

Medical History

The Reverend John Ashbourne (c.1611-61) and the Origins of the Private Madhouse System

RICHARD HUNTER, IDA MACALPINE

British Medical Journal, 1972, 2, 513-515

You've a fine trade on't,
Mad-men and Fools are a staple commodity.—*The Changeling*.*

Some years ago while we were gathering material for a history of psychiatry¹ our attention was drawn to one of its forgotten legion, the Reverend John Ashbourne, "a clerical mad-doctor of the 17th century," as he was described in his only memorial, a note over the initials "J.J.M." in the *East Anglian*, 1885-6.² Facts of his life are few. He was of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and successively deacon of Peterborough (1630) and rector of Monk Soham (1642) and Norton by (or next) Woolpit in Suffolk (1646).³ He enjoyed a local reputation for treating the mentally deranged. Fame came posthumously by the manner of his death in 1661. A King's Bench judgement for 1659 gives a glimpse of his work. The suit, in which he was described as "clark (in holy orders), Practitioner in Phisycke," was for fees. † A patient had been brought to him three years previously "troubled with phrensy and distemper in the braine." Ashbourne contracted to take him "into his dwelling house at Norton, and to give him and his keep or servant, meat, drink, lodging, washing, &c., as long as he should abide there to be cured of his disease." ‡ His terms were 14 shillings a week or two lump sums of £10 at the beginning and end of the treatment. The patient opted for the latter, recovered after some weeks, and left without paying the final instalment. He failed to appear in court and presumably judgement went to Ashbourne by default.

There is record of another action instigated by Ashbourne for non-payment of tithes.⁵ J.J.M. surmised that he was litigious. If this implies self-seeking, self-righteous would be fairer. For instance, when he was presented to Norton he offered to vacate the living of Monk Soham in favour of the previous incumbent who was sequestered in 1642.⁶

Manner of his Death

In 1661 he went to law again, for the last time. At the summer assizes which opened at Bury on 29 July he "did Indict, or cause to be Indicted, Mr. Taylor, a godly able Minister in

Bury, upon the Statute of the 15. of Q. Elizabeth, against Convencicles, for meeting with some honest People to pray and Worship God. The Indictment was found by the Grand-Jury."⁷ Three days later, "while the Assizes yet continued" and before the case could proceed, Ashbourne lay dead, murdered by a patient. Within weeks an account of the horrid deed appeared in print. J.J.M. described the publication as "a rare pamphlet on the uncertainty of life, printed in London in 1661, and now bound up in a volume of tracts in the Public Library at Cambridge, R.30.32."² When we looked for it his reference proved wrong. At Cambridge the Central Public Library had no knowledge of it and disclaimed the shelf mark; the University Library acknowledged the shelf-mark but as that of a German book of 1896. The only hope of tracing it was through the pages of Wing.⁸ We listed all titles published in 1661 even remotely bearing "on the uncertainty of life" and read them at the British Museum. None mentioned Ashbourne.

We did the same for the following year and met a measure of success. In *Mirabilis Annus Secundus: or, the second year of prodigies*, 1662, we found Ashbourne's death recounted, although it differed from that quoted by J.J.M. The section is headed "An Episcopal Parson who was active in indicating a Godly Non-conforming Minister, was murdered by a Distracted-man of his own family." Its opening paragraph has already been quoted.⁷

It seemed that the original version of 1661 would for ever elude our search, when some half-dozen years later, we saw advertised in a bookseller's catalogue a small quarto pamphlet of four leaves, "not recorded in Wing," entitled *A Terrible Thunder-Clap at Wangford in the County of Suffolk etc.*, printed at London in 1661⁹ (see Figure). Its lengthy title made no mention of Ashbourne but subject, county, and place and year of publication were right. Persistence was rewarded by collector's luck. At page 3 we found "A lamentable Relation of the cruel murther committed on a Minister at Morton (sic) near Bury." Except for capitalization and punctuation its text coincided with that given by J.J.M. It reads as follows.

Upon the first day of August, one Mr. Ashburn a Minister not far from Sudbury at a place called Morton near adjacent to Bury, who was a man of good parts, and had great skill in curing mad people.

This Minister going out of town to visit some of his acquaintance, was way-laid, by one of his Mad Patients, who was then in his house for cure, who seeing him come by, having an opportunity to act his intended design, ran eagerly upon him, and stab'd him in the Neck with a Pitch-fork, which run clean thorow.

This not satisfying him, he drew out his Knife stabbing him in several places of the body, wounding him in at least seventeen several places, of which bloody wounds he immediately dyed.

The day before his lamentable death, he came from Bury, where he had preferred a Bill of Indictment against some of his Neighbours, after which happened this sudden change.⁹

*T. Middleton and W. Rowley, *The Changeling*, first printed 1653.

†We were unable to trace the record of the King's Bench judgement from which J.J.M. quoted.

‡Contracts to cure, sometimes of the "no cure, no money" variety, were a commonplace of seventeenth century practice. A number of law suits resulted, the best known of which is that instituted by William Harvey.⁴

Friern Hospital, London N.11, and National Hospital, Queen Square, London W.C.1

RICHARD HUNTER, M.D., F.R.C.P., Consultant Psychiatrist

London W.2

IDA MACALPINE, M.D., M.R.C.P., Retired

A Terrible Thunder-Clap AT WANGFORD IN THE County of SUFFOLK,

Whereby 1. Knight, 1. Colonel, and a

Captain of a Troop, with several other Gentlemen of quality and their Attendants (meeting at the Houfe of Mr. Tho. Abfolon to make merry with *March Beer* on *Thursday* the 1. of *August*) were much mangled by a Thunder-bolt, which came in at the top of the houfe and broke the Tyles, Spars went through a Bed and a Floor into the Parlour where they were drinking together.

And in what a miraculous manner one was taken up to the top of the Room and flung down on a Table, Capt. *Tyrel* struck dead, another had his Head, Face and Body burnt as black as a Coal, other lying dumb fencelefs, and not able to utter one Word.

Publisht for the benefit of all those that are mis-informed by an imperfect paper already divulged; This being the exact Copy sent to a person of quality in London, by a Gentleman who was an Ey-witnes, and Summoned for one of the Crowners Quest.

LONDON, Printed for John Jones, 1661.

Title page of pamphlet containing account of Ashbourne's death.

The 1662 version adds some circumstantial details. Ashbourne was returning home

through a Meadow not far from his own House, where he met him one Mr. Ward (who had been Distracted, and was sent to the said Mr. Ashborn for Cure (who it seems was famous in the Country upon that account) and was now become very sober, and carried himself very civilly and orderly, and was suffered to go without any Keeper) the said Ward fell upon Mr. Ashborn in the Meadow, and with his own Fork which he then had in his hand, he thrust him through the Neck, and got him down upon the Ground, and then with Mr. Ashborn's own Knife which he pulled out of his pocket, he Wounded him in several places, and left him dead; Mr. Ward was immediately apprehended and committed to Bury Gaol, and no question before this time hath answered the Law for the Murder he committed.⁷

J.J.M. found Ashbourne's burial recorded in the parish registers the next day—according to custom—but was unable to confirm the fate of his assailant.² Interesting medicolegal argument might have ensued if a plea of non compos mentis had been entered.

Characteristics of System

Ashbourne was married to Abigail, daughter of the Reverend Samuel Ward,^{2 10} puritan divine and town preacher of Ipswich. Their son Samuel, born at Glentworth in Lincolnshire in 1639, received in 1662 the Cambridge licence to practise medicine from Trinity College.³ He and his mother ran the "mad-business" at Norton until at least 1686.² In that year a member

of the Fiske family left £100 to a relative, "a distempered man that sojourneth with Mr. Ashbourn of Norton."¹¹

The record of the Ashbourne family, slender as it is, typifies some characteristics of the private madhouse system which dominated British psychiatry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹² It began with Helkiah Crooke, physician to James I and Bethlem Hospital. He was the first doctor who is known to have taken the occasional patient into his home for treatment. In 1630 he charged £200 a year for "Physick, Diet, Clothes, Lodging, washing and all things necessary," including "two Men Servantes."¹³ The practice of taking patients into one's house for conditions requiring close supervision—and not only to control socially disruptive behaviour or incompetence—became a feature of seventeenth century medicine.^{14, 15}

From boarding a "single lunatic," to use the language of nineteenth century legislation, with his doctor or keeper it was but a step to providing accommodation for patients in numbers as a financial proposition. The first private madhouse figures in a cautionary tale for "malignants" of 1643. An atheistical hosier of Ludgate Hill fell mad with drunkenness and

continued so distracted and besotted in his senses . . . that at last it was held fit to have him away to Bedlem; yet for some credit sake, his friends so prevailed, that he was not put into the common condition of the Madmen there, but was kept private in the house of one that endeavours the cure of such persons.¹⁶

Clearly even at this date conditions in a mental hospital—in fact, the country's only one—were unacceptable to the sick with sensibilities. Admission brought social stigma and compounded common prejudice born of ignorance and fear which placed victims of "a distemper'd Brain . . . under some Kind of Disgrace and Imputation."¹⁷ Not surprisingly the public looked to private asylums for private treatment.

Contemporary with Ashbourne there was "a person dwelling in Glastonbury (Somerset), who was esteem'd very skilful and successful in such Cases."¹⁸ He was neither parson nor doctor and his name has not been preserved. A new trend appeared in his practice—namely, to remove patients from their familiar surroundings as a matter of medical policy, not only in response to social pressures. Ostensibly he gave it out that in his house they were always "under his View and Inspection" and could be made "duely to follow his Prescriptions." Institutional care became a tenet of "the Regimen and Cure of Madness." The necessity for it was emphasized by William Battie in the first psychiatric text written for students: "Repeated experience has convinced me that confinement alone is oftentimes sufficient, but always so necessary, that without it every method hitherto devised for the cure of Madness would be ineffectual."¹⁹ Thus encouraged, private enterprise furnished more houses and beds, and as commonly happens when psychiatric facilities are enlarged supply created its own demand.

Two doctors set up madhouses in London in the 1670s. John Archer, a coxcomb at the court of Charles II who styled himself "one of His Majesties Physitians in Ordinary," advertised his services to "those that stand in need . . . least unskilfull persons should do hurt":

I do hereby give notice, that I can accomodate any distempered Person with such conveniency as is fit for their Recovery, having had much practice and success that way, and can place them in an excellent Air nere the City, fit for that purpose; and with the greatest security and delight to patients; there being no better way for their Recovery.²⁰

To vaunt therapeutic prowess seems to have been the hallmark of the "mad-doctor" down the ages.

Thomas Allen was a man of different calibre. Like Crooke he was a monopolist by virtue of being physician to Bethlem Hospital, and he started the custom of keeping a private asylum while serving a public one. A patient of his in both was James

Carkesse, formerly a clerk in Samuel Pepys's office at the Admiralty and a competent versifier. To him we owe details of Allen's practice satyrically portrayed, including the well-known lines,

Who e're is Mad, he first had Wit to lose;
Betwixt Fool and Physician wink and chuse.²¹

Medical Knowledge

Allen had humanitarian concern for his charges and scientific interest in what made them ill. He refused to allow a group of medical Fellows of the Royal Society led by Richard Lower to try the experiment of transfusing sheep's blood into man.²² Yet the first necropsy in the annals of Bethlem Hospital was performed at his request. The patient died after a period of akinetic mutism and the findings, crude as they were by today's standard, indicate that he may have had a pinealoma.²³

To return to Ashbourne. It is unlikely that he had any medical training, but it would hardly have mattered. Such medical lore as he used was part of general knowledge. Over and above it he needed only qualities of personality of the kind the Reverend Doctor Francis Willis displayed a hundred years later.²⁴ The fact that he was described as "Practitioner in Phisycke" suggests that he was licensed by his bishop "to treat the melancholy and mad." A specialist licence of this kind was granted as early as 1600 by the Archbishop of Canterbury to one John Freeman of Sittingbourne in Kent.²⁵ In the metropolis Ashbourne would doubtless have come before the College of Physicians as "a quack practising on mad people." In 1615 William Sheperd was prosecuted on this account. His knowledge was severely tested by the president. Among the questions put to Sheperd were his "distinction between mad men, or what difference of madd men?," and "How is flegme burnt? and what is it? and what author hath he for it?"²⁶ A modern candidate for a higher qualification in psychiatry may wonder whether jettisoning old "knowledge" has ever kept pace with acquisition of new facts.

From a formal training, too, Ashbourne might have learnt the double standard of care for rich and poor. Examples occur in the case-book of Daniel Oxenbridge, a colleague of Mayerne and Harvey. Oxenbridge treated a Mrs. Miller, "mad for two Years," by diet, glysters, leeches, fresh cyder drinks, warm herb baths, and applying animal organs such as "warm Lungs of Lambs" to her shaven head. In contrast, to "Goodwife Jackson . . . being poor," he gave only "of Glass of Antimony a Scruple in Beer, each other Morning," with occasional "Bleeding and Sleepers."^{27 28}

The pattern of succession set by the Ashbournes—unqualified father followed by medically qualified son—was often repeated—for instance, in families famous in psychiatric history like those of Bakewell of Staffordshire, Cox of Bristol, and Finch of Wiltshire.¹³ It also became common for the woman of the house, like Mrs. Ashbourne, to play the part of matron in its management and to take over if widowed.¹² Beyond founding the first of these dynasties, Ashbourne has two other claims to be remembered. He heads the long list of private madhouse owner/keepers whose names have come down to us, as well as the

mercifully much shorter one of psychiatric martyrs. Rival claimants who were spared may take comfort in historical anonymity.

We are grateful to the librarian of Cambridge University Library for responding to our repeated inquiries about the account of Ashbourne's death.

References

- Hunter, R., and Macalpine, I., *Three Hundred Years of Psychiatry 1535-1860*. London, 1963.
- The East Anglian: or Notes and Queries relating to East Anglia*, 1885-6, N.S., 1, 249. We are indebted to Mr. R. R. Jeffers for drawing our attention to this paper.
- Venn, J., and Venn, J. A., *Alumni Cantabrigienses*, vol. 1. Cambridge, 1922.
- G. L. Keynes, *The Life of William Harvey*, p. 113. Oxford, 1966.
- Redstone, V. B., *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and Natural History*, 1909, 13, 149.
- Bullen, R. F., *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and Natural History*, 1927, 19, 152.
- Mirabilis Annus Secundus; or, the second year of prodigies*, p. 78. (London) 1662.
- Wing, D., *Short-Title Catalogue of Books printed in England . . . and of English Books printed in other Countries*, 3 vols. New York, 1945-51.
- A Terrible Thunder-Clap at Wangford in the County of Suffolk. Whereby 1. Knight, 1. Colonel, and a Captain of a Troop, with several other Gentlemen of quality and their Attendants . . . were much mangled by a Thunder-bolt*. London, 1661.
- For Samuel Ward (1577-1640), author of *Woe to Drunkards*, 1622 and other spirited tracts, see *Dictionary of National Biography*.
- Fiske, H., *Fiske Family Papers*. Norwich, 1902. This and references 5 and 6 were kindly supplied through the good offices of the Bishop of St. Edmundsbury and Ipswich by Canon P. T. E. Wareham, president, and Mr. H. E. Wilton, secretary, Ipswich Historical Society, and the Suffolk County Librarian.
- Parry-Jones, W. Ll., *The Trade in Lunacy: a study of private madhouses in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries*. London, 1971.
- Hunter, R., and Macalpine, I., *Three Hundred Years of Psychiatry 1535-1860*, p. 103. London, 1963.
- Hunter, R., and Macalpine, I., *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society of London*, 1965, 21, 31.
- Hunter, R., and Macalpine, I., *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society of London*, 1967, 21, 306.
- Vicars, J., *A Looking-Glasse for Malignants: or, Gods Hand against God-Haters. Containing a most terrible yet true relation of the many most fearful personal examples . . . of Gods wrath*, p. 20. London, 1643.
- Cheyne, G., *The English Malady: or, a Treatise of Nervous Diseases of all Kinds*, p. 260. London, 1733.
- Hallett, J., *The Life of the Reverend Mr. Geo. Trosse, late Minister of the Gospel in the City of Exon*, p. 53. Exeter, 1714.
- Battie, W., *A Treatise on Madness*, p. 68. London, 1759 (reprinted 1962).
- Archer, J., *Every Man his own Doctor, compleated with an Herbal . . . with . . . A Treatise of Melancholly and Distraction, with Government in Cure*, p. 124. London, 1673.
- Carkesse, J., *Lucida Intervalla: containing divers Miscellaneous Poems written at Finsbury and Bethlem by the Doctors Patient Extraordinary*, p. 31. London, 1679.
- Hunter, R., and Macalpine, I., *Three Hundred Years of Psychiatry 1535-1860*, p. 184. London, 1963.
- Wiseman, R., *Severall Chirurgicall Treatises*, p. 132. London, 1676.
- Macalpine, I., and Hunter, R., *George III and the Mad-Business*, p. 269. London, 1969.
- Hunter, R., and Macalpine, I., *Three Hundred Years of Psychiatry 1535-1860*, p. 59. London, 1963. Quoted by kind permission of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Trustees of Lambeth Palace Library.
- Hunter, R., and Macalpine, I., *Three Hundred Years of Psychiatry 1535-1860*, p. 91. London, 1963. Quoted by kind permission of the Registrar of the Royal College of Physicians of London.
- (Oxenbridge, D.) *General Observations and Prescriptions in the Pratic (sic) of Physick. On Several Persons of Quality, &c. By an Eminent London Physician. Who was Contemporary with . . . King James and King Charles the First*, p. 6. London, 1715.
- Macalpine, I., and Hunter, R., *Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of London*, 1970, 4, 169.