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Kilkenny and Ballinasloe district lunatic asylums

In this online archive I have given reports about two remote Irish mental hospitals in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century. This shows both the slow increase in the number of those with chronic illnesses resident in these hospitals. The second account is a reminder that the physician superintendent was both a doctor and the senior administrator of the hospital.

The Kilkenny Asylum, which was opened in the year 1852, is on almost the same plan as the Mullingar and Omagh Asylums. The original buildings consisted of a central block containing the offices and officers' quarters, and two wings, one for the male and one for the female patients; the kitchen, laundry, and airing yards being in the rear. The only difference in the design of the asylums was that in Mullingar and Kilkenny the corridors faced the front of the building and the sleeping apartments looked to the rear, while in Omagh Asylum the reverse was the case, the sleeping apartments looking to the front and the corridors towards the rear. There had been two additions built to the Kilkenny asylum; in the first addition the two wings were prolonged backwards. A portion of each addition was three-storied, like the original building, and the rest was only two-storied. Dr West (the physician superintendent) thought this was a mistake.

A second addition was built to the asylum in 1896. This consisted in prolonging the wings which were two-storied, and at the extremities of these prolongations two high water towers were erected. The water was pumped into the tank in the water tower on the female side, and a pipe from this tank descended to the ground, and ran under the surface till it reached the water tower on the male side, where it ascended to the second tank and emptied into it. If the main building had been all three-storied the pipe connecting the two tanks could have been run in the roof, and, in addition to this, it

would have been easy, by means of T-pieces, to have had several hydrants with hoses attached running from the garret down through the three floors, with fire hoses attached.

Dr West hoped that the members of the Committee of Management would see their way to putting up stand-pipes through the interior of the whole building. He thought it would have done just as well to have built one water tower, with a tank equal in capacity to the two existing tanks, and thus have saved the expense of the second water tower. He noted there had been several improvements made when the last addition was built. An entirely new laundry was erected and fitted up by Messrs. Bradford. The machinery was worked by a steam engine. The kitchen was also enlarged and a new cooking apparatus put up by Messrs. Ashwell and Nesbett, and also a vegetable kitchen with potato steamers. A new boiler-house had been built, containing two boilers 6ft.6in. in diameter and 24ft. long. He thought it would have been better if a third boiler had been put in. It took one boiler to do the ordinary work of the house, viz. driving the laundry machinery, cooking, and heating the water; this boiler burnt about 1½ tons per day. There was a system of heating the house with steam pipes in the winter time, which was certainly very effective; but it required the second boiler to do this, and it was unable to do any more. The result was that during the four winter months of the year the two boilers had to be kept constantly going; this would not have been of so much consequence if the water supplied to this asylum were not so hard. It took two tons of coal to heat the house with steam. In 1904 the boilers were fitted with Meldrum furnaces, by means of which slack could be burned instead of coal, and thus a great saving in cost was effected. There were also two general bath-rooms built, in which there were baths lined with glass which give great satisfaction, and the whole sanitary

system of the house was renewed, new lavatories and wash-hand basins had been put up, and a new system of sewers put down. The water supply of the asylum was taken from a well, about 400 yards distant, and close to the river. The supply was practically inexhaustible. 1905 was a very dry and hot year, but the well did not show any signs of becoming dry. In 1894 the city of Kilkenny had got a new water supply, and Dr West hoped that the members of the Committee of Management would see their way to take this water into the asylum. At present the steam pump was only just able to pump up the day's supply, and the tanks were nearly empty in the evening. In case of fire this would be a very serious matter.

There were new workshops built and also a Roman Catholic and a Protestant Church. They were designed by Sir Thomas Drew and the Roman Catholic Church was a very handsome building. A new farmyard was built, which was a great improvement. Dr West was of the opinion it would have been better if it had been made larger, and with more shed accommodation, it was also rather far from the house, and it would have been better to have placed it in the rear of the building and near the kitchen. The airing yards had been done away with, and the patients occupied two fields behind the asylum. It would have been a great improvement to have installed electric light in the asylum. Although the gas made from Castlecomer coal was unfit for illuminating purposes, it did very well for driving gas engines, and by using this form of motor power he believed electricity could be generated very cheaply. Originally there had been about twenty-five acres of land attached to the asylum, which was still surrounded by the old boundary wall. In 1891 the Board of Control had purchased twenty-five acres of adjoining land which was a great advantage to the asylum, although the farm was still

small. The Committee of Management had also taken steps to purchase the house and grounds of a place close to the asylum. This would add about nineteen acres of land to the asylum, and the house when some internal alterations were made would accommodate about eighty patients. The asylum farm was to a large extent a vegetable garden. All the vegetables used in the asylum were grown on it, and potatoes sufficient for three months' supply, leaving very little land for corn and hay.

Before concluding, Dr West gave some figures concerning the asylum population:

- on the 31 December 1852 the number of patients resident was 126
- on the 31 December 1870 the number resident was 226, thus giving an increase of 100 patients in 18 years
- on the 31 December 1880 the number resident was 243, giving an increase of 17 patients in 10 years
- on the 31 December 1890 the number resident was 320, giving an increase of 77 patients in 10 years
- on the 31 December 1900 the number of patients resident was 441, giving an increase of 121 patients in 10 years
- on the 31 December 1905 the number of patients resident was 465, giving an increase of 24 patients during the last 5 years.

The principal increase in the asylum population had occurred in the twenty years between 1880 and 1900. Since then the increase had not been so rapid, and Dr West hoped that they had nearly reached the high watermark. A good deal of the increase in late years had been due to the fact that several chronic cases were sent from the county

work-houses. If this continued to be done it would help to keep up the numbers, but ‘when this generation of paupers dies out I think it probable that the number of patients will decrease, or at least remain stationary’.

BALLINASLOE MENTAL HOSPITAL

An account of a meeting of the Ballinasloe Mental Hospital Committee in 1930 which was reported in the local paper confirms the administrative nature of the physician superintendent’s duties.

‘At the meeting of the Ballinasloe Mental Hospital Committee held on November 10, 1930, Dr John Mills, the Resident Medical Superintendent, again showed the mettle for which he is well known, especially when principles are at stake.’

The occasion was a complaint that a resolution passed at a former meeting ordering that older men should be promoted had not been carried out.

The following extract from *The Connaught Sentinel* forms piquant reading:

‘Mr Finnerty: We seem to attach very great importance to the M.P. certificate here. At the same time we must not forget that there are men here with long service whose terms of appointment here as attendants did not include the passing of this certificate test, and whose hours of duty thirty years ago precluded them from attending the lectures. These men should not be passed over in case of promotion, and preference given to juniors with a few years’ service who have passed the test. These men have given the best years of their lives here, and they are still at the bottom of the ladder.

‘Dr Mills: There are only three men who are affected. One has had thirty years’ service, another came here in 1902, the last in 1904. – Chairman: These men have given us considerable service and they have also considerable experience. – Dr Mills: To work in an institution like this on the principle of seniority would be hopeless. I won’t do it, and if the Committee wishes to take the matter out of my hands they are quite at liberty to do so. I selected the most competent men for the job. I have been giving lectures here since 1898, and these men never sat, listened or attempted to attend any of the lectures. I won’t budge an inch in the matter of the importance I attach to the certificates and lectures and I leave the matter in your hands.

Mr Nolan: Juniors got the jobs over the heads of seniors. – Mr Corbett: These older attendants are recognized by the Nursing Council as being qualified and are registered as such. Are we going to recognize that? - Mr Lynch: It should not go out from us that we depreciate the importance of this certificate. Attendants themselves recognize that, but some of those elderly attendants came into our service when there was no certificate, and they are the victims of the system here, not of their own actions.

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Chairman: To put the thing plainly, are these three men any good, Doctor? (Laughter.) – Dr Mills: One is no good, the second is mediocre, and the third is lazy. (Renewed laughter.) - Chairman: Now, you have it all, and that ends that.'

References

Ballinasloe Mental Hospital – reported in *Notes and News, Journal of Mental Science* (1931) **77**, 293–294.