

HOW IT ALL BEGAN....

A brief history of Leavesden Hospital written in 1971 by Paddy Landon

Prior to 1867 there was no refuge for the mentally defective in the London area, other than workhouses and similar institutions where they were housed with inmates of all types. They were the responsibility of thirty separate Boards of Guardians of the Poor who, being uncoordinated and with varying needs and resources, could not cope adequately with London as a whole.

The Metropolitan Poor Act was passed in 1867. 'An Act for the Establishment in the Metropolis of Asylums for the Sick, Insane and other classes of the Poor, and of Dispenseries; and for the Distribution over the Metropolis of Portions of the Charge for Poor Relief; and for other purposes relating to Poor Relief in the Metropolis'.

The Act was introduced by Gathorne Hardy, First Earl of Cranbrook (1814-1906), when he was President of the Poor Law Board. This pilot scheme proved to be the most important poor law measure for London between 1834 and 1929 and a significant step towards the socialisation of medical care in this country.

This Act brought into being the Metropolitan Asylums Board, MAB, who were advised that two asylums would be required each to house 1,500 patients. The particular patients would come from the mentally afflicted - the 'idiotic, chronic and harmless patients' for whom the only refuge available were the London workhouses.

A Sub-Committee was set up by the Board and their first meeting was held at Westminster Chambers on 31st July 1867. The members were Dr Brewer, Dr Cortes, Dr Griffiths, Mr Turner, Mr Wilkinson, Mr Talbot and Mr Wyatt, who was elected Chairman. This Committee dealt with the planning of the asylums and later were responsible for the running of them when they opened.

They were charged to report to the Board the number of insane patients for who accommodation was required and the mode, in the opinion of the Committee, by which accommodation could be most efficiently provided.

Prompt action followed, it was recommended to the Board that two sites be obtained for the erection of asylums one on the north side of the Thames and one on the south side, and that the sites were of not less than 20 acres and should be within a radius of 20 miles from Charing Cross and near a railway station.

Sites were advertised for and the report on the Leavesden site is recorded as follows: 'Situated 3 miles from Watford and 1½ miles from Kings Langley Stations to both of which are numerous trains. This site appears to us in many respects eligible. The land lies high on a mixed soil of gravel and chalk. The shape of the land being very suitable for the erection of an asylum, etc.' It then goes on to say that the price asked for the land was £120 per acre and they thought about 65 acres should be bought.

Eventually, 76 acres were purchased from Mr Trotter for £7,600; the sum of £219.12s.6d. was also paid to him, being the amount payable for the tenants' tillages.

The architects selected from those who applied and submitted estimates were Messrs Giles and Birvan whose estimate was £67,700 but in committee on 22nd April 1868 they reported on suggestions and alterations put forward by the Board which increased this figure.

Draft estimates covering the proposed building, furniture, bedding, clothing, etc were considered and we find recorded in the minutes that it was resolved "That having under consideration the probable cost of the proposed asylum, from the best information the Committee have been able to obtain, the estimates are:

	£
Building	85,000
Well and Chimney	3,000
Fixtures and Fittings	4,000
Furniture and Bedding	15,000
Clothing	3,000
Drainage, Water Tanks and Gas Mains	2,500
Gas House, etc	1,000
Laying out, Planting and Stocking Grounds	2,500
Farm Buildings	1,500
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	£117,500
Add Architects' Fees	3,000
Clerk of Works	500
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Making a total of	£121,000
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Prices which were proposed for the making up of Linen, Clothing, etc for the Asylum were:

	£	s.d.
Linen and Bedding for inmates	8,471.	12.2
" " " " attendants	538.	2.6
" " Clothing Male inmates	2,020.	10.0
" " " Fem. "	2,740.	6.9
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	£13,770.	11.5
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On 25th September 1868 it was agreed by the Committee "That the Foundation Stone of the Asylum be laid on Saturday, 31st October 1868 and that the Chairman of the Board be invited to perform the ceremony and that the following be invited to be present:-

- The Bishop of the Diocese
- The President and Secretary of the Poor Law Board
- The Poor Law Inspector and Mr Hugh Owen
- The Vicar and Rural Dean, Leavesden and Abbots Langley
- Ten or Twelve of the principal inhabitants of the neighbourhood of the Asylum
- The Chairman of the Metropolitan Board of Works
- The Engineer, Contractor, Architects and Officers
- Six reporters

The cost of Lithographing the Building for the use of the visitors on the laying of the stone cost £2.12s.6d. for 150 copies. Other expenses were:-

	£	s.	d.
L.N.W.R. Special train	36.	18.	0.
Brooke & Son for trowel, mallet, etc	10.	10.	0.
Wiffen for conveyances from London	17.	15.	0.
Morgan for conveyances from Watford	17.	03.	0.
Wyman & Co. - other sundries	5.	04.	0.

The actual construction of the Asylum was carried out by a contractor, Mr Henshaw, who apparently ran into some trouble early on as it is minuted, on 2nd December 1868, "That it was reported that the contractor had assigned his property to Trustees for the benefit of his creditors and that the works had been entirely stopped, a Deed of Assignment having been exhibited to the Committee by Messrs. Ashhurst."

It was also in the same minutes that it was desirable to take out a fire insurance to cover damage during construction.

At a meeting of the Committee, 17th March 1869, it was reported that there were only 18 bricklayers employed that week which was 50 less than the previous week and other men had been reduced in proportion. The total number of men employed that week was only 159 against 258 the previous week. It was considered that the falling off in the supply of bricks was the cause, as nearly all the bricks had been used up.

On 21st May 1870, the Committee examined the progress made with the several works under contract and reported that they were proceeding fairly well.

Despite these setbacks, on 4th January 1871 Messrs. Giles and Birven, the Architects, wrote to the Committee enclosing the account of Mr Henshaw for the Building Contract which they had carefully examined and certified as correct. The letter stated that the entire excess in the contract was £187.14.7d. "which, they trust, the Committee will think satisfactory."

The second Asylum, to be built on the south side of the Thames, was being erected at the same time, at Caterham, Surrey. It was virtually identical to the one at Leavesden and is now known as St. Lawrence's Hospital.

The Leavesden Asylum comprised four blocks for males, known up to recently as 4's, 6's, 8's and 10's, and five blocks for females, 3's, 5's, 7's, 9's and 11's, and built in such a way that on either side at a distance of more than 100 feet were the long corridors as we now know them extending north and south giving access to the blocks. The Infirmarys were placed at the southern extremities of each corridor and became 1's block for females and 2's block for males.

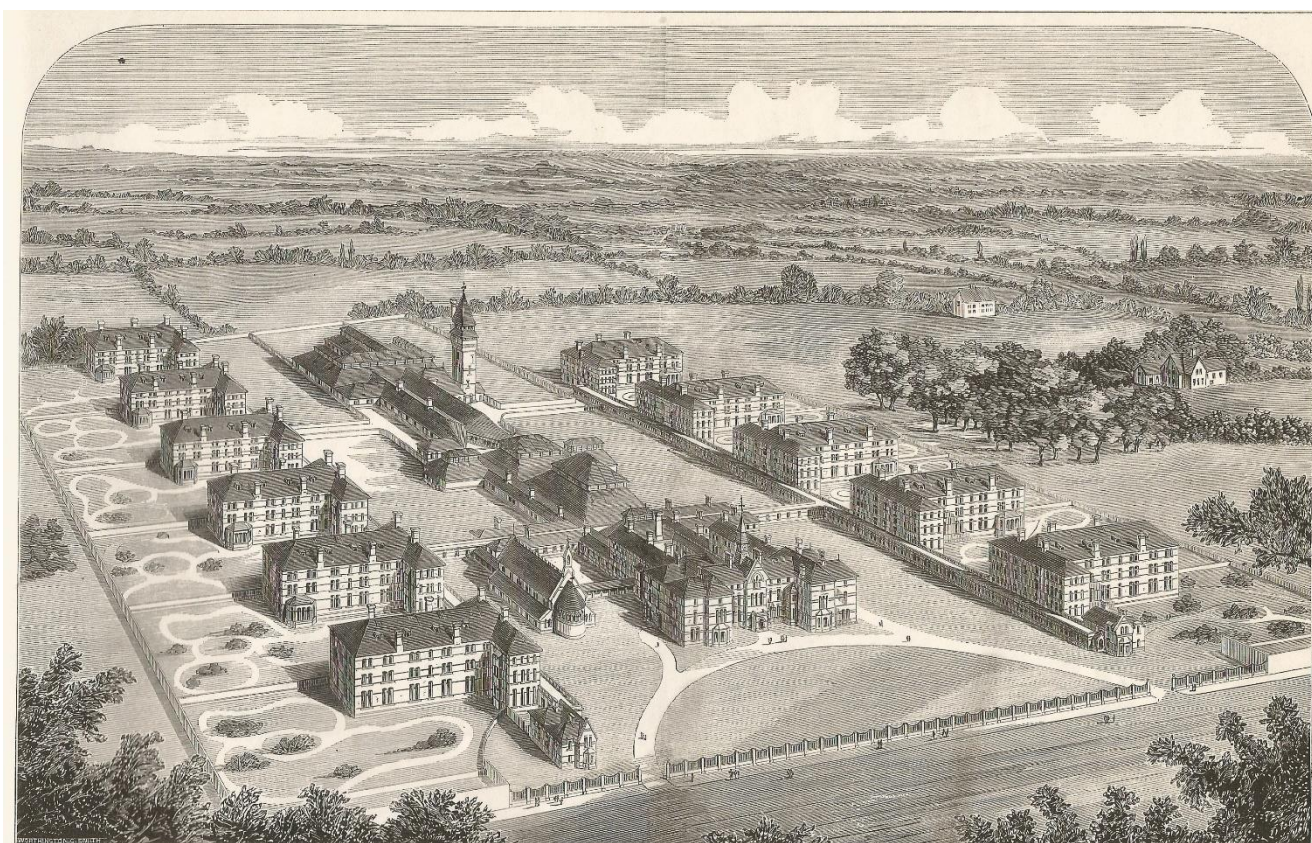
The blocks, other than the Infirmarys, were constructed on precisely the same plan in every respect and each block comprised three storeys, as today. Each block was intended for 160 inmates. The ground floors had a large dayroom, 105 feet long, 36 feet wide and 14 feet high. Near the entrances and conveniently arranged were the sculleries, store-rooms, lavatories and closets, dry earth being used in the closets on the ground floor and water on the upper storeys. The lavatories measured 20 feet by 7 feet.

The first and second floors were divided in the centre by dwarf iron partitions and iron columns, which formed four long dormitories in each block, each containing 40 beds. Also on each floor were rooms for the attendants, lavatories, closets, etc. and a single room. The 'attendants' room measured $16\frac{1}{2}$ feet by 7 feet.

The Infirmary rooms were constructed narrower than in the other blocks but were the same length. Each floor formed a separate ward and the rooms were used for living in as well as sleeping in and contained 30 beds. They had two rooms for attendants, four single rooms, kitchen, bathroom, scullery, water closets.

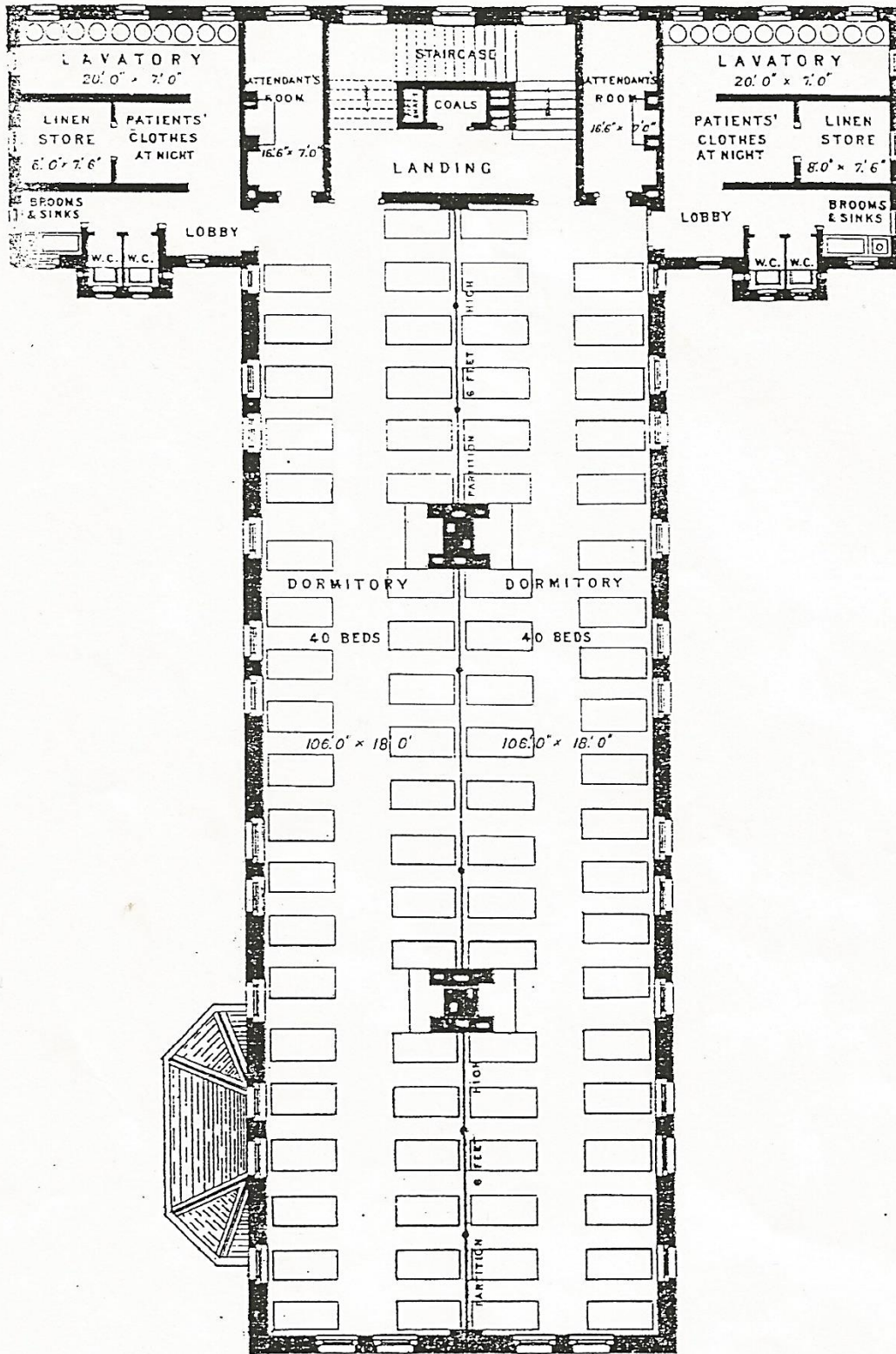
Open fireplaces in the centre of the day rooms formed the only means of heating the larger rooms, but the single rooms in the Infirmaries were artificially heated. The bathrooms and washing places were said to be extremely cold in winter.

There were baths in the Infirmaries but no baths in the ordinary blocks. The inmates, both male and female, used general bathhouses, each containing 10 copper baths and were, in fact, the buildings now used by the Finance Office on the Female side and the Industrial Painter and Industrial Carpenters on the Male side. It was soon found that these bathhouses were too small and the dressing rooms attached inadequate and inconvenient.



PROPOSED ASYLUM FOR IMBECILE POOR AT LEAVESDEN WOODSIDE, NEAR WATFORD; AND AT CATERHAM, NEAR CROYDON.—MESSRS. JOHN GILES & BIVEN, ARCHITECTS.

Caterham Asylum, 1870, built at the same time as Leavesden Asylum, and to the same plans. The above print gives a good impression of Leavesden as it originally was. Caterham is now re-named St Lawrence's Hospital. (With acknowledgements to the Wellcome Institute of History of Medicine).



First floor plan of the general blocks at Leavesden Asylum as they were when originally built in 1870. The second floor was exactly the same as the first floor and both were used as the dormitories, the ground floors being used as the dayrooms.

The Laundry too was considered not well arranged and in some departments provision for the washing and drying of clothes inadequate. Improvements were made subsequently.

There was no general dining and recreation room provided but the Laundry was occasionally used for purposes of associated amusement. One of the female wards was used for a weekly dance at which about 160 inmates of each sex generally attended.

Each block had its own airing court, being considered of ample size. They were neatly laid out and enclosed by oak park paling fences.

The Sunday services in the Chapel were attended by 200 men and 250 women and about half this number attended weekday services. There was held a special weekday service for epileptic inmates, organised by the Chaplain, to prevent the interruption and disturbance which was feared might arise due to the occurrence of fits during the ordinary services.

Staff were interviewed and appointed and, without giving the individual names, included Medical Superintendent, Assistant Medical Officers, Matron, Assistant Matrons, Inspector, Steward, Head Attendants, Male and Female, Attendants Man and Wife, Ordinary attendants, Male and Female, 1st and 2nd Class. Also Chaplain, Resident Engineer, Gate Porter, Hall Porter, Clerks.

Restrictions on the staff would not be tolerated today. For instance, gas to be turned off in the Attendants' sitting rooms at 10.30p.m. and in their bedrooms at 10.40p.m." If found lighted after that time a fine of 6d. was imposed.

The uniform provided for the male Attendants was prison made in light brown double twill and remained the property of the Asylum until it had had twelve months use when, minus the buttons and badge, it was the property of the wearer. Overcoats remained the property of the Asylum. Officials received certain allowances of coal, milk and potatoes.

Subordinate officers were allowed to have one day off every four weeks with seven days' leave per annum after one year's service. They were allowed no visitors into the Asylum. Later, however, it was agreed "that married attendants and other servants employed be allowed to introduce their wives but no other stranger on any account to be permitted to be present" for which strict orders were given by the Steward to the Gate Porter. Incidentally, the Steward was instructed to provide a supper for those invited to be present, allowing a "reasonable quantity of Wine and Beer, but not Spirits."

It was also agreed that supper be provided for the Attendants who played in the band on the night of the Ball given to the Attendants and Servants and on other occasions, also that "The band be allowed one pint of beer per man when playing for the patients and on one night a week when practising."

Female Attendants were allowed half day extra leave a month from 2-8p.m. Apparently, bonnets and shawls were worn by the Female Attendants in the very early days for, in the Minutes of October 1870 is an entry "That bonnet strings for the inmates, bonnets and shawls for the nurses and inmates be obtained."

On one occasion some of the Attendants had brought pet birds into the Asylum when it was ordered "that no birds or animals be kept by the Attendants and Servants in the Asylum."

When first opened, a large proportion of the inmates were imbecile or demented from birth and as many as 325 were epileptic and included were 75 idiotic children. It would appear that however suitable the accommodation may have been for the classes for whom, by law, it had been provided, neither the building nor the staff were calculated for any but the most harmless and quiet cases and so an examination of individual patients was carried out to decide whether they were proper cases for detection and treatment in the Asylum. As a result of this examination it was concluded that there were some patients who were dangerous, violent or troublesome. It was evident that no proper care or security could be afforded either to the staff or the inmates in wards where the staff ratio was one to forty inmates.

It was considered that in a ward of 160 with only Attendants, a single troublesome or dangerous inmate would monopolize the care of one Attendant, throwing the charge of the other 159 inmates upon the other three.

After due consideration, orders were made for the removal of these patients, the men to Colney Hatch, now Friern, and the women to Camberwell House.

Regarding the power of detention of inmates, it was the practice of the Medical Superintendent after examination of the inmate to sign a certificate in accordance with Article 16, Poor Law Board dated 6th October 1870, stating that the inmate was not in a proper state to leave the Asylum without danger to himself.

The foundation stone of the Recreation Hall was laid in 1891 and presumably opened shortly afterwards.

In 1905, a new departure from the rules came into operation when resident staff were allowed to live out. About twenty nurses received this permission and the Medical Superintendent reported to the effect "that it was very favourable upon the health of the female staff who had this permission to live out."

There had been several epidemics of the disease, including Smallpox, Enteric Fever and Typhoid, which necessitated a reduction of numbers, better sanitation and hygiene and, eventually, in 1907, the provision of an Isolation Hospital which has now been converted to Orchard View after being known for a long while as 18's.

In 1909, the wards had glass screens erected to allow one part for the day room and the other part for the dormitory so, presumably, the ward system as we now know it came into being then.

In 1913, the bridges linking the blocks in pairs were constructed but it appears that there was opposition from the Local Government Board to the expense and an alternative scheme was discussed, but not adopted, whereby the bridges were placed near the corridor ends where the distance to be traversed was least. Also, twenty-two cottages were built for the staff, the estimated cost being £654 a pair, but they were ultimately erected at a cost of £630 a pair.

This history of Leavesden Asylum, the pilot scheme, is of necessity only brief. The dissolution of the Metropolitan Asylum Board and the rebirth of Leavesden as Leavesden Hospital and the history of the care and nursing of the patients make further interesting reading for the future.