

# *Psychological* **MEDICINE**

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MONOGRAPH SUPPLEMENT 21

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A diagnostic analysis of the Casebooks of  
Ticehurst House Asylum, 1845–1890

by Trevor H. Turner

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Cambridge University Press

# A diagnostic analysis of the Casebooks of Ticehurst House Asylum, 1845–1890

Historical studies in psychiatry have been dominated, in recent years, by the analyses of social historians. These researchers have uncovered new and rich primary sources, as well as developing a theoretical approach viewing the management of 'madness' as secondary to professional power structures rather than a progress towards enlightenment. The rise of the nineteenth-century asylum and the concern as to the 'social construction' of mental illness (i.e. that such disorders merely represent contemporary forms of dissent or deviancy rather than any true nosological condition) have been especially significant topics. Given that such issues, in the guise of community care, continue to affect the practice of modern psychiatrists, the need for a clinical analysis of those deemed officially insane in the past seemed paramount. The conundrum of schizophrenia, and the theory of a 'recent disease' of viral origin, further exemplifies the need to clarify, if possible, the true forms of mental illness over the last 150 years.

Ticehurst House, a private asylum, flourished during the nineteenth century as the most expensive of such establishments, being owned and run by the Doctors Newington over five successive generations. The discovery of the full set of patient casebooks begun in 1845–6 made it possible to review in detail the clinical features of a complete cohort of patients admitted to the asylum between 1845 and 1890. Six hundred and one patients were thus analysed in terms of their age, sex, length of stay, symptoms, treatment and outcome. Modern operational diagnoses were used, and 80% of the cohort were found to conform to Research Diagnostic Criteria, in particular to the categories for schizophrenia and manic-depressive disorder. An additional finding was the high prevalence of movement and postural disorder amongst the schizophrenic group, as well as a significant trend towards the selection of a treatable, good-outcome group of patients with manic-depressive illness.

These results are discussed by comparison with other modern studies of the asylum period, and in the contemporary context of Victorian psychological medicine. It is suggested that the violence, physicality and chronicity of psychotic illness must be seen as central to the debate about the rise of the asylum in nineteenth century Britain. Furthermore, the similarity in core symptoms found in such patients and those seen in the 1980s indicates that the categories schizophrenia and manic-depressive disorder have a robust validity that is not confined to the social parameters of a particular time period.

# **Psychological Medicine**

Trevor H. Turner

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## CONTENTS

### List of Tables

Synopsis	<i>page</i> 1
Introduction	3
Method	11
Ticehurst House	11
The Casebooks	13
Assessment procedure	14
(A) Delusions	15
(B) Hallucinations	15
(C) Movement/posture disorder	15
(D) Masturbation	15
(E) Specific psychotherapy	16
(i) Flight of ideas	16
(ii) Passivity experience; (iii) Negative symptoms; (iv) Thought disorder	16
(F) Unusual disorders	16
(G) Treatment approaches	16
(i) Drugs	16
(ii) Numerical data	16
(iii) Cricket	16
(H) Violence/restraint	16
(I) Alcohol	16
(J) Suicide	17
(i) 'Schizophrenias'	17
(ii) 'Manic-depressive disorders'	17
(iii) 'Organic illnesses'	17
(iv) 'Neurotic disorder'	17
(v) 'Indefinite' ('?')	17
	....
Results	18
Movement and posture	21
Masturbation	21
Violence	22
Discussion	24
Reliability and validity of the data	26
Strengths and weaknesses of the source material	28
Implications of diagnoses	29
(A) 'Manic-depressive' and 'schizophrenic' groups	30
(B) 'Organic' group	31
(C) 'Indefinite' group	31
Contemporary diagnostic terms used at Ticehurst	31
Use of 'hysteria', 'hysterical mania' and related terms	34
Symptoms – delusions and hallucinations	37
Movement disorders	39

Masturbation	40
Violence and restraint	42
Suicide, 'attempted' suicide and suicidal risk	44
Specific psychopathologies, alcohol and 'unusual' diagnoses	46
(i) Flight of ideas	46
(ii) Thought broadcast	48
(iii) Unusual diagnoses	49
(a) Capgras syndrome	50
(b) Cotard's syndrome	51
(c) Other diagnoses	52
(iv) Other therapies	54
Physical treatments	55
(i) Feeding instruments	56
(ii) Mustard baths/pack	57
(iii) Electrical procedures	58
(iv) Sedative drugs	58
Conclusion	61
Appendix: Some representative cases, 1860–1869	64
References	68

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## LIST OF TABLES

1.	Modern diagnosis of Ticehurst patients, 1845–1890	<i>page</i> 18
2.	Diagnostic terms, from admission registers, for patients fulfilling modern diagnosis of ‘schizophrenia’, 1850–1889, by decennia	19
3.	Diagnostic terms, from admission registers, of patients categorized as ‘indefinite’ (‘?’), 1850–1889, by decennia.	19
4.	Diagnostic terms, from admission registers, for patients fulfilling criteria for ‘manic-depressive disorder’, 1850–1889, by decennia	20
5.	Length of stay of Ticehurst patients (1850–1889) by age, sex, marital status, modern diagnosis and outcome	21
6.	Modern diagnoses of Ticehurst House patients 1845–1890, relating them to length of stay, outcome, sex, mental status, movement/posture disorder, violence and masturbation (percentages)	22
7.	Treatment approaches (restraint, mustard baths, stomach pump, electricity) and incidence of violence at Ticehurst from pre-1849 to 1889, compared to total admissions	23
8(a).	Outcome of patients admitted to Ticehurst House, deemed at risk of suicide, from 100 consecutive admissions (January 1876–June 1881) by RDC diagnosis	23
8(b).	Outcome of patients admitted to Ticehurst House, deemed at risk of suicide from 100 consecutive admissions (January 1876 to June 1881) by contemporary diagnosis	23
9.	Cases in Ticehurst diagnosed ‘hysterical mania’ (HM) of hysteria (H) and related terms 1850–1890	35
10.	Cases in Ticehurst requiring restraint, 1860–1890	43
11.	Patients at Ticehurst presenting with Capgras or Cotard’s syndrome (1850–1890)	50
12.	The use of (a) cannabis (Indian hemp) and (b) chloral preparations at Ticehurst 1860–1890 (selected cases)	59