

War Worry

How the First World War affected the mental health
of people in Worcestershire



The language and words used to describe patients of Powick Mental Hospital are taken directly from the case notes. These words do not identify people living with mental ill health today. They have been identified with inverted commas.

WORRIED ABOUT CONSCRIPTION

Feckenham Man's Suicide.

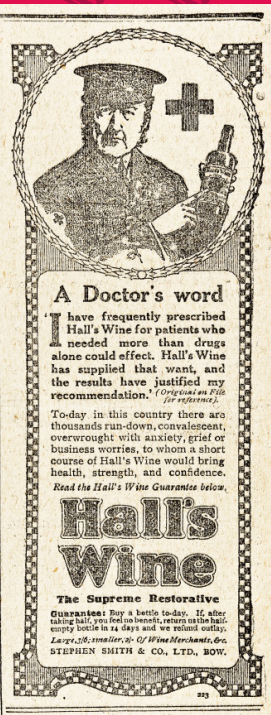
On Tuesday afternoon, Mr. G. F. S. Brown (District Coroner) held an inquest at Feckenham, respecting the death of James Edward Dicks (56), single man, and blaster, The Square, Feckenham.

James Edward Dicks, father, said that his son had been rather funny in his head over conscription, but he was very well in bodily health. He went to work at the Enfield Works, Redditch, on Friday morning. His mother missed him. Witness searched for him and found him in the brew-house hanging by a strap. Witness fetched the police, who cut him down.

P.C. Walter Kear said that Dicks had been peculiar for the past few weeks. On Saturday morning witness was fetched. He forced the brew-house door, got a knife, and cut the strap. The body then fell to the floor. The buckle part of the strap was tight round Dicks' neck. The other part of the strap was fastened to a beam above the door. He was dead. There was a chair upside-down, and it appeared that Dicks had stood on it while he fastened the strap and then kicked it away. Witness thought that Dicks was worrying because he thought he would be fetched as a conscript. He had attested, but had not received his papers.

Dr. Robert McLaughlin Banks said that Dicks called to see him on Friday morning. Witness thought that his mental condition was not very good, and advised him to have a rest. Witness told Mr. Masters, who accompanied him, to tell Dicks' relatives and friends that he would go "off his head" if he did not have a change and a rest at once. Witness noticed no suicidal tendencies about him.

Thomas Williams, foreman over Dicks, said that he went about his work as usual on Friday morning. His group had been called up. Verdict of "Suicide whilst of unsound mind."



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This project examined little-accessed medical records and local newspapers. It combined these sources to assess the psychological effects of war on Worcestershire residents.

Many histories have concentrated on how soldiers were affected by the war, while recent histories have been concerned with civilians.

In Worcestershire, local newspapers contained articles on worry and loss. While most civilians must have coped with war worries at home, many of the worst affected became patients at asylums like Powick Mental Hospital. Records from Powick show how patients suffered the effects of war. Civilians were treated alongside soldiers evacuated from the front who had shell-shock and other psychological conditions.

Read All About It: First World War affects mental health

Local newspapers were subject to less censorship than national ones so are an invaluable source. Articles reveal how people felt during the war and adverts for medicines suggest how it might have affected them.

In Worcester, Berrow's Worcester Journal and Worcester Herald published stories on many aspects of the war and described how it affected all aspects of life.

Articles reported on the movement of soldiers and the process of conscription, with absentee lists and tribunals. They publicised collections for serving soldiers and prisoners of war.

Articles also demonstrated how much life had changed. Civilians were asked to volunteer for different activities, suffered food shortages and shortened drinking hours, and were fined for breaking the lighting order.

Although only 670 civilians were killed in the UK during the First World War, the stress of warfare haunted their dreams. One measure of civilian stress might normally be suicide statistics, but the number of suicides fell during the war. It has been suggested this is because of societal cohesion, but it may be because of death from other causes. The number of civilians committed to asylums also fell during the war, but this statistic may have explanations other than improved mental health. It has been suggested there were lower committal rates because of a shortage of doctors and their reluctance to diagnose patients to overcrowded, short staffed asylums.

Along with civilians, wounded and evacuated soldiers were admitted to asylums. These men were suffering from various ailments including shell-shock.

Shell-shocked Soldiers: a symbol of the inhumanity of war



There was a strong public feeling that soldiers should not be treated like pauper asylum patients, since their mental illness was seen by the public as having been inflicted on them. So at local mental hospitals like Powick, they were registered under a new category of 'service patients'. They were given special privileges and wore a blue felt uniform to distinguish them.

The Worcester Herald reported on the local council's fear that 20 soldiers arriving in September 1916 would cost the rate payer. But these patients were paid for by the War Office. Powick Mental Hospital charged an extra two shillings and sixpence for each 'service patient'. 30 service patients would arrive in total during the war, and many of these would stay beyond the end of the war.

Woodbine Willie described the effects of shells on the men around him. A vicar in Worcester before he signed up as a chaplain on the Western Front, Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy was nicknamed 'Woodbine

Willie' for giving cigarettes to injured soldiers. He described how the shells made men 'lose their nerve'. Men tried not to show it but they would lose control of themselves and start shaking, crying, or shivering. They might be blinded or deafened, struck dumb or even paralysed. And many describe an exhausted look in soldiers' faces.

The military authorities struggled to treat psychological disorders and maintain discipline. They debated the reasons for shell-shock, possible treatments, its effect on discipline and whether to pay pensions. Some suffering from it were even shot as deserters. The main objective of the military was to remove the suffering soldier from the front line to prevent 'contagion'. The physical symptoms were treated with group therapy and hypnosis. Hypnosis aimed to persuade the patient towards more appropriate responses to stress. Electric shock therapy was sometimes used alongside hypnosis as psychotherapy methods began to develop.

Patients in their 'hospital blues' with nurses at Abbey Manor VAD Hospital, Evesham.



Powick Mental Hospital: a haven for the 'insane'

Worcester City and County Lunatic Asylum opened in 1852 to house just 200 local patients. By the beginning of the First World War it housed nearly 1,000 of the 140,000 'notified insane persons' in borough asylums across the country. By now it was called Powick Mental Hospital.

Powick was set in the beautiful Worcestershire countryside with acres of grounds, and even a farm to keep patients occupied and to provide food. Patients also helped with the boiler, the laundry, gardening and cleaning wards. Those admitted were diagnosed with various ailments and, like in other asylums, a mix of cases lived together.



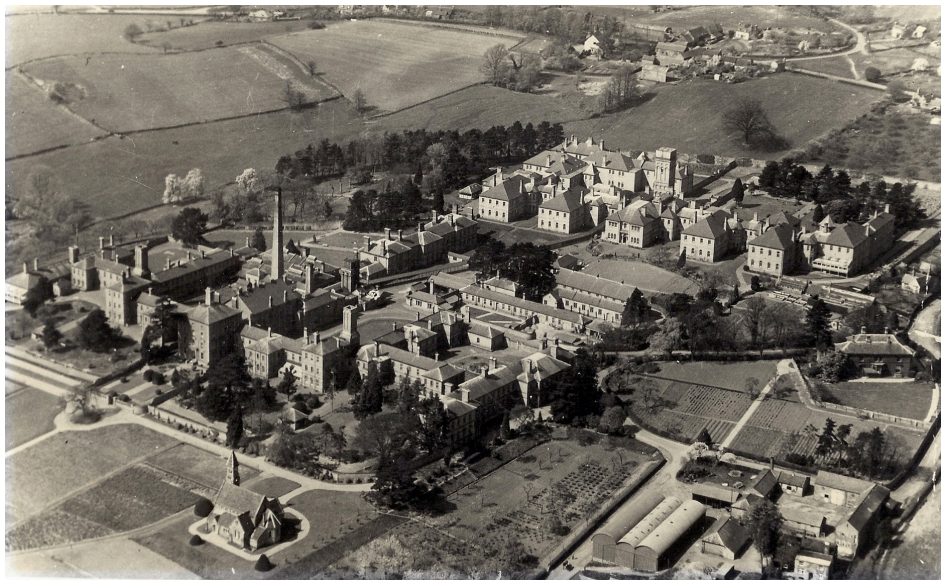
Asylums transferring patients to Powick during the First World War

British Mental Hospitals: the effects of war

Nine larger asylums became military hospitals during the war and patients were moved to other hospitals. Powick took 218 patients from Rubery Hill Hospital at Winson Green, Birmingham, and 50 from Northampton County Asylum. Patients were also moved here from asylums at Montgomery and Herefordshire. Service patients arrived from Southampton, Aldershot and Liverpool. This swelled the numbers of patients, especially those with higher needs. To make room, some of the calmest patients were "discharged recovered" or transferred to workhouses. The quietest remaining patients were moved to wards in The Annexe: an additional building unattached to the main asylum. Later, a day room within the main building was converted into a combined day room and dormitory with 'beds made up on the floor'.

While the number of patients at Powick increased, staff reduced in number. Nationally, 42% of staff at asylums volunteered for service, and by 1916, 23 of Powick's staff had left. They were replaced by staff who were often elderly, always inexperienced, and in lower numbers than those who left.

Personal relationships between medical staff and patients were impossible due to overcrowding. Yet the chaplain 'minister[ed] to spiritual wants and instruction' daily. He reported in 1915 that 'many patients have shewn great interest in the war'. Subsequent annual reports though did not mention the war or its effect on patients. This may have been a conscious decision to avoid mention of the war to reduce stress for patients, although the decision is not mentioned in meeting minutes.



Powick Mental Hospital, © Charles Hastings Education Centre

Who Were Worcestershire's Pauper Lunatics?

Those admitted to asylums were those with the most extreme cases of mental illness. These buildings were designed to protect the patient from the stress of society, but also kept the rest of society healthy by removing them. They became homes for 'incurables' and havens for solitary older people.

The majority of patients at Powick came from Worcestershire including Evesham and Pershore. The soldiers who arrived there were also local. Yet, even before the war, agreements were made between asylums to transfer difficult patients in an attempt to calm and treat them. Patients at Powick during the war were aged between 15 and 82 (although in some asylums were as young as 6). Children were admitted as

'imbeciles' and sometimes were not even able to speak. Older patients might be diagnosed with 'senile dementia' and be described in their notes as 'childlike' and 'confused'. Many of the patients wandered, shouted, were 'dirty in habits' and occasionally were violent. Sometimes the patients even screamed and tried to get out at night. Some suffered from delusions, hearing voices or even seeing things. They might be diagnosed with mania or melancholia and considered suicidal or dangerous to others and have to be supervised and monitored.

This would have been exhausting work for attendants, made worse by the reduction in their numbers during the war as patients increased.



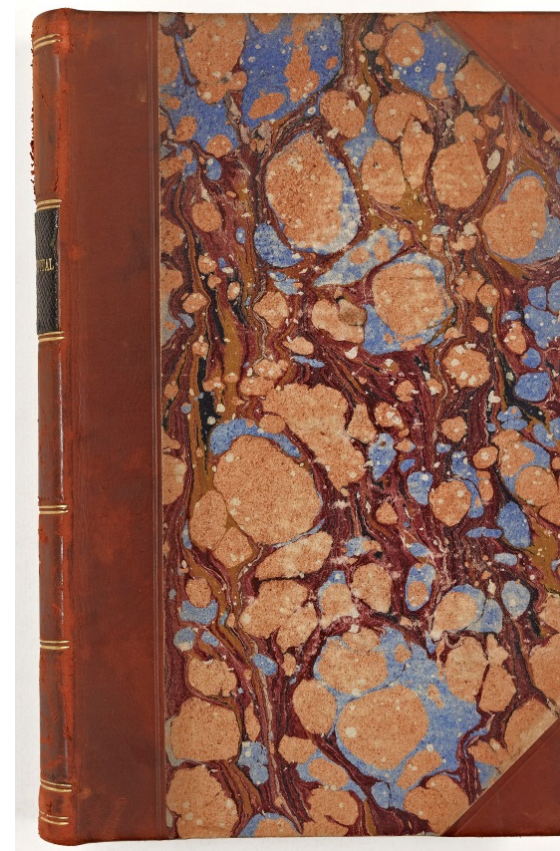
Patients at Powick during this period

Service patients were moved around the country by train, with psychiatric patients often travelling in unmarked carriages at the end of the train. They were unloaded last and carried in grey ambulances to avoid the noisy crowds at stations.

Although there are full notes for female patients during the First World War, notes for male patients at Powick survive only for a small period between the beginning of war to March 1916. During this period, there were 80 male patients at Powick, nine of these were 'service patients'.

The notes for a further 11 civilian patients mention war, or fear of war. They were mainly from Worcestershire. Those transferred from further afield had been in asylums since before the war so were protected from its stresses.

The content of records for female patients at the asylum are not as detailed as for the male patients. They missed family, or thought people were talking about them or trying to harm them, but their records do not mention the war. This may be because the women were not affected by the war, but it seems more likely that war-related content was not noted. Perhaps contemporary attitudes of male staff considered mention of the war in women's records as inappropriate, or perhaps the hospital was trying to avoid over-exciting these patients.



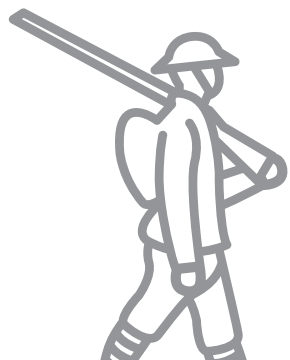
Patient Case Book from Powick Mental Hospital

Service Patients: 'not likely to become effective soldiers'

Soldiers were moved around the country from military hospitals to specialist hospitals and were eventually returned to the county where they had been born. This is true of the service patients who arrived at Powick, who had all been born in Worcestershire, although some were later transferred around the country to be nearer their families.



One soldier had been born in Droitwich, and transferred to Powick from the Royal Victoria Hospital Netley. Later in 1916 a group of soldiers came together to Powick and these were reported in the local newspaper. However, Like many of the early service patients to arrive, this one came alone. He had been with the 6th Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment and had not yet served overseas. He lived with his wife and children in Saltley, Birmingham. He was diagnosed with mania. His patient notes describe his delusions which varied each time he spoke to staff. He thought he had been to the front (but had not) and was wounded there, receiving a medal in France, been made a general, x-rayed the wounded, and helped extract them (all imaginary). His speech became slurred, his walk unsteady and his expression vacant, as he slowly became more unwell. By March 1916 he sadly died at Powick of 'general paralysis of the insane'.



Another soldier was born at Honeybourne and in 1911 was a boarder in Pebworth working as a Bank Clerk. He had enlisted on 2nd September 1914 to the Royal Army Medical Corps but served for only 71 days. His army discharge papers state he was 'not likely to become an effective soldier'. He had previously been a patient at Hatton County Lunatic Asylum in Warwickshire for 6 months. He was excited and confused having been collected from Cambridge Hospital, Aldershot by his father. By December 1915 he was one of the less ill patients to be "discharged recovered" to make space for worse affected patients, and lived until 1961.



A third patient, aged just 24 when he arrived at Powick in March 1915, was still there in the 1939 census. His notes stated he thought everyone was talking about him, and believed he 'should have been strangled by the men of his regiment'. He was depressed, cried when questioned, refused food, was confused, and kept away from other patients. By 1917 he was suffering delusions and hearing voices under the floor. In the following years he took more interest in his surroundings, was brighter and worked in the ward and gardens.

These military patients were affected by the war in different ways. While some were discharged they may have continued to suffer at home, just as those who remained in the mental hospital for many years. It is clear that the war affected them, and featured strongly in descriptions of their delusions.

War Worry: How were civilians affected by war?

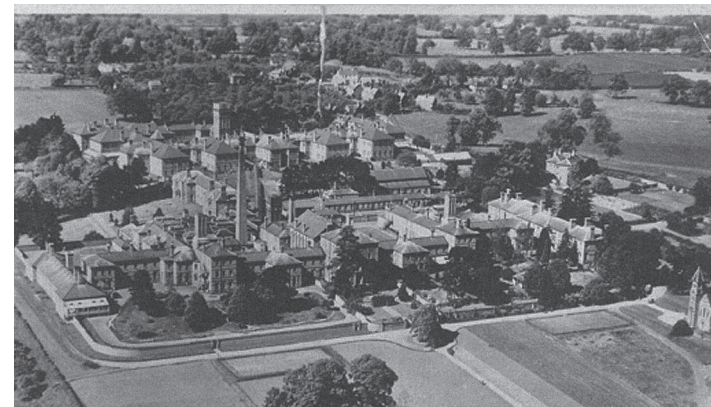
Civilian patients continued to arrive at Powick Mental Hospital during the war, and some describe war related themes in their delusions, demonstrating how the war was affecting their minds. One of the civilian patients claimed to be the cause of the war, while another said there was no war at all, and he would stop it if there was. A couple of others claimed to be traitors, one thought he was being poisoned by detectives because of this.

One patient from Tenbury was a forester. He was admitted to Powick in October 1915 with melancholia. His notes state he 'thinks he is being poisoned by detectives who think he is a German' and 'he thinks women in town shout at him "German spy."' By December he was 'discharged not improved' having escaped from Powick. He was readmitted by 1939.

Another civilian born at Snowshill, worked as a groom on a farm. He arrived at Powick in February 1915 and was diagnosed with mania. Although he was a civilian, he thought he was fighting the Germans, and 'could shoot them at 100 yards'. He was discharged in October 1915 as recovered, and he lived until 1933 in Upton.

A third civilian patient who came from Upton was admitted to the asylum in 1915. He believed he could 'end the war himself if he wanted to'. He thought he had aeroplanes and explosives and could lay telephone wire around the world in a day. His condition deteriorated, he became lost and confused, and sadly passed away in September 1917 with 'paralysis of the insane'.

The civilian patients were just as affected by the war as their military counterparts. Their delusions may have been created from what they read in the newspapers and from what people around them talked about, but would have felt very real to them. The rigorous process of admittance to asylums meant there was no likelihood they pretended their delusions.



Powick Mental Hospital

Conclusions and Recommendations

During the First World War, and because of it, asylum patients were moved around the country and a new category of 'service patients' was created. Mental Hospitals were overcrowded and short of staff. These issues are reflected in the account records and minutes for Powick Mental Hospital. Meanwhile the patient records show that war affected many of the patients and contributed to their mental illness.

There were issues of access to these patient records because of the way they were created, and because they contain sensitive data on vulnerable individuals. The records were intended for a different purpose so their usefulness for this research was complicated. But the records revealed some useful insights. Plus, sometimes what is missing

is as interesting as what exists. This is the case with the women's records which do not show any evidence that war had affected them.

This project has addressed some interesting issues. Further possible research could compare Powick to other asylums, look at patient movements around the country, or look more in-depth at patient records and treatments.

Advertisements for medicines for the symptoms of stress and anxiety appeared in the newspapers along with articles about how stressed people were.

Many people were affected by the war in different ways. While many coped with the changes during the war it made some people dangerously unwell. Those who suffered the most were admitted to mental hospitals like Powick.



Acknowledgements and Key References

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David Gunnell, 'Suicide in England and Wales 1861-2007: a time-trends analysis' Kyla Thomas Department of Social Medicine, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK*

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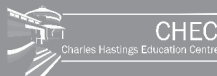
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