

“EVERY MATERIAL OF THE BEST QUALITY”. THE FOUNDATION OF BLOOMFIELD HOSPITAL, DUBLIN.

‘On the 29th day of the 4th Month 1807 the Representatives of the yearly Meeting of Friends of Ireland (together with some other Friends) being convened for the purpose of considering of the expediency of providing accommodation for Friends who may be Afflicted with Disorder of the Mind.

‘On enquiry being made it appeared to them, that some of that Description were then in this Nation, requiring care, better suited to their States and circumstances, and more in unison with the Ideas of Friends than could be had in the public Hospitals for Lunatics in this Country, when the following Judgement was come to—

‘That such an Institution is desirable and necessary, on a scale calculated to meet the circumstances of Friends of Ireland.

‘And in order to carry the same into effect, they entered into a Subscription among themselves, and the Sum Subscribed being such as to afford encouragement to persevere, they appointed James Abel, Richard Davis, Reuben Harvey, Samuel Bewley, Jonathan Pim Junr., Samuel Elly and William Harding to solicit further Subscriptions from Friends, and authorized them to call a Meeting of the Subscribers when they should think it advisable.’

So begins the first page of Bloomfield’s “Committee’s Proceedings” which are our main and, unfortunately, often the only documentary source of information about the psychiatric hospital founded by Friends in Ireland.

Psychiatry at that time was, at the best, largely custodial and, at the worst, brutal in the lack of care and deliberate infliction of worthless and painful physical treatments. This awful picture was gradually changing as a result of William Tuke’s foundation of the Retreat in York in 1792 and the concomitant changes in management introduced by Pinel in Paris. Tuke’s reforms were mainly humanitarian while Pinel’s were more political – the right of freedom.

William Tuke was a Quaker tea merchant with no medical knowledge but with a great compassion for the mentally afflicted and, in particular, for a young Quakeress who died from presumed neglect in isolation in the “York Lunatic Asylum”. Despite the strong opposition of many members of the Society including his wife, who ridiculed the

idea, he founded the York Retreat which was the first hospital to treat the mentally ill as patients, not solely for custodial care, and with the minimum of physical restraint. Chains were never used whereas it was estimated that eight out of ten inmates of English asylums were at one stage chained. The Retreat practice was for chains to be removed as soon as the patient arrived.

With these revolutionary ideas being publicised and especially because of the dramatic Quaker involvement in York, it was understandable that Irish Friends should consider the establishment of a similar hospital. There was evidently close liaison between William Tuke and the Bloomfield committee but records are scarce and the first note of the relationship was on 20 January 1810 when ‘William Todhunter, Jonathan Pim and Robert Fayle are desired to continue their care respecting a superintendent and to write again on some material points to W. Tuke at York’. This they did and a week later, on 27 January it was recorded that a letter had been sent to W. Tuke ‘respecting the intended building’ and his reply was read but details are not given and the letter is not available. On 31 January the above three Friends were exhorted to find a superintendent with ‘as much Dispatch as convenient being considered by this Committee and recommended by William Tuke that such a person might derive much advantage by spending a little time at the Retreat at York previous to his commencing here.’

The appointment of a suitable superintendent and also of a housekeeper was, indeed, vital for the success of the venture. The post of superintendent, at that time a non-medical one, concerned the whole administration of the hospital but, despite the urgency noted above, little was achieved and it was not until twelve months later, on 19 January 1811, when the building was nearly ready, that a circular letter was sent to all Monthly Meetings in Ireland appealing for applications for these two posts. A month later the committee was able to consider the letter from John Allen of Richill offering his services and that of his wife and a letter from Jane Eustace of Cork. It was decided to interview John Allen and to reply to Jane Eustace ‘when the Committee are enabled to do so’ which was not until 2 October, this seemingly ungracious delay being partly due to the Committee not appreciating that Jane Eustace was offering to work for no salary, but also to her not wishing to be involved in patient care.

The Committee being ‘not capable of judging of his fitness’ decided to send John Allen to York to get William Tuke’s opinion so that, if suitable, he would see how a revolutionary hospital was managed. His expenses were to be paid and it was agreed that, if appointed, his salary

would be £50 a year and his wife as Housekeeper and Matron, would receive £25 a year. Presumably the Committee did not consider sending ‘John Allen’s wife’ to York and it is interesting that she is only recorded thus as if she were John Allen’s property and did not have a name of her own.

A letter was sent to William Tuke introducing John Allen saying that he was considered to have been appointed to the post of Superintendent unless William Tuke considered him to be unfit. William Tuke’s reputation was such that the Bloomfield committee had complete confidence in his opinion regarding the appointment; after all, William Tuke had chosen George Jepson, a Yorkshire weaver, to fill the same post in York and this had proved an excellent choice. A postscript to the Committee’s letter of introduction tentatively suggested George Jepson’s coming to Dublin with John Allen to ‘set the Institution in motion’ and subsequently making periodic visits but there is no further reference to this matter; had it been implemented the early days of Bloomfield might have been different and less troublesome.

John Allen went to York and, although William Tuke saw less of him than intended, his opinion was very favourable –

‘I perceive better abilities than I looked for in a young man from Farming and Weaving – there is modesty and diffidence respecting his own abilities, that are rather an indication of usefulness than a discouragement to your entrusting him with the management of your Institution; especially on trial’.

Perhaps it was significant that William Tuke added the caveat ‘especially on trial’, and so partly avoided the final decision Bloomfield Committee had entrusted to him. William Tuke added that John Allen ‘seemed to be a little short of money’ so the Bloomfield Treasurer was instructed to refund William Tuke ‘Six pounds English’.

On 6 November 1811 it was recorded that ‘John Allen and his wife’ had arrived to take up their duties as Male and Female Superintendents, ‘John Allen’s Wife’ having been accepted on the basis of ‘a very agreeable account’ from Irish Friends.

The Committee had sought earnestly and long for suitable premises and, in September 1809 had decided to buy Bloomfield House and grounds. The title deeds show that Robert Emmett, the Irish patriot who was executed in 1803 for leading the rebellion of that year, was at one time the owner. The building subcommittee appears, from the minutes, to have been busy altering and adding to the premises but the main committee was unhappy and reprimanded them gently by informing them of the ‘uneasiness which the Committee feel in this backwardness in putting forward the business of the Building...’

There are many references to the structure and equipment of the building and, again, William Tuke provided much help even to details such as ‘lining the Patient’s Lodging’ as well as the ‘Thickness & kind of Flooring’ and the slating with ‘every material of the best quality’. He advised about windows and offered to send models of useful articles such as bedsteads, which were to be made of oak.

The proposal to found a new psychiatric hospital involved an act of faith that there would be sufficient financial help quite apart from the assumption that there was a need for such an institution and that patients would be forthcoming. At the first Committee, as noted above, the Friends involved had already ‘entered into a subscription among themselves and the sum subscribed being such as to afford encouragement to persevere...’ – surely a very worthy gesture. It was only a year and a half later, in September 1809 that Bloomfield House and grounds were bought for £1500 and £25 p.a. In October it was agreed to issue debentures to raise the necessary money. There were many individual and Monthly Meeting donations including one from Henry Tuke, brother of the founder of the York Retreat, who offered the profits from the sale of his books in Ireland.

On 26 April 1811, the accounts showed a balance of only £97.13.0 in addition to debentures valued at £305.8.10½. The first subscription from the Monthly Meetings had raised (to the nearest penny) £2592, the second £1160 and there was interest of £293, legacies of £70, and £33 from the gardens. The expenses were £1545 for Bloomfield, £2042 for the new buildings, £59 for rent and taxes, £25 for printing, advertising and stationery, £26 for furniture, £42 for the gardener and gatekeeper and near £4 for coal and carriage. On 9 October 1811, ‘The funds being exhausted and several sums being now wanted’ an appeal was made with apparent confidence to the Monthly Meetings for a third subscription. Money does not appear to have been a problem in the foundation of Bloomfield hospital.

The Retreat, as it was known for many years, was at the end of 1811 not yet ready for occupancy and, on 27 November ‘a young woman Friend disordered in mind’ could not be accepted. On 11 December the request for admission of ‘a female patient’ was rejected according to the rules of the institution as she ‘had forfeited her rights of Membership by marrying contrary to the Rules of our Society’; one wonders what was the outcome of that sad decision. On the 1 January 1812, Monthly Meetings were requested to send names of prospective patients and, on 15 January Dr. Baker was appointed Physician at £20 per annum ‘being most proper for this situation’. On 22 January the building was insured

for £2000 and the furniture for £500 all for a premium of £5.13.7. Fees for patients on the ‘lowest terms’ were to be 7s.7d. weekly but for others 10s. to £1 weekly. Everything appears to have been ready but there were still no acceptable patients and it was not until 16 March, 1812 that the first patient, a man, was received into the house. The Retreat was now in operation.

Who was the driving force or who was the man of vision? No name is more prominent than others in the Committee minutes. There was no William Tuke fighting against derision and ignorance to provide a dramatic picture of the foundation. Rather, one is impressed by the solid painstaking work of the Committee which met nearly every week at 8 a.m. and sometimes at 7.30 ensuring that Bloomfield would be based on the best of the York Retreat, that the seemingly harsh rules about loss of rights of membership would be meticulously and unkindly applied for a few months, that no woman served on the Committee, that ‘John Allen’s wife’ derived significance from her husband, but that ‘everything would be of the best materials’. The care and efforts of the Committee resulted in the solid foundation of a hospital which tended the mentally sick throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and, in the present century, has broadened its care to include the elderly and now, in 1988, is expanding further. A worthy living memorial to those industrious determined Friends hidden in the anonymity of a committee.

J.E.O’N. Gillespie

This article is based on the first volume of the “Committee’s Proceedings” of Bloomfield Hospital, then known as The Retreat. This large handwritten leather-bound book of 366 pages, originally unnumbered, covers the period 27 April 1807 to the 12 April 1815. It is one of the treasures of the hospital archives which, alas, are few in number.