



miscellany

A pennyworth of history

'One man's truth is another man's treasure.'

The truth of this aphorism struck me forcibly as, with increasing delight, I examined the contents of a plastic envelope surreptitiously slipped into my hand by a colleague. The treasure trove that had come my way so unexpectedly consisted of a cache of yellowing postcards of the penny-plain variety, which my benefactor's wife, an avid collector of memorabilia, had picked up in a junk shop – they featured my old hospital, Horton, Epsom.

Each was a joy, but what intrigued me most was the one inscribed 'Horton Asylum Chapel' (Fig. 1). The George V halfpenny stamp fixes it in time – 20 August 1913. What the photograph highlights is the size, if not grandeur, of the chapel typical of chapels built as essential adjuncts to mental health hospitals of that

era (Horton was opened in 1902). The size can be explained very easily: church services played a central role in the life of what was in effect a closed community. What is more, attendances were compulsory for all resident staff, that is, nurses and doctors on 'church duty', and for all patients fit enough to attend. The accommodation had, therefore, to be sufficient to meet the needs of a community approaching 2000 in number.

Seen in the right of the photograph was the splendid organ, too splendid, one might think, for the spiritual uplift of mere 'pauper lunatics'. Years ago I was struck by this apparent anomaly and found on investigation that Horton's organ was likely to have been bought from Winchester College when a new one was installed there in about 1905.

The reverse side of the postcard is just as intriguing as the obverse and bristles with mystery. For example, who was Miss Gertie Lane (or is it, ironically perhaps, Sane?) and who was her correspondent

whose signature is indecipherable? Was she (or he) a patient or a member of staff? And did Gertie ever raise the wind to enable her to take the train one fine Saturday afternoon to visit her friend? Furthermore, did Gertie appreciate that there were two stations in Epsom in 1913, the London and South West Railway on the site of the present station and the London and Brighton South Coast Railway, then in the Upper High Street? Either way, poor dear, she would be faced with a slog of a mile or more on foot before reaching the gates of the asylum.

Note: By chance, a local newspaper recently ran an article deploring the sad state of neglect of the chapel because, apparently, no decision could be made by the powers that be as to what to do with it.

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Fig. 1. The chapel, part of which was later made into the music therapy centre.