

## St Audry's Workhouse and Mental Hospital, Melton;

### Victorian attitudes examined: Talk to SIAH by David Phelan on 14<sup>th</sup> January, 2017

St Audry, or St Etheldreda, as she was known in the 7<sup>th</sup> century founded a monastery at Ely, and part of the estate of the monastery came to include the area of East Suffolk around Woodbridge. One of her saintly attributes was the ability to cast out devils.

The mental hospital which bore her name at Melton occupied a site whose public service history spanned the years from 1764 to 1993, when the hospital closed. After this the site was redeveloped for housing .

From 1765 to 1826 it was known as the Melton House of Industry for the relief of the poor, or colloquially as the Melton Workhouse. Workhouses were built to a fairly standardised design, and the main administration block of the former hospital that still remains consists of two storeys and is made up of red brick with ashlar dressings and gabled and hipped plain tile roofs.

Whole families had to enter the workhouse, or face starvation, if their circumstances meant there were no wages coming in. It was believed that some people were either born to be poor, or they fell on hard times through their own neglect. Entering families were segregated and housed in separate areas for men, women, girls and boys. They had to wear workhouse uniform, and carry out work such as picking oakum from old ropes, or the hard labour of breaking rocks for road making. This work produced an income towards meeting workhouse costs, which included providing a basic education for the children. By 1826 the Melton Workhouse was losing money and it was closed.

In 1829 the buildings were taken over by The Suffolk County Asylum for Pauper Lunatics, the true origin of the Mental Hospital. Before this time the treatment of mental illness had been largely restricted to the so-called "heroic cures", which included purging by laxatives, 'Vomits', Blood letting, manacles and hot and cold bath treatments.

The first major change to this approach was when William Tuke (1732-1822) opened the York Retreat in 1796. He instituted his "moral treatments" based on personalised attention and benevolence, restoring the self-esteem and self-control of residents. An early example of occupational therapy was introduced, including walks, cleaning and farm labouring in pleasant and quiet surroundings.

Another pioneer of this approach was John Conolly ( 1794 – 1866) who published the volume *Indications of Insanity* in 1830. In 1839, he was appointed resident physician to the Middlesex County Asylum at Hanwell where he introduced the principle of non-restraint

into the treatment of the insane, which led to non-restraint became accepted practice throughout England.

In 1832 Dr John Kirkman (1794-1887) was appointed Medical Superintendent at St Audry's Asylum, and would remain its leading light until 1876. Under him St Audry's followed Connolly's ideas, and was pioneering in its treatment of mental illness. Dr Kirkman believed that 'No restraint can be employed which is so powerful as tenderness.'

The hospital motto became, *'To heal sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always'*.

The December 1846 annual report showed that 60% of the inhabitants could read. The hospital catered to poorer wage earners, and a high proportion were single and under 50. Some 60% of patients were women, a class which included unmarried mothers, often routinely assigned to the asylum. Some 10% of inmates suffered from 'puerperal psychosis' a severe depression, with delusions, after giving birth which could result in child murder. A condition called 'the general paralysis of the insane' is now known to have been undiagnosed syphilis.

From 1902 to 1904 was a period of expansion with new wards, isolation hospital, farm buildings, bakehouse and mortuary, and in 1906 the Hospital was renamed Suffolk District Asylum. There was an asylum football team in 1909, and in 1917 it was again renamed to St Audry's Hospital for Mental Diseases.

In 1930 Occupational Therapy was officially introduced, and when open days began in 1960, patients could be seen building beach huts for use on Felixstowe beach.

By 1935 patient numbers peaked at 1200, and in 1948 the NHS Act placed it under the Suffolk Mental Hospital Management Committee.

In 1957 27 patients died of Asian Flu, and in common with most other deaths in the hospital, were buried in the small cemetery on the site, marked with an iron cross. The usual death rate was 28 per year, burials were un-coffined, in a shroud, and graves were re-used in rotation. (The iron crosses were sold for scrap in 1993 by Hopkins Homes, the site developer.)

In 1958 Largactil or chlorpromazine was introduced, and this medication became widely seen as making it possible for patients to be treated at home. In July 1960 Enoch Powell became Minister of Health, and in 1961 he began a campaign to close large scale asylums.

Patient numbers gradually reduced at Melton and in 1974 the hospital set up a museum for visitors in an unused ward. In 1993, the last 100 patients at Melton were released into Care in the Community.

Further information is available at Felixstowe Museum and at websites <http://felixstowemuseum.org/> and <https://staudrysproject.wordpress.com/>

