century', *Home Cultures*, 8 (2011), 2, pp. 151-169.

**Abstract (250 words)**

This article examines clothing in public lunatic asylums in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England. It considers the intentions of the authorities but also explores patient experience and agency, which have been notoriously difficult to access. Publicly-funded (pauper) patients had to give up their own clothes and wear the asylum's standard apparel. Asylum authorities did not envision this as a uniform, either honorific or punitive, and

claimed that imposed dress was intended to improve patients' behaviour and assist recovery. There was a growing awareness that variety in dress could be beneficial, and there were calls for some pauper patients to be allowed to wear their own clothes, but this was ultimately impractical within the economy of mass provision in the public asylum. Although the clothing might have offered comfort to the impoverished, some patients were angered and humiliated by the imposition. Ill-fitting items and rough fabrics could be a daily, bodily, reminder to the wearers of the shame of their status as insane paupers. It did, however, offer some room for self-fashioning. They were able to make small but, in the circumstances, telling adjustments to the way they wore their clothes and their hair. If it was considered safe, they were allowed some minor possessions. Certain of these items, like spectacles and false teeth, were vital to basic agency and independence. Others, such as jewellery -- and especially wedding rings -- could help maintain a vital link with relationships in the outside world.

(242 words).

### **Key Words**

Material culture; clothing; dress; lunatic asylum; institution; uniform; agency.

## **Comfort in Small Things? Clothing, Control and Agency in County Lunatic Asylums in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century England<sup>1</sup>**

**Jane Hamlett and Lesley Hoskins**

In 1925, a steward sat down in the stores at Brookwood County Lunatic Asylum in Surrey, and made a list of a motley collection of small objects. That list comprised all the items that had been brought into the asylum by patients who had died there since 1894, which had not been collected by friends or relatives.<sup>2</sup> The list was quite long, and is a poignant testimony to the forgotten things of those who had perished in the asylum, perhaps friendless, or at least unremembered. The majority of goods on the list were for personal adornment. There were twenty pairs of spectacles and forty sets of false teeth. But there was also jewellery, including two bracelets, three locket, pendants and necklets, thirty-eight brooches and twenty-eight pairs of earrings. There were eleven watches, a watch case and fifteen chains. Two patients had left a rosary and cross. Rings were the most common objects -- there were

---

<sup>1</sup> The research for this article was produced as a part of the Economic and Social Research Council project 'At Home in the Institution: Asylum, School and Lodging House Interiors in London and South-East England, 1845-1914' (RES-061-25-0389). We would also like to thank Julian Pooley at Surrey History Centre and Jan Pimblett at City of London, London Metropolitan Archives for their help with the research for this piece. Louise Hide, Vivienne Richmond and Rebecca Wynter very generously read it and gave us their comments. And we would also like to thank the participants in the Royal Holloway Centre for the History of Bodies and Material Culture seminar for their comments.

<sup>2</sup> Unclaimed patients' property 1894-1925, 3403/Box96/22, Surrey History Centre (SHC).

one hundred and thirty on the list -- and it is likely that a large proportion of them were wedding rings. When pauper (that is publicly funded) patients arrived at county lunatic asylums in this period, their clothing was removed and replaced with a set of standardized dress. But sometimes, if it was considered safe, they were allowed to retain small objects. In the context of uniformity of dress, a small embellishment, such as a wedding ring, would have added much to a patient's sense of self and identity. Archival evidence makes it clear that some patients were able to retain control over small possessions that, within the regimented material world of the asylum, bore a heavy weight of meaning.

During the last twenty years, the history of psychiatry has been one of the most productive areas in Victorian social history.<sup>3</sup> Initial debates speculated on the broader social and cultural significance of ideas about insanity and the expansion of institutional provision, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> A subsequent range of detailed studies has emphasized the differing interests -- including those of patients and their families -- that played a part in this expansion.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1980s, Roy Porter famously called for a new

---

<sup>3</sup> For a summary, see introduction to Joseph Melling and Bill Forsythe, *The Politics of Madness: the State, Insanity and Society in England, 1845-1914* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1967); Andrew T. Scull, *Museums of Madness: The Social Organization of Insanity in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Allen Lane, 1979); Roy Porter, *Mind-Forg'd Manacles: A History of Madness in England from the Restoration to the Regency* (London: Athlone Press, 1987); Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (London: Virago Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> This was established most clearly in David Wright, 'Getting out of the Asylum: Understanding the Confinement of the Insane in the Nineteenth Century', *Social History of Medicine*, 10, 1 (1997), 137-155.

history focusing on patient experience,<sup>6</sup> and since then historians have been finding ways of enriching our knowledge of life within asylum walls.<sup>7</sup> Recent work, interpreting case-book notes and investigating caches of letters, has suggested that patients' voices are more recoverable than previously thought, in spite of the challenges to self expression resulting from economic deprivation, mental illness, and the power dynamics within the asylum.<sup>8</sup> This

---

<sup>6</sup> Roy Porter, 'The Patient's View: Doing Medical History from Below,' *Theory and Society*, 14 (1985), 14: 175-98.

<sup>7</sup> Such works are too numerous to list here, but recent major studies of the nineteenth-century asylum include: Leonard D. Smith, '*Cure, Comfort and Safe Custody*': *Public Lunatic Asylums in Nineteenth-Century England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1999); David Wright, *Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum, 1847-1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); Pamela Michael, *Care and Treatment of the Mentally Ill in North Wales, 1800-2000* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003); Hilary Marland, *Dangerous Motherhood: Insanity and Childbirth in Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Melling and Forsythe, *The Politics of Madness*.

<sup>8</sup> For discussions of pauper experience and the sources for investigating it: Jonathan Andrews, 'Case Notes, Case Histories, and the Patient's Experience of Insanity at Gartnavel Royal Asylum, Glasgow, in the Nineteenth Century,' *Social History of Medicine*, 11, 2 (1998), 255-281; Frank Crompton, 'Needs and Desires in the Care of Pauper Lunatics: Admissions to the Worcester Asylum, 1852-72', in *Mental Illness and Learning Disability since 1850: Finding a Place for Mental Disorder in the United Kingdom*, ed. by Pamela Dale and Joseph Melling (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.46-64; Marland, *Dangerous Motherhood*; Leonard Smith, '"Your Very Thankful Inmate": Discovering the Patients of an Early County Lunatic Asylum', *Social History of Medicine*, 21, 2 (2008), 237-252; and Louise Wannell, 'Patients' Relatives and Psychiatric Doctors: Letter Writing in the York Retreat, 1875-1910',

article aims to further consider patients' experiences by looking closely at the material culture of asylums -- that is the way in which goods were thought about and used, both by those in positions of authority and those subject to institutional regulation. The approaches to material culture developed by interdisciplinary scholars can be particularly helpful when exploring the lives of marginalized groups. As the anthropologist Daniel Miller puts it: 'however oppressed and apparently culturally impoverished, most people nevertheless access the creative potential of the unpromising material goods around them'.<sup>9</sup> Historian Sara Pennell, drawing on the archaeologist James Deetz's seminal work, *In Small Things Forgotten*, reminds us that a critical focus on small objects can reveal a wealth of information about the lives of their users.<sup>10</sup> We suggest that the study of material culture offers a new way of assessing patient experiences and of considering the difficult question of patient agency. In this article, we focus on the important role of clothing in the asylum.

---

*Social History of Medicine*, 20, 2 (2007), 297–313. However, at the same time, Joseph Melling suggested that research on patient experience so far had been an 'elusive promise' rather than a realisation: "'Buried Alive by her Friends": Asylum Narratives and the English Governess, 1845-1914', in Dale and Melling, pp. 65-91 (p.82).

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Miller, *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Sara Pennell, 'Mundane Materiality, or Should Small Things be Forgotten? Material Culture, Microhistories and the Problem of Scale', in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed. by Karen Harvey (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), pp. 173-191.

Recent studies of dress (which encompasses not just clothing but the many ways in which the body can be adorned or fashioned) have emphasised its social and cultural role.<sup>11</sup> Sociologist Julia Twigg argues that clothing forms ‘the vestimentary envelope that contains and makes manifest the body, offering a means whereby it is experienced, presented and given meaning in particular social contexts.’<sup>12</sup> And American sociologist Erving Goffman has written that dress takes on a particular significance within institutions, especially where individuals are relieved of their ‘identity kit’ or the tools of self-fashioning -- their clothes, make-up, and access to a barber.<sup>13</sup>

The importance of clothing in the nineteenth-century asylum has not gone unnoticed by historians of psychiatry. Jonathan Andrews has investigated the way that contemporary representations of the dress of the ‘mad poor’ related to conceptualisations of madness from the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> Rebecca Wynter has demonstrated its

---

<sup>11</sup> Amy de la Haye and Elizabeth Wilson, *Defining Dress: Dress as Object, Meaning and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 3. According to Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne Eicher, ‘identities are communicated by dress as it announces social positions of wearer to both wearer and observers within a particular interaction situation’: Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, Joanne B. Eicher, Kim K.P. Johnson, *Dress and Identity* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1995), p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Twigg, ‘Clothing, Age and the Body: a Critical Review’, *Ageing & Society*, 27 (2007), 285-305, p. 286.

<sup>13</sup> Erving Goffman, ‘The Mentally Ill and the Management of Personal Front,’ in Roach-Higgins et al., *Dress and Identity*, 116-120, p.119.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Andrews, ‘The (Un)dress of the Mad Poor in England, c.1650–1850’, part 1, *History of Psychiatry*, 18 (2007), 1, 5–24; and part 2, *History of Psychiatry*, 18 (2007), 2, 131-156.

importance as treatment and as a bench-mark of the nature and quality of an asylum in the first half of the nineteenth century; she also demonstrates how investigating clothing can reveal rituals and behaviour within the asylum.<sup>15</sup> Louise Hide shows how the standardized clothing provided by the London County Council's asylums at Claybury and Bexley in the late nineteenth century reinforced class identities.<sup>16</sup> Vivienne Richmond, a dress historian, also understands clothing as treatment, and discusses the growing rhetoric of the benefits of variety in asylum dress.<sup>17</sup>

This article builds on these studies. Our focus is on county asylums, which were funded largely by rate-payers and were associated with the Poor Law; almost all of their inmates were maintained at public expense and were classified as 'paupers'. Throughout this period, pauper patients in public asylums wore clothes provided by the institution. The situation was significantly different in private and charitable establishments, which offered facilities according to payment and where patients wore their own clothes. Some public asylums, especially towards the end of the nineteenth century, did accept a small number of private patients, who paid for their own maintenance and whose privileges included the visible and material differentiation of wearing their own clothes. But, overall, the majority of all those certified and committed to an institution were classified as paupers.<sup>18</sup> The 1845

---

<sup>15</sup> Rebecca Wynter, "'Good in all respects": Appearance and Dress at Staffordshire County Lunatic Asylum, 1818-1854', *History of Psychiatry*, 22, 1, 40-57.

<sup>16</sup> Louise Hide, 'Inside the Asylum: Gender and Class in English Mental Hospitals, 1890-1914' (unpublished PhD thesis, Birkbeck College, University of London, 2011), p. 195.

<sup>17</sup> Vivienne Richmond, "'No Finery": The Dress of the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England' (unpublished PhD thesis, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2005), pp. 247-255.

<sup>18</sup> In January 1875, 83% of the patients in asylums of all kinds (excluding those in workhouses) in England and Wales were 'paupers' and, of those, 95% were housed in public

Lunacy Act made the building of asylums by local authorities (previously merely enabled by the County Asylums Act of 1808) compulsory; the numbers of county and borough asylums in England and Wales increased substantially, from 21 in 1847 to 95 in 1910. And the number of pauper committals to public asylums rose dramatically, from 5,247 in 1847 to 94,215 in 1910, a rise which outstripped the growth in the population.<sup>19</sup> It was, then, by no means an unusual experience to have spent time as a patient in a public asylum, wearing clothes provided by the institution,

The article is divided into three sections. Firstly, we consider how far patients' apparel was intended, understood, and experienced as a uniform. We then assess the extent to which patients' sense of identity was affected by what they were given to wear and consider their responses, especially to the materiality of the clothing -- to its fit and feel -- and how it could reinforce the stigma associated with asylum dress. Finally, we explore some of the small ways in which patients might have been able to use dress to express their identity or exert agency within the restricted world of the institution.

We focus on three asylums in South East England: the Middlesex County Asylum at Hanwell (1831), the Surrey County Asylum at Brookwood (1867), and Long Grove, a London County Council institution at Epsom, (1907). They were all built using public funds to house and treat patients, mostly from their own counties, who had been certified as insane or of unsound mind, and almost all of whom were maintained at public expense. Although

---

asylums. *Commissioners in Lunacy: Twenty-ninth Annual Report to the Lord Chancellor*, (1875), p.1: House of Commons Papers, Reports of Commissioners, (337) XXXIII.1.

<sup>19</sup> *Commissioners in Lunacy: Further Report to the Lord Chancellor* (1847-8), p.317: House of Commons Papers, Reports of Commissioners, (858) XXXII.371; *Commissioners in Lunacy: Sixty-fourth Annual Report to the Lord Chancellor* (1910), p.3: House of Commons Papers, Reports of Commissioners, (204) XLI.1.

practices varied considerably from asylum to asylum, the case studies are chosen to allow a consideration of chronological change in rhetoric, theory, and practice. The article covers the period from 1831, when the Middlesex Asylum at Hanwell opened, until the First World War. During this period, the dominant theory of caring for the mentally ill, distressed or disabled was moral treatment or management. This involved removing individuals from their previous circumstances and housing them in a decent, comfortable, institutional environment, with adequate food and clothing to build up their physical and mental strength, and where attempts could be made to induce rational, normal, social conduct and self-control, largely through techniques of behavioural modelling, encouragement, rewards, and deprivations. It was hoped that patients would progress towards taking moral responsibility for themselves, and behave according to ethical beliefs in right and wrong. Anne Digby has shown how moral treatment was first instigated at the Quaker asylum, The Retreat, in the early nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Later, she argues, when numbers became too large for specialist individual treatment, there was a shift towards using moral management, organising patients systematically through routines and material provision.<sup>21</sup> While some doctors questioned the system in the late nineteenth century,<sup>22</sup> it remained highly influential in many asylums.<sup>23</sup> As will be seen, clothing had an important part to play in moral treatment.

---

<sup>20</sup> Anne Digby, *Madness, Morality and Medicine: A Study of the York Retreat, 1796-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 105.

<sup>21</sup> Digby, p.56, p.61.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Jackson, *The Borderland of Imbecility: Medicine, Society and the Fabrication of the Feeble Mind in late Victorian and Edwardian England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.35.

<sup>23</sup> Crompton, p. 58; Hide, pp. 104-6 and 187.

In preparing this article we have brought together for comparison four main categories of evidence. Firstly, there are a number of outsiders' accounts, especially the comprehensive annual reports of the Commissioners in Lunacy, who from 1845 onwards had the duty of monitoring all asylums. Secondly, we have investigated contemporary professional debates about the place and nature of clothing in treatment. Thirdly, the vast archives of documents left behind by the public asylums provide evidence for clothing regimes and practices from the authorities' point of view. But some of these documents -- especially the case-books and the management minutes -- can also be read to reveal patients' behaviours, activities and, occasionally, attitudes. Finally, and most directly, there are a small number of personal accounts of public asylum life; they were almost all written with campaigning intent but, bearing this in mind, they provide valuable first-hand responses to the asylum environment.

### **1. Creating a Uniform? The Intentions of Asylum Authorities**

The assumption of asylum dress was a significant part of induction into institutional life. First of all, the individual's existing clothing and ornaments were removed. If the patient arrived in workhouse clothing, it was returned immediately to the officer of the workhouse. If the clothes were the patient's own and were sufficiently decent, they were taken away, logged, ticketed, laundered and carefully stored until the patient was discharged, at which point they were returned to him/her.<sup>24</sup> The patient was bathed and physically examined before assuming the dress provided and was then moved into the main part of the asylum.

---

<sup>24</sup> *Manual of the Duties of the Ward Attendants at the Middlesex Lunatic Asylum Hanwell, October 1846*, City of London, London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), H11/HLL/A9/2, pp. 1-13.

Jennifer Craik argues that one aspect of a formal uniform is that it is ‘rigorously managed by external impositions’.<sup>25</sup> Pauper patients’ dress in nineteenth-century asylums fits that definition well: on entry, patients were provided with a standard set of clothes, administered by the asylum management. According to Nathan Joseph, a uniform can be used to present a desired image to outsiders<sup>26</sup> and the condition and cleanliness of patients’ clothing was one of the matters that the Commissioners in Lunacy always reported on as reflecting the general state of management. Paul Fussell usefully distinguishes between honorific and stigmatic uniforms (the former belonging, for example, to armies and schools, the latter to prisons and concentration camps).<sup>27</sup> Many patients felt stigmatized by clothing that identified them as institutionalized pauper lunatics but we will argue that it was not deliberately used to shame or punish inmates or to represent or develop identification with the institution. There was uniformity or standardization within each asylum, but not ‘a uniform’ in this sense. Indeed, the provision of standardized apparel was increasingly criticized and towards the end of the period representations were made (though not generally adopted) that patients should be allowed to wear their own clothes.

Prison uniforms had a punitive intention – convict clothing was often, from the 1860s, marked with arrows, stigmatizing the wearers and making them instantly recognisable

---

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Nathan Joseph, *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication through Clothing* (New York & London: Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 116.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Fussell, *Uniforms: Why We Are What We Wear* (Boston New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), p. 121. Asylum attendants, nurses and other staff often wore honorific uniforms. The role and meaning of staff clothing is extremely interesting but beyond the scope of this article; see Wynter, p.43, p.48.

should they escape.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, different colours and badges were used to distinguish between different categories of prisoner.<sup>29</sup> But asylum clothing was not directly intended as a punishment -- patients were widely represented as the 'victims' of a cruel affliction. Nor was it deliberately deployed to create a hierarchy among the patients, although there were effective and visible differences in provision for some categories of patient. At Hanwell in the 1860s, those wards where the patients were considered likely to dirty or tear their clothes were provided with the most worn clothing.<sup>30</sup> Also, some patients were put into 'strong dresses' (as shown in figure 1), made of very thick material and fastened at the back, to prevent them taking off or destroying their clothes. This was, theoretically, a means of management and a treatment rather than a punishment but it did mark out 'difficult' patients and was certainly open to overuse or abuse by ward staff. The Commissioners in Lunacy advised restricting its use.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Juliet Ash, *Dress Behind Bars: Prison Clothing as Criminality* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 38-39 and 49-50.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret De Lacy, *Prison Reform in Lancashire, 1700-1850: A Study in Local Administration* (Manchester: Printed for the Chetham Society, 1986), p. 101; Trevor May, *Victorian and Edwardian Prisons* (Buckinghamshire: Shire Publications, 2006), p. 27; Margaret Maynard, *Fashioned from Penury: Dress as a Cultural Practice in Colonial Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 20; Richmond, pp. 234-236.

<sup>30</sup> Hanwell Annual Report for 1868, especially p. 26, LMA, H11/HLL/A5/7.

<sup>31</sup> For example, *Commissioners in Lunacy: Fiftieth Report to the Lord Chancellor* (1896), p. 326; House of Commons Papers, Reports of Commissioners, (304) XXXIX.Pt.1.1. Hide finds that women were secluded (i.e. shut up in a room alone) more often than men, perhaps because direct violence was more willingly used by attendants on male wards; Hide, p. 306.

If anything, the authorities thought that standardized asylum clothing was a moral and physical improvement for many of the inmates. A basic minimum standard was imposed on all patients -- including the very poor and the unruly – and dress could be used to encourage behaviour that adhered to norms of working-class respectability. At Bristol Borough Asylum, for example, patients wore bowlers or bonnets when going outside for exercise, even if it was only into the airing courts just outside the wards.<sup>32</sup> The provision of Sunday clothes was much advocated and the desire for them was considered a sign of recovery.<sup>33</sup> The Commissioners in Lunacy noted approvingly in 1874 that all the male patients at Brookwood had a superior suit for Sundays.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, the clothing provided by asylums was often not substantially different from the kind of clothes worn by nineteenth-century working men and women. A photograph of patients working in the fields at Brookwood in about 1870 shows men wearing trousers, shirts, and neckerchiefs in a very similar fashion to agricultural workers elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> (See

---

<sup>32</sup> *Life in a Lunatic Asylum: an Autobiographical Sketch* (London: Houlston & Wright, 1867), pp. 34-35 and 96. We have been able to identify the location of this anonymized account as Bristol Borough Asylum and the author as John Weston.

<sup>33</sup> John Conolly, 'Lectures on the Construction and Government of Lunatic Asylums, Supplementary to Clinical Lectures Delivered in the Middlesex Lunatic Asylum at Hanwell. Lecture III', *The Lancet*, 1 August 1846, p. 113.

<sup>34</sup> *Commissioners in Lunacy: Twenty-eighth Report to the Lord Chancellor* (1874), p. 215: House of Commons Papers, Reports of Commissioners (284) XXVII.1.

<sup>35</sup> Christobel Williams-Mitchell, *Dressed for the Job: The History of Occupational Costume* (Poole: Blandford Press, 1982), p. 83.

figure 2).<sup>36</sup> However, asylum dress did not always keep up with fashions ‘outside’. At Hanwell, until the mid 1860s or 70s, the men continued to wear the short, ‘round’, jackets that had been common working-men’s wear earlier in the century.<sup>37</sup> The women’s clothes were often made from fabrics such as prints, gingham, linen checks, or merino much used by working-class women elsewhere but the linsey and winsey (inexpensive wool and cotton or wool and linen cloths) used in the asylum became less common outside as the century progressed.<sup>38</sup> Figure 3 shows an 1891 photograph of a Hanwell female patient in the standard dress of the asylum.

Within the mental health fraternity (which never actually spoke with a single voice) there was increasing criticism of uniformity. John Connolly, was a very influential alienist in the 1840s and 50s, drawing on his experience as the superintendent at Hanwell from 1839-1844 and subsequently its visiting physician. He wrote that there were certain advantages in employing standardized dress: it identified escapees; and, especially with respect to male patients, presented a clean and orderly asylum.<sup>39</sup> But Conolly also agreed that there should be

---

<sup>36</sup> This particular picture appears to have been created as a record of asylum life, and may not have been seen by the patients. Elsewhere patients were sometimes shown their own photographs, in the hope of revealing the effect of their condition or giving them an image to aspire to. Peter Hamilton and Roger Hargreaves, *The Beautiful and the Damned: The Creation of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Photography* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2001), p.81.

<sup>37</sup> Maynard, p.16.

<sup>38</sup> Conolly, p. 116; *First Annual Report of the Committee of Visitors of the Surrey County Lunatic Asylum at Brookwood, 1868*, SHC, 3043/1/1/1/1, p. 36. Personal communication, Vivienne Richmond.

<sup>39</sup> Conolly, p. 116.

some latitude for the wearer's personal preferences, if only in the details: 'it is best, in regard to the handkerchiefs, and the covering for the head, to allow the patients to choose that colour or kind which they prefer.'<sup>40</sup> He considered that:

in numerous cases among the female patients, [standardization should] be wholly dispensed with. Many of the women should indeed be indulged in wearing neat articles of dress brought to them by their friends; there are even some whom it is impossible to soothe without this indulgence.<sup>41</sup>

Some thirty years later, Joseph Mortimer Granville (a doctor and popularising medical journalist), expounded at some length on the undesirability of uniformity. He saw a patient's clothing as providing a space for the development or reclamation of personal self-control and authority. Although he did not condone carelessness in dress, he argued that sane people had different preferences in dress and that idiosyncrasy was not necessarily a sign of madness. He pointed out that dressing inmates all alike in 'sombre garb, without variety, colour or ornament ...' was suggestive of long residence.<sup>42</sup> Granville criticized the clothes at Hanwell, pointing out that the women, in particular, might be helped by 'a little pride in dress'.<sup>43</sup> By the time he was writing, Hanwell was considered generally old-fashioned but Brookwood, which opened in 1867, represented newer developments in the field. Granville noted approvingly that the women there were dressed in a variety of colours and materials and that 'the depressing effect of a uniform, especially marked in the case of females, is wisely

---

<sup>40</sup> Conolly, p. 116.

<sup>41</sup> Conolly, p. 116.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Mortimer Granville, *The Care and Cure of the Insane* (London: Hardwick and Bogue, 1877), vol. 2, pp. 174-175.

<sup>43</sup> Granville, vol. 1, p. 80.

avoided'.<sup>44</sup> The fabrics of the men's clothes were also diverse.<sup>45</sup> Figure 4 shows a photograph of the women's day room at Long Grove; it was taken in the early twentieth century, but the women's clothing is along the same lines as that at Brookwood and Hanwell earlier on. The women are in standard dress, but there is some variety in colour. They have also been allowed to adorn their clothes with collars of different shapes and sizes, which may well be their own handiwork. As well as suggestions for more diversity in imposed dress, from the 1860s there were calls for pauper patients from middle-class backgrounds to be allowed their own clothes.<sup>46</sup> In a few instances at Brookwood this was granted as a reward for good behaviour.<sup>47</sup> By the 1890s, there were suggestions that all pauper patients, not just the middle-class or respectable ones, should be able to wear their own clothes if they could afford to do so.<sup>48</sup> In the second decade of the twentieth century this was put even more forcefully by Montagu Lomax, a doctor campaigning for thorough-going reform of asylums: 'Nothing is so destructive to an insane patient's self-respect as his deprivation of his own clothes ...'.<sup>49</sup> But this impassioned plea indicates that uniformity was still the reality; the early twentieth-

---

<sup>44</sup> Granville, vol. 1, p. 37.

<sup>45</sup> *First Annual Report of the Committee of Visitors of the Surrey County Lunatic Asylum at Brookwood*, 1868, SHC, 3043/1/1/1/1, p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> *Commissioners in Lunacy: Sixteenth Report to the Lord Chancellor* (1862), p. 147: House of Commons Papers, Reports of Commissioners (417) XXIII.1.

<sup>47</sup> Brookwood Asylum, House Committee Minutes, 1868-1872, SHC, 3043/1/2/5/1, 17 February 1871.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Mercier, *Lunatic Asylums: their Organisation and Management* (London: Charles Griffin, 1894), pp. 81-83.

<sup>49</sup> Montagu Lomax, *The Experiences of an Asylum Doctor, with Suggestions for Asylum and Lunacy Law Reform* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1921), pp. 57-58.

century management minutes for the London County Asylums show no intention of abandoning standard asylum dress.<sup>50</sup>

Uniformity was probably retained largely for practical reasons. Many patients would not have been able to afford to clothe themselves and there was always rate-payer pressure to keep the costs of provision down. After the initial kitting-out of a new asylum, much of the clothing, including shoes, was usually made in-house, by the patients, partly to provide the occupation that was considered (by managers, doctors and, sometimes, patients themselves) an important part of moral therapy.<sup>51</sup> But, importantly, it was also cheaper than buying goods in and asylums kept careful accounts of production.<sup>52</sup> This fostered standardization since it was easier to manage a limited range of patterns. Uniformity also supported the asylums' centralized laundering systems. All items were marked with the identity of the ward; patients wore the clothes that belonged to their ward and, within the ward, did not have their 'own' things.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> County of London, Long Grove Asylum, Minute Books, 1903-1911, LMA, LCC/MIN/01166-01174, *passim*.

<sup>51</sup> An overview of the development of therapeutic work is given here: Jennifer Laws, 'Crackpots and basket-cases: a history of therapeutic work and occupation,' *History of the Human Sciences*. 24 (2011) 2, 65-81. For details on such work in asylums the second half of the nineteenth century see Crompton, p.58; Marland, p.121.

<sup>52</sup> For example, *Reports of the Superintendent and Chaplain of Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum for the year 1864* (London: HMSO, 1865), p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> *Regulations and Orders for the Management and Conduct of the Pauper Lunatic Asylum for the County of Middlesex, Hanwell, 1869*, LMA, H11/HLL/A9/6, p. 17; *Life in a Lunatic Asylum*, p. 50.

Patients' clothing was, then, intended as part of the treatment regime, and not as either an honorific or a stigmatizing 'uniform'. It was, however, standardized and continued to be so, in spite of increasing calls for variety and even for the relaxation of imposed dress. But if there were professional disagreements on the matter, what did the patients feel and what was it actually like to wear asylum dress?

## **2. Dress as a source of comfort? The patients' view**

It was widely understood that the physical debility brought about by poverty, cold and hunger predisposed people to mental illness.<sup>54</sup> Treatment therefore involved strengthening the body, partly through diet and partly by providing clothing that was warm, clean and suited to the patient's needs and activities.<sup>55</sup> For some -- perhaps many -- the new attire was undoubtedly better quality than their own.<sup>56</sup> It might indeed have been a source of the 'comfort' that Conolly attributed to it.<sup>57</sup> But first-hand accounts of asylum life and incidents reported in case-books or management minutes show that it could also be a source of discomfort, discontent and conflict.

Patients' clothing was seen as a source of a source of danger: items such as apron strings and braces could be -- and were -- used in suicide; and patients could conceal weapons, to be used either against themselves or others, in their clothing. For these reasons, clothes were under surveillance, especially at night, when patients had more opportunity to attempt self-harm. At Hanwell in the 1840s patients' clothes were generally to be taken out of

---

<sup>54</sup> Smith, *'Cure, Comfort and Safe Custody'*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>55</sup> Conolly, p. 116.

<sup>56</sup> P. Bartlett, 'The Asylum, the Workhouse, and the Voice of the Insane Poor in Nineteenth-Century England' *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 21 (1998) 4, 421-432, p. 428.

<sup>57</sup> Conolly, p. 116.

the bed-rooms, wrapped up, and placed outside the door of each room.<sup>58</sup> A similar system at Bristol was much resented by a patient who wrote about his experiences there in the 1860s.<sup>59</sup> In the 1870s, Granville argued against this procedure, which was apparently in general use at least for patients considered at risk of suicide, on the grounds that it was demeaning and showed distrust.<sup>60</sup>

A rigid insistence on time-tabled dressing and undressing was another area for conflict, sometimes violent. As part of moral therapy, it was usually required that patients be up and dressed by a certain time.<sup>61</sup> The 1894 regulations for London County asylums ordered that: ‘The patients shall be induced, and if necessary, instructed to wash and dress themselves, and to keep their persons clean and in good order, and generally they shall be induced to exercise self-control’.<sup>62</sup> The means of inducement and instruction, however, were not stipulated and there is evidence that this could be heavy handed. Ernest Parley was a ward attendant in a public asylum during World War One and subsequently campaigned for changes in the system. He hinted at the sometimes violent methods used: ‘The men up, washed and dressed with or without assistance and bullying as the case may be ...’.<sup>63</sup> This

---

<sup>58</sup> *Manual of the Duties of the Ward Attendants at the Middlesex Lunatic Asylum Hanwell, October 1846*, LMA, H11/HLL/A9/2, p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> *Life in a Lunatic Asylum*, pp. 15-18.

<sup>60</sup> Granville, vol. 1, p. 361.

<sup>61</sup> *Rules for the Guidance of the Attendants, Servants, and all Persons Engaged in the Service of the Surrey County Asylum at Brookwood, near Woking Station. 1871*, SHC, 3043/1/3/1/2, p. 14.

<sup>62</sup> *London County Asylums. General Rules. 1894*, LMA, H11/HLL/A9/10, p. 20.

<sup>63</sup> Ernest Parley, ex-attendant, *Life in a Madhouse* (London: The Independent Labour Party, 1920), p. 6.

hint is confirmed by incidents discussed by the Long Grove management committee. There was, for example, an investigation in 1908 of the probable fracture of a rib of a sixty-seven-year-old patient. He had been ordered by the Medical Officer to remain in bed, but, through a misunderstanding, he was allowed his clothes and began to dress. When the attendant realized the mistake and asked him to undress, the patient refused. The attendant, seeing that force would be necessary, called for assistance and a struggle ensued. The committee was unable to determine who had attacked whom and whether there was an intentional violent blow. But, whatever actually happened, they never disputed that if someone refused to take their clothes off, force -- though not violence -- would be needed.<sup>64</sup>

Patients complained about the style and quality of the clothing, belying the professional rhetoric. Conolly himself reported in the 1840s that many of the Hanwell male patients, on first admission, objected to the short jackets provided; he agreed that short coats would be more becoming -- and, we might think, more like up-to-date working-class garb.<sup>65</sup> He also noted that some of the female patients complained about their skin being irritated by the coarse linen used for undergarments. *Ten Years in a Lunatic Asylum*, published in about 1863, is a highly melodramatic novel but its pseudonymous female author had actually spent time in the West Yorkshire Pauper Asylum.<sup>66</sup> The genteel narrator tells of her arrival at a public asylum: ‘The dress was coarse and ugly enough, and the rough linen hurt my tender

---

<sup>64</sup> County of London, Long Grove Asylum, Minute Book, 1907-8, LMA, LCC/MIN/01168, pp. 316-8.

<sup>65</sup> Conolly, p. 116.

<sup>66</sup> Mabel Etchell, *Ten Years in a Lunatic Asylum* (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., c.1863); Hester Parr and Chris Philo, ‘Mapping “Mad” Identities’ in *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation*, ed. by Stephen Pile and Nigel Thrift (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 182-207.

skin; then the great heavy boots ...'.<sup>67</sup> There were also objections to the inadequacy of clothing. John Weston, a patient at Bristol in the 1860s, wrote about freezing in winter.<sup>68</sup>

Lomax recalled that patients at Prestwich Asylum during World War One were not allowed to wear overcoats.<sup>69</sup> He also discussed lack of fit:

Scores of cases of blistered heels and inflamed toes and festered corns are caused every year by the roughly made and badly fitting boots which the patients are compelled to wear. This is one of the minor evils of asylum life ... But minor though it is, it is not negligible, and could be mitigated by allowing the patients to wear their own boots as long as possible, and when they could no longer afford this, by taking more trouble to fit the boots to the wearer instead of the wearer to the boots. ... a constant source of discomfort and minor misery.<sup>70</sup>

In 1908 the Bermondsey Guardians visited asylum patients supported by their parish, reporting in dismay that:

[i]n a great number of cases, especially in Long Grove, we noticed that the clothes did not fit the people. We consider that although the patients are insane they still have a certain amount of self respect and if clothed in garments which fitted them it would greatly forward their recovery.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Etchell, p. 300.

<sup>68</sup> *Life in a Lunatic Asylum*, p. 62.

<sup>69</sup> Lomax, pp. 59-60.

<sup>70</sup> Lomax, p. 105.

<sup>71</sup> County of London, Long Grove Asylum, Minute Book, 1907-8, LMA, LCC/MIN/01168, p. 71.

The material discomfort caused by badly fitting, scratchy clothing could be a constant bodily reminder of its presence and its associations. Critical inmates and outsiders often likened asylum clothing to prison attire.<sup>72</sup> And, as Hide has made clear, clothing within the asylum was often associated with the humiliations of pauperisation.<sup>73</sup> County and borough asylums actually contained a broad social mix.<sup>74</sup> Many patients had, prior to their admission, not been in receipt of parish relief but, if they or their families could not afford the costs of institutional care, they entered a public asylum and their maintenance was paid for by their parish or union or county. At this point they were classified as paupers. Unlike private patients, who were allowed to wear their own clothes, they were obliged, as were paupers in the workhouse, to wear institutional garb.<sup>75</sup> It was widely agreed at the time that this was a distressing situation for those patients who had formerly held more elevated social positions.<sup>76</sup> Not only did such people have to associate with paupers but they had to dress in a way that made it clear that they were paupers themselves. This was a disgrace, and so was certification as a lunatic. It was a double stigma, made manifest in their clothing. This

---

<sup>72</sup> Lomax, Granville, Weston?

<sup>73</sup> Hide, pp.195 and 197.

<sup>74</sup> Melling and Forsythe, p. 154; Anne Shepherd, 'The Public and Private Institutionalisation of the Insane in Late Nineteenth-century Surrey: Brookwood Asylum and Holloway Sanatorium' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Oxford Brookes University, 2009), pp. 137-139.

<sup>75</sup> For a discussion of workhouse dress see Clare Rose, *Making, Selling and Wearing Boys' Clothes in Late-Victorian England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp.33-39.

<sup>76</sup> *Commissioners in Lunacy: Twenty-third Report to the Lord Chancellor* (1868-9), p. 53: House of Commons Papers, Reports of Commissioners (321) XXVII.1. Also see *House of Commons Debate, 8 June 1880, vol. 252 cc1472-96, 1473.*

emerges very clearly in *Life in a Lunatic Asylum*.<sup>77</sup> Its author, John Weston, considered his asylum clothing to be demeaning and inadequate but, more than that, it certified, pauperised and even unmanned him. It was only when he was finally discharged that he felt able to throw off the institutional identity that was made manifest in his dress: ‘...the Master directed me to get ready by changing my attire. Thus prepared, by putting off the pauper, and once more putting on the man’ he waited for his release.<sup>78</sup>

### 3. Finding Comfort in Small Things: Patient Dress and the Possibilities of Agency

Joseph points out that ‘the precision and explicitness of the uniform makes even small departures from the norm obvious and meaningful to both wearers and audiences’.<sup>79</sup> And, as many experts on dress have remarked, the presence of a uniform, imposed by an institution, is likely to give rise to resistance. Margaret Maynard has found that in the Australian penal colonies, in the 1840s, women forced to labour in factories expressed their dissent by flouting dress rules, wearing bright scarves and earrings.<sup>80</sup> However, it difficult to know the extent to which we can interpret asylum patients’ deviation in dress as oppositional resistance to the regime since many inmates were suffering from various forms of mental illness.<sup>81</sup> In his study of the early-nineteenth-century asylum, Leonard Smith has found that the tearing of clothes was quite common, both before and after admission. It was a well-known signal of

---

<sup>77</sup> Richmond, p. 252.

<sup>78</sup> *Life in a Lunatic Asylum*, p. 100.

<sup>79</sup> Joseph, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Maynard, p. 25.

<sup>81</sup> Although Hide has shown that many patients *did* resist the asylum in many ways -- especially through everyday gestures such as refusal of, or complaints about, food; Hide, pp. 307-311.

grief or distress and ‘[f]or the poor, clothing was a valuable commodity; its destruction was a gesture expressing a degree of desperation close to suicide’. He points out that it was mostly among female patients that it was regarded as a major element in the pathology; we might suppose that this is because it was considered a woman’s normal role to care for clothing.<sup>82</sup> The destruction of clothing was still common in our period. So was stripping and exposing, which Richmond has interpreted in the prison context as a form of resistance, most frequently -- because of its shock value -- employed by women.<sup>83</sup> Granville, for one, appears to have understood such destruction as a deliberate act and a response to the clothing imposed by the asylum.<sup>84</sup> However, in this final section of the article, we move away from the question of the use of dress in resistance to the institution, and instead consider the broader idea of the space it provided for agency. What was the role of small items in facilitating basic independence for patients, and to what extent could dress allow self-fashioning within the institution?

Although asylums took patients’ belongings away from them, they were careful to log and document small things, where possible giving them back. The ward attendants at Hanwell were cautioned: ‘... any books or trifling ornaments on which the patient sets a value and which cannot be used for mischievous purposes to be kept for them and, if permitted by the Medical Officers or Matron, allowed to remain in the Patient’s possession.’<sup>85</sup> Such items included purses, rings, brooches, knives, spectacles and false teeth. Some of these were potentially harmful items and, since new admissions were generally considered a suicide risk, were often kept away from patients, at least for a while. But the

---

<sup>82</sup> Smith, p. 99.

<sup>83</sup> Richmond, p. 242.

<sup>84</sup> Granville, vol. 2, p. 175.

<sup>85</sup> *Manual of the Duties of the Ward Attendants at the Middlesex Lunatic Asylum Hanwell, October 1846*, LMA, H11/HLL/A9/2, p. 11.

presence of some of these items was crucial in the basic day-to-day agency of patients -- they could be essential for movement, sight and eating. When Sophia S., a sixty-seven-year-old widow, was admitted to Brookwood in 1908 she was diagnosed with 'recent melancholia'. Perhaps because people with melancholia were considered liable to self-harm, a month after admission her spectacles and wedding ring had still not been returned to her. For the large majority of individual patients, we have no way of knowing their response to being denuded of the items of their previous life but, in Mrs. S.'s case, there is a letter from her son that directly reports her feelings:

she informed me that her spectacles & wedding ring had been taken away from her, which greatly upset her -- I now write to ask you if you would be kind enough to have these articles returned to her, as she will then be greatly relieved in her mind. -- If her spectacles are returned she will then be able to read & partly amuse herself, as she told us the time seems so long & she does not know what to do with herself. She has been a very active woman all her life & to have these things denied her is worse than everything & in my humble opinion is calculated to make her worse.<sup>86</sup>

Nor were false teeth trivial or simply cosmetic. In 1907 the management committee of Long Grove devoted a portion of no less than three meetings to discussing whether a patient whose teeth had been stolen from her could be given a replacement set.<sup>87</sup> A patient who afterwards wrote a critical campaigning account of her experiences in a private asylum recalled how glad she was when her false teeth, which had been left at her previous rest home, were forwarded to her, enabling her finally to eat properly. She also wrote about a fellow patient who was not allowed her teeth until she was transferred to the convalescent ward, after eighteen months in

---

<sup>86</sup> Brookwood Asylum, Female Case-book, July 1908-July 1909, SHC, 3043/5/9/2/36, case 1.

<sup>87</sup> County of London, Long Grove Asylum, Minute Book, 1906-7, LMA, LCC/MIN/01167, pp. 130, 173 and 208.

the asylum.<sup>88</sup> This is an example of the tension that could arise between different elements of moral management: the prevention of self-harm without the use physical restraints, such as tying the hands, and instead removing the patient from anything potentially harmful (in this instance, false teeth) could nonetheless result in making it difficult for a patient to take the nourishment that was considered essential for gaining physical and mental strength or to eat in a socially acceptable manner, especially with food that was tough -- as asylum meat often was.

The arrangement of patients' hair was partly dictated by health and hygiene and it was sometimes shaved if they had lice or if they pulled it out.<sup>89</sup> But hair, both on the head and the face, could also be an opportunity for self-fashioning. Weston recalled that his flowing beard and hair were cut on admission to Bristol Asylum in the 1860s but the insistence on shaving appears to have been on the decline during the century.<sup>90</sup> The Brookwood regulations of 1871 stated that patients who wished to cultivate a beard could do so, though it had to be kept scrupulously clean and tidy; female patients' hair was not to be materially shortened.<sup>91</sup> Photographs of patients working in the fields at Brookwood [figure 2] and in the case-books at Hanwell [figure 5] in the 1890s show a considerable variety of facial and head hair.

It is hard to assess the extent to which patients could achieve control over their clothing. Weston described this as being very limited. He was a resourceful person and managed to negotiate a degree of personal freedom within the asylum, by accommodation

---

<sup>88</sup> Marcia Hamilcar, *Legally Dead. Experiences during Seventeen Weeks' Detention in a Private Asylum* (London: John Ouseley, 1910), pp. 182-183 and 278.

<sup>89</sup> Hide, p. 234.

<sup>90</sup> *Life in a Lunatic Asylum*, p. 15.

<sup>91</sup> *Rules for the Guidance of Attendants, Servants and all Persons Engaged in the Service of the Surrey County Asylum at Brookwood, 1871*, SHC, 3043/1/3/1/2, p. 40.

rather than resistance. But all he managed to do as far as his dress was concerned was to get a needle and thread to convert some of his bandages into drawers to keep himself warm.<sup>92</sup> On the other hand, there are numerous references, in published accounts and in case-books, showing some personalization being permitted. Hanwell was more austere than some other asylums but the Matron's report of 1869 describes a patient:

She was invited to drink tea with a lady in the village ... the quaint little figure ... was dressed with scrupulous neatness, in her gown of black merino, snowy white cap with a profusion of frilling, a square of black thrown carelessly over her head, for she never would wear a bonnet, and various crosses and beads suspended from her neck.<sup>93</sup>

The merino dress and the cap might well have been asylum 'best' wear but the crosses and beads were probably the patient's own (she was a devout Catholic). And her refusal to wear a bonnet, though commented on as odd, was nevertheless permitted.

Hanwell case-books photographs [figure 5] also suggest that there was an opportunity to use presentation and embellishment as a means of individual self-fashioning. The question of the extent to which such photographs can represent individual agency is fraught with difficulty. In general, there is an absence of documentation relating to asylum photography, which varied considerably in its extent, intention and method.<sup>94</sup> Such images were created within the power dynamic of the asylum and the act of taking a photograph might itself be a means of controlling or disciplining patients, although Katherine Rawling has argued that we

---

<sup>92</sup> *Life in a Lunatic Asylum*, p. 62.

<sup>93</sup> Annual Report, Hanwell Asylum, 1869, LMA, H11/HLL/A/05/008, pp. 43-44.

<sup>94</sup> Adrienne Burrows and Iwan Schumacher, *Portraits of the Insane: The Case of Dr Diamond* (London and New York: Quartet Books, 1990), p.2.

should not always see these photographs as repressive.<sup>95</sup> Carol Reeves has found that at Colney Hatch, another Middlesex County Asylum, discharged patients were photographed ‘coiffed and dressed for the occasion in borrowed finery’ (although patients were also photographed in asylum dress shortly after admission), but the Hanwell examples do not suggest special grooming.<sup>96</sup> The four men shown here, photographed in the 1890s, all wear standardized clothing but present themselves (or are represented) rather differently, with pose, hair, manner of dress, and kemptness making a significant difference. One of the patients has a flower in his buttonhole.

Many case-book entries show that there was scope for patients to add to their asylum dress in an *ad hoc* manner. Edward B., for example, admitted to Brookwood in 1879, was reported as ‘given to decorating himself with pieces of metal & buttons’.<sup>97</sup> He sometimes worked in the upholstery shop -- perhaps the source of his ornaments. There is no suggestion that he was prevented from modifying his asylum dress. Eccentricity of dress might be noted as an element of a patient’s pathology but it does not seem, on its own, to have been

---

<sup>95</sup> Katherine Dorothy Berry Rawling, ‘Visualising Mental Illness: Gender, Medicine and Visual Media c.1850-1910’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 2011), p. 192. For a further discussion of the role and purpose of patient photography in asylums see Burrows and Schumacher, *Portraits of the Insane*; Sander L. Gilman (ed.), *The Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography* (Secaucus, New Jersey: The Citadel Press, 1977).

<sup>96</sup> Carole Anne Reeves, ‘Insanity and Nervous Diseases Among Jewish Immigrants to the East End of London, 1880-1920’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 2001), p.45.

<sup>97</sup> Brookwood Asylum, Male Case-book, May 1878-April 1880, SHC, 3043/5/9/1/10, fol. 161 and following.

considered an absolute marker of insanity. One very long-standing Brookwood case, admitted in 1867, who was noted as ‘dressing herself rather fantastically’ and as ‘fond of dressing in finery wears sandals &c’, was nonetheless discharged recovered.<sup>98</sup> This patient's sartorial decisions may have been driven by a desire to rebel against the austere material world of the asylum -- but we can certainly say that patients were at least allowed to express themselves through small modifications to their dress. *Ten Years in a Lunatic Asylum*, with its fictionalised account of a public asylum in the late 1850s, suggests that patients could not wear real jewellery but could nonetheless make substitutes. When the narrator admired the hair chain and jet bracelets of one of her asylum friends she was disabused -- ‘Did not I know that no ornaments were allowed?’. The jet was actually laburnum seeds worked into chains.<sup>99</sup> As already noted, case-books give many examples of patients making their own decorations.

However, records from Brookwood show that some pauper patients were probably allowed to wear their own ornaments such as rings, brooches and ear-rings, provided it was considered safe. Jewellery could be a vital (if small) means of self-fashioning -- especially if we remember that nineteenth-century women's jewellery was often imbued with sentimental meaning and was frequently marked out, by the middle classes at least, for transmission to the next female generation.<sup>100</sup> And the wedding ring had perhaps more capacity than any other item of dress to retain sentimental meanings and allow the wearer to continue feeling connected to their past life and relationships.

---

<sup>98</sup> Brookwood Asylum, Female Case-book, June 1867-July 1868, SHC, 3043/5/9/2/1, fol. 28 and following.

<sup>99</sup> Etchell, p. 336.

<sup>100</sup> Jane Hamlett, *Material Relations: Middle-Class Families and Domestic Interiors in England, 1850-1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 193.

In conclusion, our examination of pauper patient dress in asylums in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century England reveals that while publicly-funded patients were required to wear standard apparel, it was not intended as a uniform in the sense in which this is usually understood. The asylum authorities did not seek to punish through dress. In fact, in some cases they aimed to raise patients to a basic standard of clean, neat clothes that, it was hoped, would improve their behaviour and assist recovery. Such dress was often not substantially different in style and material to ordinary working-class clothing, although perhaps rather outdated. There was even a growing awareness, among some asylum authorities and commentators, that variety in dress was beneficial and that an increased interest in personal appearance might aid recovery. Nonetheless, although there were some calls for pauper patients to be allowed to wear their own clothes, within the economy of mass provision in the public asylum this was ultimately impractical and most publicly-funded patients wore the standard dress provided by the asylum throughout the period in question.

Although asylum clothing might have provided some comfort to the very impoverished, some patients were certainly angered and humiliated by the imposition. The dressing process itself could be the scene of conflicts, sometimes violent, between patients and attendants. Items often did not fit properly, and rough fabrics could be scratchy and uncomfortable. The physical irritation caused by these clothes would have been a constant reminder of their presence -- helping to create an ongoing awareness of the wearer's pauperism and insanity. Some patients also saw a similarity to prison dress. Rebellion against the imposition of such an identity may help to explain why clothes were wilfully destroyed -- although it is unclear whether we should see these acts as gestures of resistance, the products of mental illness, or a combination of the two.

Although the possessions of the patient were removed when they entered the asylum, they were carefully documented, and where possible, given back to the patient. Some items,

like spectacles and false teeth, could be vital to basic agency and independence. Moreover, small differences in dress could give patients access to some means of self-fashioning.

Goffman's 'identity toolkit' was not entirely absent from the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century asylum. Male and female patients were allowed different hair-styles, and men could wear their facial hair as they chose. The men could make small differences in their dress with the inclusion of button-holes or neck ties. Female patients were also sometimes allowed to wear jewellery -- and wedding rings were permitted. Few patients have left a record of their feelings about these things -- but we can certainly speculate that retaining such items allowed them to maintain a vital link with the outside world.

Word count including endnotes: 8917.

Word count excluding endnotes: 6621.

### **Figure Captions:**

Figure 1

A 'strong dress' from Brookwood Asylum, about 1890

Photograph © The Lightbox Gallery and Museum, Woking, Surrey

Figure 2

Photograph of male patients, with attendants, working in the fields at Brookwood Asylum, about 1875

SHC, 3043/Box 4/20/11

© Surrey History Centre

Figure 3

Photograph of a female patient in a case-book from Hanwell Asylum, 1891

LMA, H11/HLL/B/19/36, p.133

© City of London, London Metropolitan Archives

Figure 4

Photograph of a women's ward at Long Grove Asylum, 1910

LMA, 26.21 LON, 2314c

© City of London, London Metropolitan Archives

Figure 5

Photographs of four male patients from a case-book for Hanwell Asylum, 1893-4

LMA, H11/HLL/B/20/23, pp. 400, 402, 460, and 568

© City of London, London Metropolitan Archives