

History Trail



Point 2 - Cell Barnes Colony

Cell Barnes Colony architects J M Sheppard and Partners of London, was built on land purchased from Lord Verulam, and opened in 1933 as Cell Barnes Mental Hospital (Cell Barnes Colony), 'a Colony for Mental Defectives' (words from then). It was transferred to NHS in 1948 and renamed Cell Barnes Hospital. The word 'colony' then had none of the connotations it has acquired since, so too the word 'asylum', originally meaning a place of shelter or refuge.

Although the new Mental Treatment Act 1930, was in force, the Colony would be governed by the Mental Deficiency Act 1913. It was not a 'mental hospital' as defined by s21(1) of the Mental Treatment Act, but a certified institution for the reception of mental defectives as defined by s71 of the Mental Deficiency Act. A diagnosis of 'Idiot, Imbecile, Feeble-Minded or Moral Deficient' (with Epilepsy also noted) would be made, categories which reflected a range of ability from low grade to high grade. 'Idiots' were "so deeply defective in mind as to be unable to guard against common physical dangers". 'Imbeciles' were "incapable of managing themselves or their affairs, or, in the case of children, of being taught to do so". The 'Feeble-Minded' (the 'socially inefficient') had problems "so pronounced that they require care, supervision, and control for their own protection or the protection of others" and, if children, a condition that was "so pronounced that they by reason of such defectiveness appear to be personally incapable of receiving proper benefit from instruction in ordinary schools". 'Moral Defectives' displayed from an early age "some permanent mental defect coupled with strong vicious or criminal propensities on which punishment had little or no effect".

When the colony opened in 1933 it housed 600 residents, 120 of them children for whom a school was provided. Guests were invited to view the buildings which had cost £¼m to complete. They expressed themselves "favourably impressed as there was no barrack-like drabness, rather a series of artistic blocks and villas each practically self-contained".

The hospital comprised a series of detached two-storey ward buildings, centred around the administration and service areas. The site was bisected east to west by the hospital driveway which linked Highfield Lane with Hill End Lane. South of the driveway were ward buildings while to the north were situated a range of support services including a nurses' training school, workshops and boiler house. In 1952 a further extension was added to the Female Occupational Therapy, comprising a domestic unit, hairdressing salon and Industrial Department. Also at this time the unused staff cycle shed was converted into a Male/Occupational, Industrial Department.



Aerial view of Cell Barnes Hospital (date unknown)

In 1956 the Association of Hospital Friends built a prefabricated Scout Unit with recreation and store facilities. In 1965 they added a Church Sanctuary, naming the building Bryn Hall in memory of Dr Thomas, Medical Superintendent 1954-64. The building was used as a rehabilitation centre during the day, patients' social activities in the evenings and church services on Sundays. In 1958 three new wards were completed as well as two units for resident staff. The same year the Acland Social Staff Club was opened by HRH the Duke of Gloucester KG. Dr Thomas was selected to serve on the Royal Commission which led to the Mental Health Act 1959. That year saw the wards no longer locked.



Children's Ward .Courtesy of J Gilson (date unknown)

The clerical offices were behind the Administration block and were vacated in 1963 and, with some alteration, became the Dispensary and Pathological Laboratory. In 1967 the Physiotherapy Department was opened and the Ena Daniels' School, comprising four classrooms, a nurse's and staff rooms, was opened in 1968, named after the Chairman of the Hospital Management Committee. In 1969 the hydrotherapy pool, given to the hospital by societies interested in the mentally handicapped and

spastic children in and around Cell Barnes was added. Approximately 100 children and adults attended this unit daily for treatment. Also in 1969 a further two wards were completed and opened to house the more severely and physically disabled.

Patients lived in large spacious wards containing about 20 patients on average. Most wards were single-sex, but a few were mixed. Each ward had a large dormitory (there were very few single bedrooms), and large sitting and dining areas shared by all the patients. Most patients attended the Occupational Therapy Department for day care, while a few attended activities outside the Hospital.

In addition to the orchard, a thriving farm was managed in the hospital grounds, growing arable crops and where cows, pigs and poultry were reared. The farm was closed in 1965 and the hospital closed in 1998. The only buildings still in existence from the original hospital are West Lodge (see Point 1), the Occupational Health department now Rowan House and used for offices, the former nurses' training school called the Birch Centre, now Ladybirds Nursery and, opposite Tillage Close, the former regional pill packing unit, now Highfield Lane Day Nursery.

"We had Day Services and the Ena Daniels' School (located where the car park by Ladybirds is now). Mixed industrial companies would provide lampshades, crayons etc. which the patients put together on a production line. There was a Hydro-therapy pool and a recreational department with 5 classrooms. There were discos every week, fetes, sports days and parties. In my last year I managed the Children's Unit and Starlight Club (named by Bill Titley – a lovely man – because he was quite theatrical) with recreational activities". (CB Nurse)

"Cell Barnes Hospital did have 2 locked Wards. Apart from the pool there was also a Scout Unit and football pitches. But not much in terms of physical activities as staffing would have been difficult". (CB Nurse)

It is amazing that when building the hospital they had visions of the need for a pool *“There was a dedicated swimming pool on site; a very good one with water at blood temperature”*.

(CB Hydro-therapist)

“There was a butcher’s shop, cobblers – we were totally self-sufficient. Each ward had 20-30 people. Big dormitories but made as private as possible and separated with wardrobes into small private areas. Also a sitting room and big kitchen. We gathered chairs round in small units rather than in rows or a large circle.”

(CB Nurse)

“The Pill Packing Unit (now Highfield Lane Day Nursery) was where there used to be a tennis court though it was not used much and was pretty run down. There was a good recreation hall at Cell Barnes named Noel Burke Hall in honour of the first Medical Superintendent – Dr Noel N M Burke.” *(CB Nurse)*

“There were underground tunnels with access from various places. Manholes, which were very heavy to lift, were at the end of each block and subways ran under all wards apart from Ward 24 which was single storey. All water and electricity pipes and telephone cables ran in these ducts. The main subway from works to under reception and towards Wards 2 and 4 you could easily walk through. But once near the ward blocks you had to stoop. Ward flooring was suspended so you could look up under the floors. Chlorifier –there were steam ducts which ran towards the laundry, the kitchen and then to Noel Burke Hall and at different stages they branched off to wards. You had to have 2 men whenever you went in the subway and to wear hard hats. We had some lighting which was basic and so always took torches. We never had any cases of subsidence, though one resident did disappear and got down into the subway. The search discovered him under Ward 11”. *(CB Electrician & Maintenance Supervisor)*

*“Ward 15 became **Monkstone House** behind Bryn Hall. It housed strong men with severe challenging behaviour. Ward 17 stayed as a ward. **Spring Meadow** was Ward 22 – it’s odd that others were just numbered. Ward 24 became Ward 1 then back to Ward 24 – both were **Spring Meadow** but not at the same time”.* *(CB Ward Sister)*



*Taken from Cell Barnes Tower - Bryn Hall top left.
Courtesy of J Gilson (date unknown)*

Layout of the Colony – taken from an article “Hertfordshire’s New Institution” – date unknown – “Minister of Health Opens £250,000 Colony for Mental Defectives in St Albans: Buildings and Equipment Described”.

The various units are conveniently planned around the administrative block which is approached by a main drive running right through the grounds from east to west. This building and also the residential quarters are of a pleasing elevation, the whole being carried out in multi-surfaced bricks and Reading sand faced tiles. To the immediate west lies the laundry, fully equipped with electrically operated washing, drying and ironing plant and capable of handling the whole of the institution’s work, and providing practical training for certain of the female inmates. On the east flank are situated the workshops, comprising wood chopping, tailors’, painters’, plumbers’ and bricklayers’ workshops, smithy, fitters’ and engineers’ shops



Cell Barnes Laundry. Courtesy of J Gilson (date unknown)

and storage. A completely self-contained unit, the kitchen, including scullery, service and trolleys, cold storage, plant and equipment, butcher's shop, refrigerating plant and engine room, is electrically equipped throughout and is of generous dimensions.

To the north is the medical block and out-patients' receiving department, Surgeons' and Matrons' rooms, consulting room and lying-in ward constitute the greater part of this building and on each side

there are two blocks of villas for the lower-grade male and female patients. Immediately on the south side of the administrative block are the male and female quarters for what are known as "typical" cases. In layout and accommodation, they are similar in all respects to the "lower-grade" quarters. To the west of the lower-grade units lie the children's blocks, again for male and female, wherein ample accommodation is provided in each to meet future needs. There is contemplated the erection of a school building in close proximity to these units.

The comfort and welfare of the large staff of female nurses has been studied, and necessary provision made by the acquisition, conversion and extension of the former Cell Barnes Mansion. Recreation needs of the staff and inmates have been met by the erection of an assembly hall, complete with large size stage, dressing rooms and cloakrooms. This room is capable of accommodating 600 people. The hall has been constructed to meet the County Council's own regulations governing the installation of film projector apparatus.

Portions taken from a typed paper found in the Trust's office dated 18.05.76

Profile of Cell Barnes Hospital – author unknown

...there has been a considerable increase and/or improvement in facilities available for patients in therapeutic, environmental and recreational areas. These include the extension of school and occupational/industrial training facilities and improvements in the specialised aspects of psychology, physiotherapy, hydrotherapy, environmental therapy, art therapy, behaviour modification etc. Improvements in chiropody and dental facilities have been made, the latter to a considerable degree. The Ena Daniels' School, now administered and financed by the Education Department of Hertfordshire County Council, is currently being extended and will, on completion, make available additional places for the education of children in the hospital. The scheme of peripatetic teaching within the ward situation continues, and altogether, children on school register number over 100. There will be further developments in this area with the utilisation in the Autumn of 1976 of an educational establishment sited locally which is surplus to requirement of the normal school system.

There are numerous volunteers and/or voluntary organisations working in the hospital including the League of Friends, W.R.V.S. (whose members manage and operate the canteen and shop) and the Link Scheme which brings local ladies into the hospital to help the children in play activity, hydrotherapy etc.