



Henry Hawkins: Founder of Together

A short biography of the founder of the country's oldest community mental-health charity



Rev Henry Hawkins, Chaplain of Colney Hatch Asylum, was the driving force behind the formation of Together – the country's oldest community mental-health charity – over 125 years ago.

Early inspiration

Henry Hawkins was born on 25 September 1825 and grew up in Gosmore, a village near Hitchin, the only son of a prominent surgeon. His only sister Matilda died at the age of 10 when Henry was 25.

He was privately tutored by a Rev John May in Moulsey (?). It seems likely that it was during this period that Henry developed his interest in asylum work because his tutor was himself a future asylum chaplain, who went on to become Chaplain of the Middlesex County Asylum at Hanwell after Henry went up to Oxford in 1844.

After graduating, Henry went to Wells Theological College, one of many members of his family before and after him to enter the Church. On leaving Wells he became a deacon, then Curate of 'Moulsham' (possibly Moulsecoomb, E Sussex?) in 1849, before being ordained in 1851. Two years later, now Curate of Barking, he married his cousin, Mary Hawkins, before taking up another curate's post at Cuckfield, West Sussex, in 1854.

Family life

Henry and Mary had eight children, four sons and four daughters. The eldest son Francis followed Henry into the Church eventually becoming Prebendary of St Paul's Cathedral. *His* son, Robert, was Canon of St George's Chapel, Windsor. (We are very grateful to Robert's son Tony Hawkins – Henry's great grandson – for all the information about his family that he has given us.)

Sadly two of Henry's sons died young, one in childhood. But Edward the other surviving son became a doctor, while one daughter Henrietta worked with her father at Colney Hatch and her sister Mary was a nun.

Asylum chaplain

It was when the post of Chaplain at the Sussex County Asylum at Haywards Heath became available in 1859 that Henry was able to begin what would become his life's work.

The role of Asylum Chaplain involved caring for the spiritual wellbeing of patients and staff, taking chapel services, conducting funerals, organising volunteer helpers, and running the library and educational classes.

We can glean more details of what was involved from the chaplain's reports that Henry wrote for each of the asylum's annual reports during his eight years at

Haywards Heath. From these, for example, we learn that another aspect of the job involved replying to the relatives who wrote to the asylum to find out how patients were progressing.

We also learn about some of the small but important ways in which Henry worked to improve the way patients were treated. In one report, for example, he argued for, and apparently later secured, the introduction of markers for graves and names on coffins: humane gestures in a world where 'pauper lunatics' were buried in unmarked graves.

Other reports show how he encouraged those in the potentially insular world of the institution to look outside its walls, arranging visits from missionaries who told stories of their travels overseas, and delivering talks himself, including one on the 'cotton famine' that left thousands hungry in the mill towns of the North West during the American Civil War.

Colney Hatch

In 1867 Henry moved to the Chaplain's post at Middlesex County Pauper Lunatic Asylum at Colney Hatch. (Perhaps his former tutor John May at Hanewell put in a good word for his former pupil.) And it was here that Henry was to spend the rest of his career.

Colney Hatch (later Friern Hospital) is in New Southgate, north London. It was the largest asylum in Europe. Almost as infamous as the Bethlem Hospital, its name appeared in 'comic' songs such as 'Here's Another One Off to Colney Hatch', and became a generic term for an asylum in writings of the time. William Morris in his *News from Nowhere*, for example, writes: 'There certainly seemed no flavour in him of Colney Hatch'.

Like other such institutions, the Middlesex Asylum was designed to be self-sufficient with its own farm, laundry, needle room etc, 'staffed' by patients. Built between 1849 and 1851 using more than ten million bricks and with a foundation stone laid by Prince Albert, Colney Hatch appeared very grand – from a distance. Close up it was rather a different story: almost as soon as it was finished the Commissioners in Lunacy who inspected it were describing it as 'altogether out of date'. Wards were dank and dark with small Italianate windows that had to be replaced immediately with larger sash panes (in a replacement programme that took 40 years to complete).

For much of its life the asylum housed over 2000 patients, many more than it was designed to hold, and almost from day one there were

problems with overcrowding and a huge waiting list.

Despite all the problems, a building that had cost so much to build would not be abandoned quickly, and it continued to function as a psychiatric hospital throughout the 20th century. In fact it wasn't until 1993 that Friern Hospital finally shut down, when – more than 100 years after Henry had argued for care in the community – most former patients were moved into care homes in local boroughs, including one run by Together in Enfield.

The building itself was then renamed Princess Park Manor and transformed into luxury apartments. (See if you can spot any mention of the site's history in the developer's sales pitch at www.comerhomes.co.uk/ppm/aboutppm.html ...)

Lost lives

The patients at Colney Hatch in the second half of the 19th century had a variety of mental-health problems, physical illnesses and learning disabilities. As Richrd Hunter and Ida Macalpine describe in their history of Colney Hatch *Psychiatry for the Poor*, 'The decision to send a patient to the asylum was made on social as much as medical grounds. Patients rendered socially intolerable by disease were certified as "lunatic" irrespective of what made them ill.'

'Patients were divided into "curable" and "incurable" by duration of illness and the presence of "complications" like paralysis, epilepsy and dementia.'

Some of them didn't even have mental-health problems (at least when they entered the asylum...); they were deaf, dumb or blind or had learning difficulties, and simply had nowhere else to go.

For financial reasons – those in county asylums were paid for by the county rather than the parish – it was also expedient to send people with chronic physical illnesses to asylums. So asylum medical superintendents reported that their hospitals were home to many with diseases such as TB and syphilis whom the workhouses had simply found it too time-consuming or expensive to treat.

Admitted at all ages from of 10 to 86, the records show that patients came from the full range of Victorian trades: sealing-wax makers to mother-of-pearl workers, hawkers to porters.

The records also show that latterly about 150 patients a year were released from Colney Hatch of which about 30 per cent relapsed.

Treatment

For those who remained in the asylum, treatment was often non-

existent, inappropriate or simply inhumane.

Dr Shepherd, the Medical Superintendent in charge of male patients from 1862 to 1881, was a firm believer in the curative properties of Turkish baths. 'Dirty' or 'destructive' patients were locked in small rooms, naked and without a bed or pillow. Belts, locked gloves and other restraints were also used during this period, for which Shepherd was criticised by the Commissioners in Lunacy in 1867, 1870 and 1872.

Silent voices

Most patients at Colney Hatch were both poor and ill. Doubly disempowered, their voices were seldom heard, and the saddest thing that we have discovered while researching the story of Henry's life is the complete lack of testimony from patients: nowhere, it seems, are the thoughts and ideas of those at Colney Hatch in Henry's time recorded in their own words. We will continue to look, but it seems most likely that such records simply never existed.

Current debates

If patients themselves were denied a voice, others had plenty to say.

Henry worked at Colney Hatch during a time of great debate among

the 'great and good' of the psychiatric profession. Leading doctors such as John Connolly, Medical Superintendent at Hanwell Asylum; Charles Lockheart Robertson, from the Sussex Asylum; and Daniel Hack Tuke, great grandson of William Tuke, the founder of the York Retreat, argued against the use of mechanical restraints in asylums. But some of the new 'humane' ways of controlling 'difficult' patients that they proposed – such as the use of drugs like opium, chloral and bromides, seclusion and 'wet packs' (wrapping people in wet sheets) – were scarcely better than the means they replaced.

Debate also raged over the very future of the asylum system. As early as the 1860s it was already clear that the huge asylums – built to solve the problem of people with mental-health needs being shut away in workhouses where they were cruelly treated and received no special support – had simply created problems of their own.

Many patients in the new asylums became institutionalised, and, as the Commissioners in Lunacy reported of Colney Hatch in 1874, 'an asylum of this magnitude, and occupied by the description of patients here now, is quite beyond satisfactory management'.

To differing degrees, reforming and radical doctors advocated alternative models of home-based care in the community, based in particular on the approaches to mental-health care adopted in Belgium and Scotland.

A life's work

It was in this context that Henry continued his work at Colney Hatch. His duties were the same as at Middlesex, with the addition of organising a collection of musical instruments provided for the patients' use. (These were one element of the lighter side of life in Colney Hatch that is revealed in the following list of entertainments and social events recorded as having been held in 1868: 'summer and winter fêtes, 15 balls, three dramatic representations, three magic-lantern shows, two concerts and two lectures'.)

Henry's annual reports talk largely about details of the arrangements for chapel services and educational classes etc. We know that he also set up a Guild of Friends of the Insane at Colney Hatch, organised collections for a wide range of local charities, and worked on behalf of individual patients, for example, by seeking out jobs for those leaving the asylum.

As well as taking care of his day-to-day duties – no mean feat when

Colney Hatch contained the three-quarter-of-a-mile longest corridor in Europe, and, as one visitor reported, it took 'five hours to walk the hospital and see every ward' – Henry found time to produce a range of 'tracts' offering solace and advice to both staff and patients. These included *Work in the Wards*, *Visiting Day at the Asylum*, *Friendly Words with a New Patient* and *Made Whole: A Parting Address to Convalescents on Leaving an Asylum*, several of which were published – and reprinted many times – by SPCK.

Filled with advice on all aspects of physical, mental and spiritual health, with supporting Biblical texts these do contain the admonishments about the evils of strong drink and 'bad books [that] ... paint vice in bright colour' that we might expect of 19th century tracts. But there is also a warmth and compassion that sets Henry's words apart. And, although, the overt regiliosity may be problematic for many modern readers, the underlying spiritual principles he advocates are universal.

At a practical level, Henry advises convalescent patients to 'look for the little pleasures as you would flowers by the wayside' and suggests they think of getting a pet bird, saying 'a bird's song has often reached the heart'. No doubt some of his ideas

may now appear somewhat dated, naive or paternalistic, but what shines most clearly through the high Victorian language is the spirit of a gentle, kind and caring man, and – something that does not fit well with modern concepts of the relationship between professionals and those who use mental-health services – the great love he felt for those in his care.

Nowhere to go

There was one group of patients whose situation particularly touched Henry. This was those people who were well enough to leave but had no home, family or job to go to. Women in particular found it hard to reclaim their place in society. Job opportunities for uneducated women were limited and many employers then, as now, unwilling to offer work to someone who had had mental-health problems.

In 1869 the Medical Superintendent wrote 'I could discharge more than 100 of the females without the slightest hesitation and at once if I could ensure for them outside the most reasonable consideration for their condition and infirmity. This, however, is utterly beyond my power...' But Henry set about doing everything within *his* power to make

sure these people *would* be offered that consideration.

Combining practical application of the latest psychiatric ideas about 'boarded-out' care with a practical determination to get something done, in 1871 he wrote in the *Journal of Mental Science* (later the *British Journal of Psychiatry*) 'A Plea for Convalescent Homes in Connection with Asylums for the Insane Poor'.

In it Henry described his vision for 'a kind of half-way house, between the asylum and the world' in which people could live while they readjusted to life outside Colney Hatch and looked for work.

Together is formed

In 1879 Henry wrote again to the *Journal of Mental Science* on the subject of 'After Care', describing the problems faced by those leaving the asylum, and the urgent need for 'convalescent homes' and job opportunities.

And on June 5 that year he organised a meeting of some of the most important names in psychiatry at the time, including Drs Daniel Hack Tuke, John Bucknill and Charles Lockheart Robertson, at which was formed the charitable organisation dedicated to 'after care' that his article had advocated.

Henry himself was elected the first Secretary of what was then

known as the After-care Association for Poor and Friendless Female Convalescents on Leaving Asylums for the Insane. Though in 1886, having brought the organisation into being, he stepped down to concentrate on his first love – his work at Colney Hatch – and the Association appointed a paid Secretary to replace him.

Retirement

When Henry finally retired in 1900 he had worked at Colney Hatch for 33 years, and in retirement, according to his obituary in the *Friern Barnet Parish Magazine*: ‘The Asylum still saw his friendly face. His life for its inmates became more than ever a labour of love; for nothing could daunt the interest he felt there.’

Henry died aged 79 on 16 December 1904 after a short illness, and was buried at St James the Great in Friern Barnet. His parish magazine obituary also included this touching tribute: ‘To meet him in the street was a privilege and a delight, and one hears on every side how his pleasant little greetings, his humorous sayings, or his tender words of sympathy, have been welcomed and treasured by all who received them. And then there was that charming humility of disposition, which so persistently refused recognition – in fact, any expression

of gratitude almost seemed to distress him.’

Henry’s legacy

The organisation that Henry founded has grown into the Together of today. The story of the charity’s growth is told in *Community Care in the Making: A History of Together 1879–2000* (available from Together). A century and a quarter after it was founded, Together is a leading national charity working for wellbeing: that means we support people with mental health needs to get what they want from life and to feel happier. We do this by running a range of services across the country; by campaigning and doing research; and by educating local communities about their own mental health needs. In everything we do we are inspired and guided by the hopes and wishes of the people we support.

To find out more about Together’s work, call us on 020 7061 3400 or visit our website www.together-uk.org

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