

A Brief History of Bethlem Royal Hospital

Beginnings

Bethlem was not founded as a hospital at all. In 1247 Simon Fitzmary, an Alderman of the City of London founded a priory of the Church of St Mary of Bethlehem to serve knights setting off to the Holy Land.

By 1329 it was already being referred to as a hospital and in 1403 there is the first evidence of the hospital being used to house the insane. Bethlem took patients from all over the country, mainly from the poor. Patients were admitted with the expectation that they would be cured but those who didn't recover might stay for many years. A list of patients from 1598 includes one woman who had been in Bethlem for 25 years. Those looking after them would have been largely untrained and it was not until 1634 that the hospital employed a regular physician.

Moorfields

By the second half of the 17th century, new premises were needed and a new hospital was built at Moorfields with space for 120 patients. Great attention was paid to the design of the building with iron railings surrounding it so it would be noticed by passers-by.

On the inside, there were two galleries running the length of the building with an iron grille in the middle separating the male and female quarters. The galleries formed the day rooms for those patients who were well enough and individual rooms opened off them. In addition there were two external exercise yards surrounded by high walls. Violent or dangerous patients were kept locked in their rooms. Sightseers also used the galleries. This practice was only ended in 1770. There was some provision for those who were incurable and could not be cared for by their family but generally patients stayed for a year or less.



St George's Fields

By 1800, the hospital at Moorfields was in need of repairs considered too extensive and costly. The hospital opened on a new site in south London in 1815. Part of the building still stands today and houses the Imperial War Museum. It was designed to house 400 patients but only took half this number at first.

