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The Madhouses of St Georges

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England first developed widespread specialised care for the mentally ill in the 18th century with the growth of the madhouse business which blossomed in the early 19th Century before collapsing with the growth of the public lunatic asylum. These “madhouses” (as they were called at the time) were generally run by doctors but some were run by clerics and some by the doctor’s widows. They were usually set up in large houses, in secluded places, and first regulated in 1774 when they had to be licenced and statistics start to be possible. Like any business they always had a unique selling point; usually about the individual skills of the proprietor, some advertising through books to broadcast their skills, as Mason Cox of Fishponds House did. When there were scandals the businesses suffered. When they did well they would move to larger premises or take over other asylums. There was a business and living to be made out of the madhouse trade!

In Bristol eight private madhouses were licenced – most created after 1800. Three of these survived to the 1950s, principally the larger purpose built places.



I'm going to talk about two less known in the St Georges area. Nowadays it is not a secluded rural situation but in the 1840s it was, as this map of 1880 show.



Figure 1

St Georges 1880 with sites of the two asylums marked

Whitehall House

Whitehall House is now demolished but gave its name to the area of Whitehall just north of St Georges. Whitehall House was probably over 100 years old by the time it became an asylum, and was the home of Henry Davis, banker, whose son Richard Hart Davis was member of parliament for Bristol from 1812 to 1831. After Henry died in 1804 and his widow in 1814,

two of his daughters lived there until in 1829 they moved into a new house built next door – Woodbine Cottage. Whitehall House then put up for sale but stood empty looking for a use until it was rented by John Braithwaite Taylor in 1832 to be turned into an lunatic asylum for women.

John Braithwaite Taylor was the son of Major-General Aldwell Taylor of the East India Company, Madras. He was born in 1801 in the East, educated at St Pauls School and graduated a physician from Edinburgh in 1824. He first worked in the Tewkebury Dispensary but then moved to Bristol where he offered lessons for medical students.

He rented Whitehall House in 1832 and in January

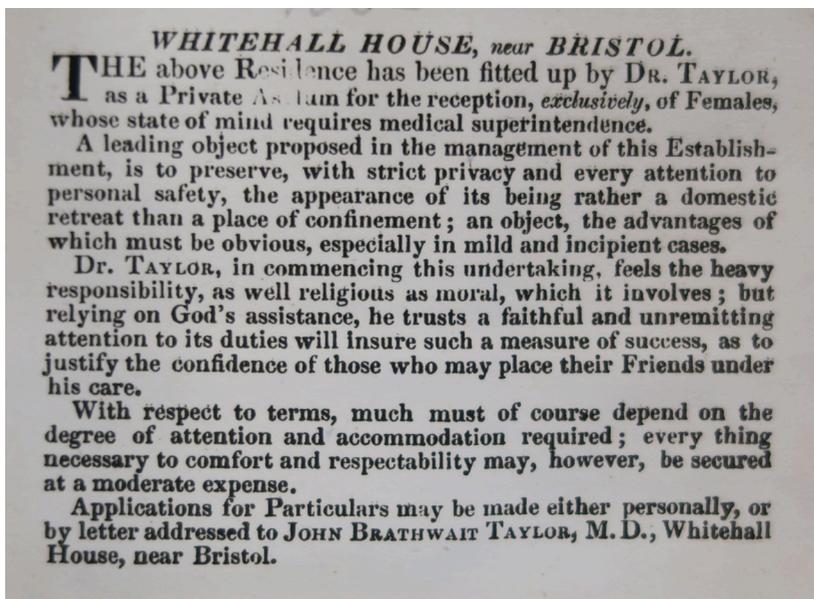


Figure 2 Advert for the opening of Whitehall [Bristol Mirror 26 May 1832]



applied to the Justices of the Peace for a licence to operate as a private asylum for up to twelve women with no pauper patients.

John first advertises the home in May 1832 as a private asylum and states he trusts in God's assistance in his work. At the same time he sent his prospectus around to local doctors and also the admission certificates that needed to be completed for patients to be admitted legally.

Interestingly though soon after the start he also extends his potential by offering himself as a candidate for the vacant medical position at St Peter's Hospital, saying that his conduct of Whitehall House makes him a suitable candidate.

When you look at the patient numbers you realise that this was chronic patients with a slow turn over - there are only three patients admitted in the first year and seven in the next of whom one dies and four are removed.

John Taylor died in 1833. He had married Martha Ann Parsons, the daughter of a English army captain. She took over the business until she died in 1848, initially with a Mr Shorland visiting as surgeon, but later with her brother John Dungate Featherstonhaugh Parsons. John Parsons was born in Ireland in 1814 when his family were stationed out there.

The plans put in for the original licensing show a fairly unremarkable four-storey house. It is unclear how it would be used as an asylum but this becomes slightly





clearer in a revised plan one year later which shows the third attic floor converted into five bedroom cells and the second floor with bedrooms and sitting rooms.

By 1841 Martha is living there with her four children, eight patients, four female servants and her brother John Parsons. Interestingly the house is put up for sale again by the Davis family in 1844 and may have been bought by the Taylors. By 1847 they got to ten patients but then Martha died from a 'Visitation of God' in 1848. The business was continued by her brother John Parsons who had married John Taylor's sister Jane.

John Parsons clearly decided that he wanted to expand and applied for extensions to the buildings with twelve more bedrooms which he then built.

The census return of 1851 shows him with his wife and two of Martha's younger orphan children, with nine female inmates all of whom are gentlewomen though one is also stated to be the daughter of a baronet and another of a naval officer. Interestingly only two female lunatic attendants live in with a cook and general servant, suggesting that the work was not onerous or dangerous.

Fishponds Asylum

During 1849 to 1851 the nearby large Fishponds Asylum was going from one disaster to another with public scandals about care followed by changes of management and the injection of money to improve its fabric followed by the unexpected death of the



new manager. John Parsons appears to have seized his opportunity and even though he had only just enlarged Whitehall, took over the larger and well adapted Fishponds House. Whitehall House was put up for sale with its new three story extension but failed to sell and became derelict until it was demolished and the site used for Whitehall School. The lane by it was called Madhouse Lane until it was renamed Bourneville Road in the 20th Century.

When Parsons moved with his patients he moved from looking after ten women to nine men and twenty-two women. He seems to have decided to go back to women only and advertised this in 1855.

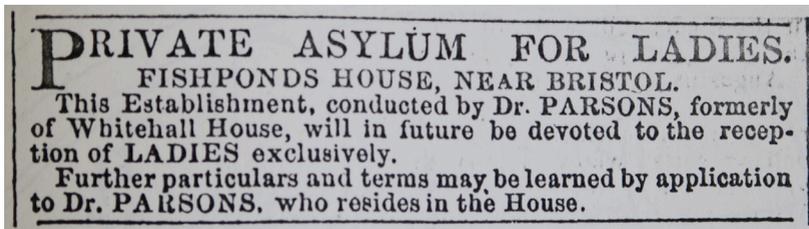


Figure 3
1855 Advertisement for Fishponds House

Rather usefully in 1854 he described his views on treatment to the Commissioners:

'Mechanical restraint is never employed, except when it may become necessary in the course of surgical treatment, to prevent, for instance, the forcible removal of dressings from a wound. One instance of this has occurred during the last two years. Seclusion is scarcely more frequently resorted to, only one patient



having been subjected to it within the year.

In the medical treatment of acute mania, as well as of the paroxysms of excitement and violence which occur in chronic cases, I rely chiefly on the use of narcotics and sedatives (opium, morphia and hyoscyamus), with purgatives, and the warm bath and cold shower-bath.

Bleeding, either general or topical, ought not, I think to be reckoned among the remedies for any form of insanity. Indeed the coexistence of insanity with any other disease which may call for bleeding makes me more than usually cautious in the use of it.

Nauseates, as a means of subduing excitement, I am not in the habit of prescribing. I have had several patients under my care to whom they have previously been given, whose mental and bodily condition has certainly improved since they have ceased to take them.'

John Parsons seems to have planned to continue in the Lunacy Business. In 1856 he negotiated a fourteen year lease of Fishponds House from the owners, the Bompas family.

But he then had problems with the Commissioners in Lunacy who told him to tell relatives to remove two of his patients to other establishments as they felt they would do better if moved. John Parsons did this but the people were not removed and there is then conflict over the next years where the Commissioners put mounting pressure on him to have the patients moved including using the local magistrates. The





magistrates are sympathetic to John and comments that John Parsons acted under trying circumstances and had been suffering from severe gout to explain his brusque manner but they bemoan the fact that the commissioners were basically branding his asylum as inferior to some others. Interestingly the two patients did move but appear to have died soon after. The next year, in 1859, Fishponds House is put up for sale.

John Parsons moved to Dowry Square and went into work in general practice including at the Clifton Dispensary.



Figure 4. John Dungate Featherstonhaugh Parsons in his later years





Summer Hill House

The other place I was talk about is that operated by Thomas Dowling Eyre in Summerhill House.

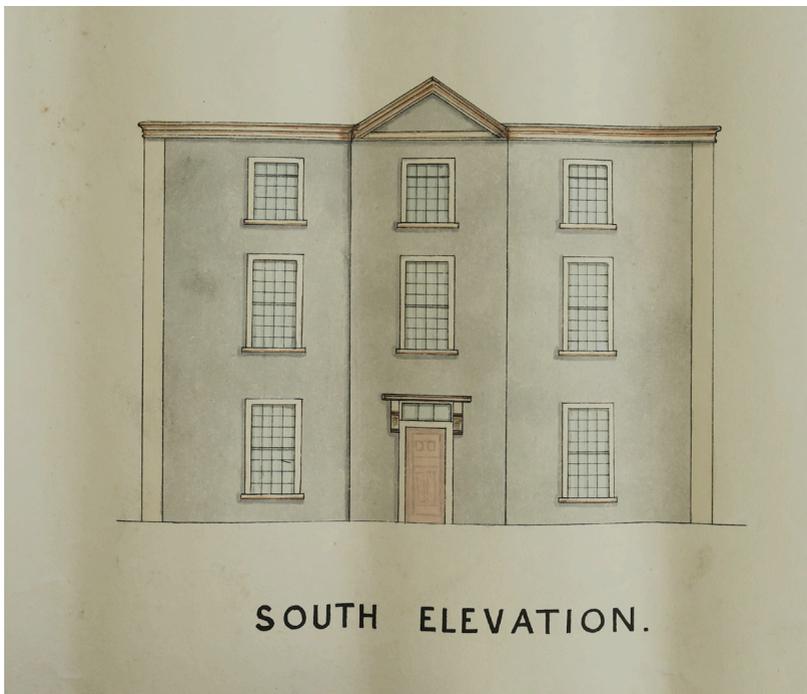
He was the fourth child of six children of the Rev William Eyre of Wells who married Charlotte Dowling of Chew Magna in 1790. He was born in 1795 and married his cousin Mary Dowling who was the daughter of Joseph Dowling surgeon in Chew Magna. He himself is stated in a family tree to have been a Captain in the Royal Marines and I cannot find evidence that he was a surgeon – he is always referred to as ‘gentleman’.

In 1841 he is living with his wife with his widowed mother Charlotte in her house, Summer Hill House. With them appear to be two or three other families they are probably renting rooms to.

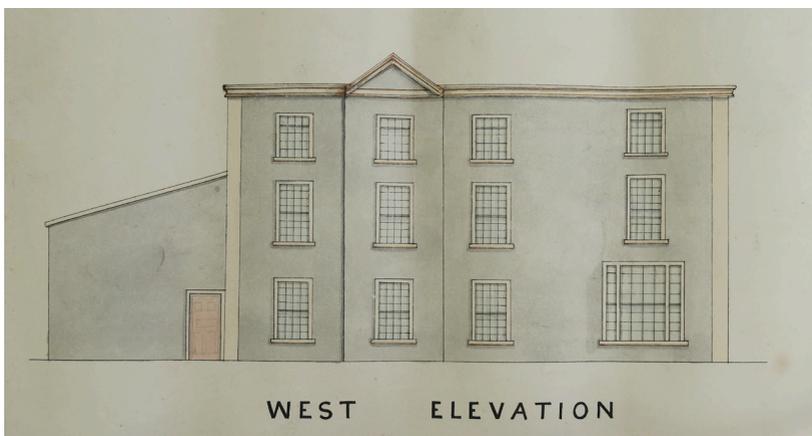
In 1843 he applies for a £15 annual licence to become a lunatic asylum for up to three men. However he never seems that more than two men in it and in 1849 surrenders the licence to have only one patient which meant that he no longer needed to pay out £15 for the licence. To be an asylum he needed a visiting surgeon and this may have been his brother in law, Thomas Dowling of Chew Magna.

In 1851 he is there with his wife and two servants and one patient, John Stokes aged seventy-six from London along with his attendant James who is aged twenty, from Wiltshire.





*Figures 5a and 5b
Images of Summerhill House from the licence
Application.*





In September 1858 Mr Eyre tries to sell Summerhill House. He died two years later of stomach cancer and his will notes effects of under £1000. His widow moved back Chew Magna to live with her brother Thomas Dowling the GP there and she died fifteen years later.

Summerhill House itself was a fairly non-descript house set by the road at Summer Hill just before one reaches Air Balloon Hill. There seems nothing remarkable about it except I note it had eleven bedrooms. It was demolished in the 1960s and is now covered by modern Housing.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr Peter Parsons, descendant of the Whitehall House Proprietors, for his material on the people and asylum and image of JDF Parsons. The plans of the houses are at the Gloucestershire Archives, for whom I am grateful for the images of Summerhill House. Fishponds asylum is well described by Dr H Temple Phillips in his thesis "*The History of the old private lunatic asylum at Fishponds, Bristol*".

