

The town hall's past as an asylum

By Emma Ailes

news@southwarknews.org

AS SOUTHWARK Council approves controversial plans to sell or lease all three of its Town Halls, the 'News' decided to take a look back at the history of some of these historic buildings, including Southwark Town Hall's little known former life as a lunatic asylum.

Situated in the grounds of Southwark Town Hall and with aspects still visible today, the building previously known as Alfred House and later Camberwell House was erected in 1777, with a further north side added in 1780.

The principal building was originally built by Mr. Wanostrocht to house King Alfred's School for Boys, where the famous poet Robert Browning was once a pupil, and was afterwards used by the Royal Naval School. In 1846, Camberwell House became a lunatic asylum.

At the time, the 'madhouse' was still a relatively new concept, as until the County Asylum Act of 1808 gave the Justice of the Peace the power to commission special institutions, those suffering from mental health problems largely languished in prisons, houses of correction or poor houses.

As a private establishment, however, Camberwell House was described as having a "a decided air of comfort". Set among twenty acres of beautiful grounds and pleasure gardens, the building contained a padded cell, but also a 'Bonton' - a top class apartment with an elegant sitting room, lined with mirrors, where 42 women in colourful dresses sat and drank tea.

In total, the asylum had 420 beds and 227 staff, and the patients were divided by class and gender, but age and insanity were mixed together. Its inhabitants were a mixture of publicly funded, and private patients who were placed there and paid for by their family.

A short distance away was the similarly fancy private asylum, Peckham House.

Built in 1785 on the spot where Harris Academy now stands, the building was originally the home of the wealthy Spitta family, who lived there until 1824. Charlie Chaplin's mother is also thought to have lived in Peckham House for many years. In 1826, it was bought and turned into an 'asylum for the mentally ill'.

With fancy drawing rooms for private patients, a ballroom and parties held every Monday evening where they were given small amounts of wine and beer, the patients lived a luxurious lifestyle.

The 'paupers' who lived in the out-houses did not have it so lucky. In 1829, there were 40 patients at Peckham House, but also 172 paupers living in the grounds who had been 'bought from the work house for profit'.

Both institutions finally closed and were sold off in the 1950s.

The borough was also home to many alms houses. Asylum Road in Peckham especially had several big alms houses, including the Asylum of



Camberwell House (main) and Peckham House



the Metropolitan Beer and Wine Trade Association, for the aged and unwell workers of the local brew-

eries. Chumley Gardens in Burgess Park was the location of an alms house

specifically for women, and gave charity including financial help and accommodation to elderly, poor, and

sick women, including women with depression and mental health prob-

lems. It was run by the Friendly Females Society, a charity founded and maintained by women, although it was necessary for a man to be the landlord, as women could not legally own property at the time.

Queen Victoria and later the Queen Mother were both patrons of the organisation, whose motto was "Love, kindness and absence of humbug."

Research for this article was done by volunteers at CoolTan Arts, a community Arts Centre that works with people who have experienced poor mental health, at the Royal Bethlem Hospital and Southwark Local History Archives.

The volunteers, who are a mix of people of all ages and abilities, use their research to run a monthly guided walk known as the Largactyl Shuffle, named after the strong, antipsychotic drug used for people with mental health problems that makes people shuffle.

The walks are held every third Saturday of the month. The next Largactyl Shuffle will take place on Saturday, December 18, meeting at 12pm at the Tate Modern, and will tell the story of artists who spent time in the Maudsley and Bethlem Hospitals.

For more information on CoolTan Arts, please visit: <http://www.cooltanarts.org.uk> or ring 020 7701 2696.