

Institutions of the past

Prior to 19th century when asylums were first established in Britain, many people who had mental health issues and were unable to be supported at home by family would end up in the workhouse, which was described as 'poor prison'. The government put in place the county asylums act of 1808, which led to them building asylums to house people who they considered 'lunatics'.

An asylum is defined as 'a hospital for people with mental illnesses' (Cambridge dictionary). They were at the time viewed as a place for people who needed refuge or further care, as were struggling with their mental health. However, this was often not the case in asylums and psychiatric hospitals of the past. Conditions were inhumane and patients were thought of as prisoners.

One of the most prolific asylums in Britain was Bethlem, also known as 'Bedlam', which was founded in London in 1247. The term was soon used to describe 'madness' itself.

Was this really a solution?

How do you think this was problematic?



*High Royds Hospital, Menston, Ilkley, Yorkshire: a corridor.
March 2004. Paul Digby. Pencil drawing,*

High Royds Psychiatric Hospital was built in 1888 and referred to at the time as a 'pauper lunatic asylum'. The asylum was built due to overcrowding in other West Riding Asylums based in Wakefield, Wadsley and Sheffield. Overcrowding truly illustrates the lack of care over living conditions and for people suffering in these institutions.

The label of a 'pauper lunatic asylum' reinforces this need to restrict and control patients, highlighting the lack of care and the poor opinion the public had at this time of people living with mental health. This was further reinforced by the inhumane treatment of the patients from restraining to beating, as though they were inmates.

Henry Maudsley English alienist from the 1800's distanced himself from asylums and their practices reflected on his view of such inhumane practices "I cannot help feeling, from my experience, that one effect of asylums is to make permanent lunatics."(Maudsley, 1871)

What impression did the image give you of psychiatric hospitals?

How do you think media has shaped your views and understanding of these facilities?

what does the word "asylum" make you think of?

When you first saw this cage, what did you think it was for?

This parrot cage was used by the Sussex 'Lunatic' Asylum between 1859 and 1939 as a way of caring for and treating long-term patients. The asylum hoped that by allowing the patients to care for and feed the parrots, and by creating a sense of responsibility, it would attempt to restore a sense of positivity to the patients.



*Parrot Cage, Sussex Lunatic Asylum
1859-1939*

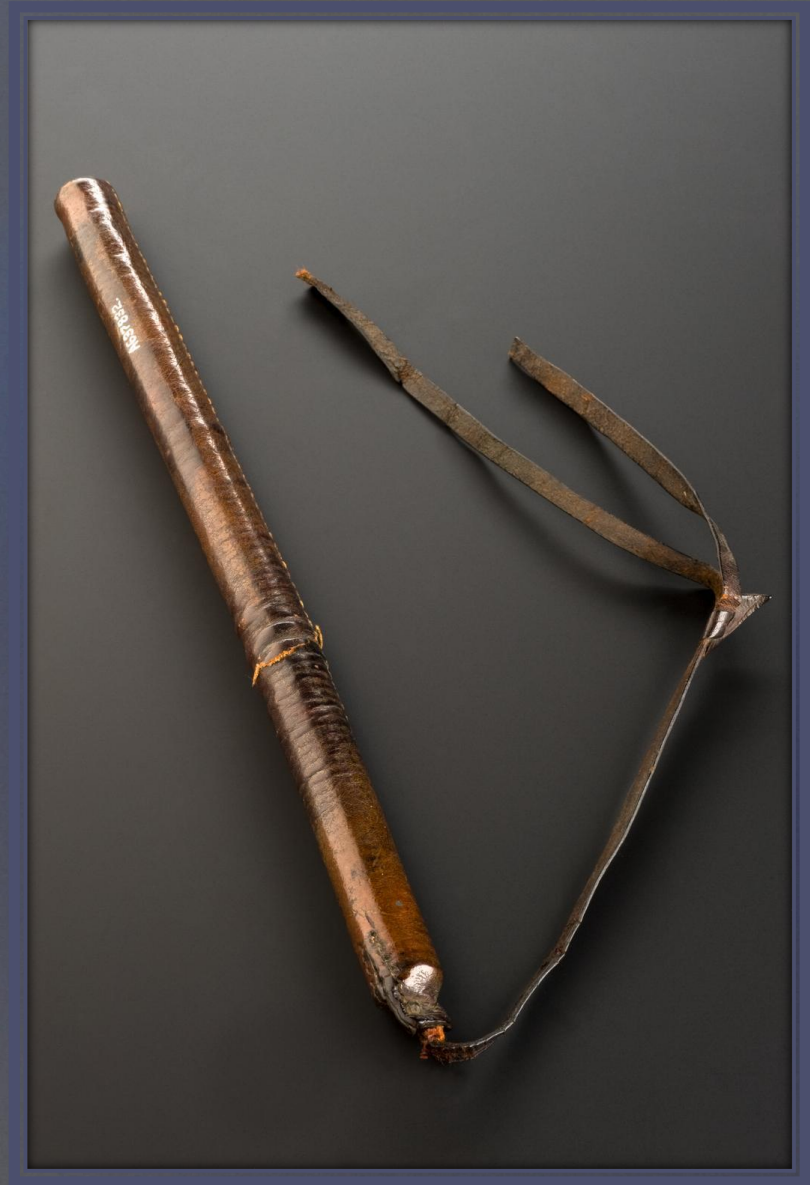


This is a straitjacket used to restrain adult psychiatric patients. It was used at Frenchay Hospital, Bristol in the 1930s and 1960s. Made of heavy canvas, the straitjacket was designed with straps to restrict the movement of patients who were considered violent or unruly.

This was slowly phased out when more humane and scientific methods of management were introduced.

*Canvas straitjacket for restraining adult patients.
Used in Frenchay Hospital, Bristol
London, England. 1930-1960*

This is a Leather Truncheon for restraining, secluding and subduing the mentally ill. As can be seen by the picture it is made of leather covered springs and has broken off near the handle. This was the 'treatment' used at Narborough Mental Asylum in the early twentieth century, during which time there was little other psychiatric treatment available.



*Leather Truncheon
Narborough Mental Asylum, 1901-1930*