

BOOK REVIEW

Asylum: Inside the Pauper Lunatic Asylums *by Mark Davis*

Paperback, 96 pages
Amberley Publishing
May 2019

This short book is a modern-day photographic record of 17 asylums in Britain and Ireland. Most were built in the Victorian era and ceased to function following the Care in the Community Act 1990. These old buildings have been abandoned, converted to alternative uses, or demolished. Abandoned asylums are now a popular source for exploration and photography. The photographs in this book show how quickly such old buildings deteriorate.

The book comprises 19 pages of text and 180 colour photographs. External and internal photographs of each institution are preceded by a short and easy-to-read historical summary. Interesting and evocative images of large recreation rooms, ballrooms and long corridors are a reminder how life must have been for the patients and staff in these institutions. The photographs are of high quality, the author being a professional photographer.

However, the photograph of a unique stained-glass window at Stanley Royd Hospital, Wakefield, now lost, was taken at an angle so that the figures of patients and staff are not clearly visible. Images of split corridors are included but their purpose is not explained in the associated captions. Undue emphasis is perhaps placed on the photography of decay, an example being a flooded room with the associated caption "the water ingress makes for superb reflections".

Although images of asylums are readily available, this book provides a valuable resource extending to a wide range of institutions – including asylums that no longer exist – with several photographs of each providing a permanent record that will aid future researchers. However, it lacks depth and other features expected of a historical source. The summaries lack detail and are not supported by references. Some information has been taken directly from sources that have not been quoted. There are no recommendations for further reading. There is no index and page numbers are difficult to follow.

Opportunities for historical study have not been exploited: for example, there are some images of wall graffiti. Were these written by patients or staff, or by visitors? Did "brain surge" and "destroyed by a storm" refer to acute psychiatric episodes or something else? There is also a tendency to over-dramatise, an example being the repeated use of "Pauper" in the naming of some institutions when this is incorrect.

Asylum will appeal to those with an interest in old psychiatric institutions as buildings but is more of a book for the curious reader than a source for in-depth historical research.

Mike Collins
July 2019

Published online at www.bshm.org.uk.