

## Private Minds, Public Histories:

### Discovering Archives of Mental Illness and Learning Disability at Surrey History Centre.

Surrey had more mental hospitals than most English counties, including 18<sup>th</sup> century private madhouses, Victorian county asylums like Springfield in Tooting or Brookwood in Woking and charitable foundations such as the Holloway Sanatorium at Egham and the Royal Earlswood Asylum for Idiots at Redhill. In the early 20th century these institutions were joined by Netherne Hospital at Coulsdon and the 'Cluster' of five large hospitals established at Epsom by the London County Council: Horton, Long Grove, The Manor, St Ebba's and West Park. When these large institutions closed in the early 1990s, Surrey History Centre rescued vast quantities of their historic records: admission and discharge registers, clinical records, case books and many thousands of case files.



**Record Room at one of the Epsom Cluster hospitals.  
Photograph: Julian Pooley**

Now cleaned, packaged, catalogued and preserved at Surrey History Centre in Woking, these fascinating records are proving a rich hunting ground for many family, social and medical historians but they are increasingly being used in imaginative and exciting ways by those with personal experience of mental illness or physical and learning disability.



**Women's ward at Brookwood Asylum, Woking, c.1870  
SHC ref: 3043/Box 4 /20.**

The Freewheelers Theatre Company brings together disabled and non-disabled actors, dancers, animators and film makers to explore issues associated with disability. In a recent project they were keen to learn more about the lives and experiences of young people of their own age and with similar conditions who had been admitted to Surrey hospitals a century ago. They visited our searchroom to see medical casebooks, patient newsletters, hospital theatre

programmes, photographs and even hospital menus that are preserved in the archives of these institutions.



**Maud Lipscombe, 23. A cigarette maker from Camberwell, admitted to The Manor Hospital, Epsom suffering from 'fright and overwork'. SHC ref: 6282/14/6/19.**

I've used these records before, with academics, family historians and reminiscence groups but this session was particularly successful because these young people were so fascinated by the people recorded in such detail on the case book pages. They seized on their experiences as individuals. What was wrong with them? Why were they ill? Why were they sent to a hospital so far from home? What about their parents, family, visitors? What medicines were they given? Were they shut away in wards? How did they spend their time? They were fascinated by the patient photographs fixed to the pages – a range of emotions or mental conditions fixed in sepia in what may have been the only photograph ever taken of that person. They were intrigued by the contrast between a placid expression in the photograph and the disturbed history and behaviour recorded in the case book, and also queried the similarity of the clothes worn by each patient (hospital issue) and background to the image (hospital curtain fixed to pole in the exercise yard). Their questions brought home to me just how much we can learn about the lives and experiences of our ancestors from these institutional records. The patients themselves may never even have seen these photographs and would certainly not have read their case notes, but a century later we meet them face to face at a particular crisis point in their lives. The Freewheelers used the records to create short, 'talking-head' style films in which a patient reads from a letter they have written to their family from the hospital ward. They are powerful, very personal insights into a world we can only glimpse through these remarkable records and they can be seen at <http://freewheelerstheatre.co.uk/productions/films/>

For further information about mental health records at Surrey History Centre, see [http://www.exploringsurreypast.org.uk/themes/subjects/mental\\_hospital\\_records/](http://www.exploringsurreypast.org.uk/themes/subjects/mental_hospital_records/)

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UK Disability History Month (UKDHM): <http://ukdhm.org/>