

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **The Princess Christian Farm Colony and Hospital 1895-1995: "Just a Bit Barmy!" by Chris Rowley**

Paperback, 220 pages  
Chris Rowley  
Jan 2019

The Princess Christian Farm Colony and Hospital in Kent owed its existence to the Victorian physician John Langdon Down whose interest in what would now be termed learning difficulty led to the eponymous term Down's syndrome. Chris Rowley traces the life of this institution in a beautifully produced paperback with crisp text and numerous coloured maps, photographs and documents.

From an original idea in the 1890s, the Princess Christian developed into a working farm and home for 150 "feeble-minded" residents known as colonists. Originally a charity and funded largely by patronage, it was taken over by the NHS around 1949, then run down and eventually closed in 1994 as colonists were transferred to care in the community.

Rowley's style is chatty and informal and he strives to avoid the pitfall of providing a narrative litany of names, occupations and buildings by injecting anecdotes, first-hand testimony from locals and workers who remember the later years of the colony, and some discursive speculation of his own, for example, ruminations on the changing nomenclature of learning difficulty.

Historical sources include committee minutes, plans and planning applications, local newspaper reports and the house magazine, *Spotlight*. Although it was "not practical or sensitive" to interview surviving colonists, a few first-hand recollections by former workers and volunteers illuminate the later years. Unfortunately, no medical or administrative records exist prior to around 1950; it was rumoured that they were destroyed when the NHS took over.

The author has commendably unearthed as much as he could but, given the paucity of his source material, the daily life and routine of colonists remains a mystery. There are, however, tantalising glimpses. One local recalled that prior to the 1960s, parents were only allowed to visit once a year. A volunteer in the 1980s described insults and abuse from staff towards colonists and an occupational therapist around the same time described the previous highly regimented regime as from the "Dark Ages". Colonists had to work or face confiscation of their meagre pocket money. On the other hand, many locals and ex-workers described a happy family atmosphere.

Other unexplored areas include the role of patronage, which was instrumental in setting up the Princess Christian and the colonist's backgrounds. Again, there are glimpses: one elderly resident sent, aged 17, after her mother had died; another after stealing a packet of cigarettes.

Rowley attempts, on occasion, to place his history in the context of contemporary thinking around mental illness but, in essence, this remains a charming, accessible history of one institution. This book will interest those involved in local history or who seek a pleasant read about the fortunes of an initially pioneering scheme.

**Martin Edwards**  
**May 2020**

Published online at [www.bshm.org.uk](http://www.bshm.org.uk).