

People and places

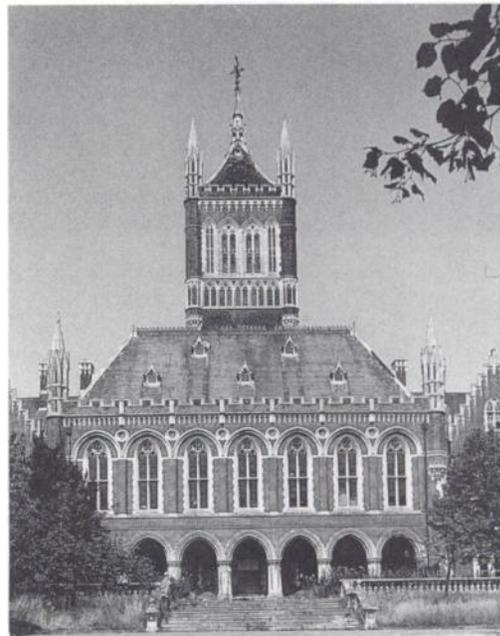
Hospital cases

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It could be said that one of the chief architectural legacies of the late 20th century, when it comes to be considered retrospectively, will be the wanton destruction and dispersal of buildings constructed in the previous century for the public benefit. Churches, schools and hospitals have been systematically sold off, and a good number of them, if not totally demolished, have lapsed into a pathetic state of limbo, particularly in this time of economic recession. Some of the worst cases of this known to the Victorian Society are hospitals of great architectural quality, constructed for the treatment of the mentally ill, then known as lunatic asylums.

The image of the Victorian asylum is a grim one in the minds of moderns; damp, dark “Gothic” horrors, little better than prisons. However, this was not really always the case. Take Holloway Sanatorium, a purpose-built Sanatorium, opened in 1884, and designed to the highest standards by the architect W. H. Crossland for the philanthropist Thomas Holloway (a fortune made on the proceeds of a patent medicine thought to be based on a compound of rhubarb). The same patron and architect were responsible for the construction of Royal Holloway College, the first purpose-built college for women in England.

The style of the hospital is modelled on 13/14th century Flemish Gothic, the tower and painted grand hall on the Cloth Hall at Ypres – the tower incidentally can be seen, looking a little like a stray Big Ben, near the sewage works on the M25. It was listed Grade I, in recognition of its architectural interest – the main building, its painted and gilded halls and fine chapel. Since it was closed ten years ago, there have been a series of proposals for its conversion and re-use, as hotel, offices, and private residential apartments. One by one the developers have come, bargained more and more concessions from worried planners and exasperated conservation groups, and then melted away, leaving the process to begin again. But each winter the weather takes its toll, each summer the vandals do more and more damage – one “vandal” so organised that he removed 30 foot of stone balustrading to the front terrace. The present developer-owner made some efforts to secure the site



The Holloway Sanatorium (Photo: The Daily Telegraph).



Holloway Sanatorium, Virginia Water, photographed in 1990. (Photo: Peter Howell).



Mendip Hospital, Wells (Photo: English Heritage).

with high fencing, and greater security on the gate. However, he continued to press the council for permission to erect more and more houses on the grounds, demolishing more of the original buildings to the rear, crowding the landscape setting with houses and flats. Then, in August of this year this developer went into Receivership; thus the whole process continues gloomily.

Things, perhaps, look more hopeful for the Mendip Hospital, Wells, in Somerset, ironically perhaps—given the architectural and decorative quality of Holloway, built specifically for a wealthy part of the population and now in an advanced state of almost hopeless decay—for the Mendip Hospital, in Tudorbethan style, was a County Pauper Asylum, by the architects Scott and Moffat. Scott was the architect of St Pancras Hotel, and the Foreign Office, and here, early in his career, demonstrates the Victorian ambition of creating a harmonious environment for the care and treatment of the mentally ill, with good architecture, a landscape setting with fine views. These buildings have been described by Elaine Harwood, who wrote an architectural thesis on the Victorian Asylum, as “one of the most attractive examples of pauper asylums of the time”. With the closure of the hospital at present occupying these

buildings, things have perhaps, got off to a better start here with a group listing and the declaration of a conservation area. However, I understand that we still await firm proposals for re-development.

One of the latest of the purpose-built asylums, designed by G. T. Hine, one of the principal asylum architects of the late 19th century, in 1901, at Hellingly, near Hailsham in Sussex, is also on the point of administrative redundancy.

These buildings perhaps illustrate the apogee of asylum design and plan-form. The whole range of these buildings, as in the above examples, sit in fine landscaped grounds. The future of the buildings is now uncertain, and demolition has been discussed, but that would, in the opinion of this Society, be just another example of a wanton disposal of a complex of architectural and historical interest.

It is surely possible that many of the better designed and built asylums, often set in well-planted grounds should be capable of imaginative re-use. Perhaps residential or office accommodation, or perhaps mixed-use incorporating some hospital use, or at least something which relates to the charitable or philanthropic purposes for which these buildings, some of them monuments of design of their time, were built.