

Fair Mile Hospital

a reflection of Victorian values

The Victorians believed that mental illness was curable as long as patients were treated in the right conditions.

The asylums were designed to provide these conditions. They were calm, orderly places, where the sexes were divided and meaningful work was provided as a tool to recovery.

Most county asylums were built following the passing of the County Asylum/Lunacy Act in 1845.

The Berkshire, Reading and Newbury Lunatic Asylum was opened at Moulsoford in 1870 to serve the old county of Berkshire. Local government reorganisation in 1974 moved Moulsoford into Oxfordshire.

The asylum's name was later changed to the Berkshire Lunatic Asylum and then the Berkshire Mental Hospital, before it became Fair Mile Hospital in 1948, when the NHS was founded.

Following a move to increased mental health provision in the community, Fair Mile was closed by the NHS in 2003, with in-patient care moving to hospitals in Reading and Oxford.

The Fair Mile site has since been redeveloped for housing.

The Victorians viewed various types of behaviour as mental illness – melancholia (depression), mania (bi-polar), epilepsy, dementia (meaning the loss of mental faculty) and amentia (what we understand as severe/profound learning difficulties).

On entry into the asylum, a patient's mental and physical condition was written down in one of the many case books. After this, the patient's condition was recorded once a month, until discharge. Many case books from Fair Mile's archive are still held by the Berkshire Record Office.

Many of those patients that we have identified as showing autistic traits spent their entire lives in asylums, having entered them as children with challenging behaviour.

The case books record that these children responded well to the calm, orderly atmosphere, but as their mental faculties were thought to be impaired, they lived to the end of their days in the asylum.



Mark Stevens is the county archivist for Berkshire and has written a book, called *Fair Mile – Life in the Victorian Asylum*, looking at the early days of the hospital. He talks about the institution and the asylum system in a special video recorded for this project. Visit: <http://prt.cm/18c245e> or scan the QR code from your phone.

