



# Fascinating account of a local institution

The story of the Glenside hospital at Fishponds is well known, but in the 18th and 19th centuries there was also a privately-run asylum in Fishponds whose history is far more obscure. But a new book relates its often shocking history. Eugene Byrne reports.

**A**FTER Mike Jempson moved to Fishponds in the 1980s he was visited by a cousin who lived south of the river. She told him it was the first time she had been to the area, because it had a bad reputation.

No, not crime.

"She told me that our redoubtable grandmother Julia Dempsey (née McCabe) used to threaten her seven children with being sent to Fishponds if they misbehaved because it was where the mad and the bad were locked up in asylums."

Mike knew about the Glenside Hospital, but found that there was also a privately-run "madhouse" that predated it.

"No-one seemed know much about it so I felt it needed investigation."

And so his research began, uncovering a story that reads like something out of some Victorian novel, but which proved to be all too real.

"The fact that the private madhouse was run as a family firm for

centuries. These were rather more complex than folk-memory of ill-treatment of mental patients, and bizarre quack treatments might suggest.

Although there is plenty of ill-treatment and strange therapies. Some of the latter are more surprising than others. No-one familiar with the history of medicine will be surprised to find that, at various times, inmates at Fishponds were subjected to bleeding, induced vomiting and laxatives. But other supposed "cures" for mental illness included music, which might have been harmless enough, and "rotational therapy" - being spun around whilst strapped to a suspended chair.

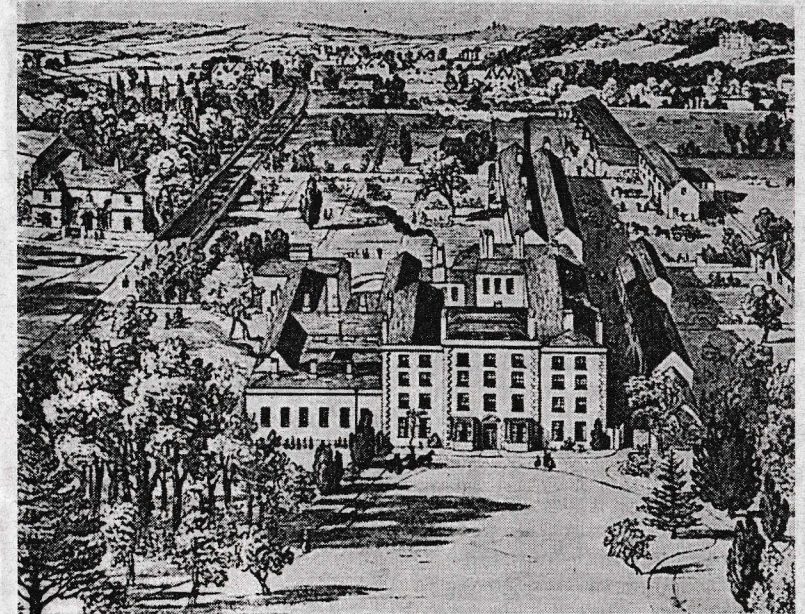
The asylum was founded in 1740 by Joseph Mason, who styled himself "doctor" but whose qualifications are unknown. Mason's father had been a licensed surgeon, though the profession was far less prestigious than now. They bled patients (because bleeding was thought to fix no end of ailments) and "cut for stone" - removed blad-

having now several Persons of Distinction under his Cure," said the advert in a Gloucester newspaper when it opened.

The ad went on to inform readers that "Doctor" Joseph Mason also undertook to cure the King's Evil - scrofula.

"Mason's Madhouse", as it would become known, would go on to be located at various different sites in the Fishponds neighbourhood. Throughout its 119-year history it also remained a family business. When Joseph Mason died in 1779 his daughter Sarah took over for a couple of years before it went to Mason's son-in-law John Cox who ran it jointly with Mason's grandson Joseph Mason Cox.

The latter then took full control until being succeeded by Mason's great-grandson Dr George Gwinnett Bompas ... and so it went on, though by the 19th century the men running the place - female members of the family also took charge, though only temporarily - had legitimate medical qualifications.



"Mason's Madhouse" - the asylum in the 1840s. The site is to the west of what's now Victoria Park but which at that time was part of Oldbury Court Road. The building was demolished later in the 19th century

John Conolly of Hanwell Asylum in Middlesex gave the most damning evidence. Conolly outlined how he tried to avoid chains and straitjackets at all costs, because his inmates almost always responded more positively to humane treatment. Everything that Conolly said at the hearings comes across down the years as just plain common sense.

Bompas may not have been ill-intentioned, but he was certainly

than in other places?

"As with so many of these things, it all depends on who is telling the tale. There is no doubt that some good was done in the numerous private asylums set up around Bristol, though we do have to ask about what really motivated these businesses.

"It was incarceration in Long Fox's Brislington House that persuaded John Perceval to set up the

And so his research began, uncovering a story that reads like something out of some Victorian novel, but which proved to be all too real.

"The fact that the private mad-house was run as a family firm for 120 years was surprising enough, but to discover that its founder may not even have had formal training was a shock, as was the extensive land and property holdings he built up in a relatively short time."

"That proved it was a lucrative business."

The result of his work is *'No cure, no Pay, Boarding excepted': 'Mason's Madhouses' in old Fishponds*. It's a fascinating account of a local institution - a business, really - of which little is known.

It also offers us some useful insights into the approaches to mental illness in the 18th and 19th

centuries. Conolly was styled himself "doctor" but whose qualifications are unknown. Mason's father had been a licensed surgeon, though the profession was far less prestigious than now. They bled patients (because bleeding was thought to fix no end of ailments) and "cut for stone" - removed bladder stones in a terrifying procedure that most patients only consented to if they were already in so much pain that they didn't care if it killed them. Which it often did.

Mason senior ran a private mad-house in Wickwar for "Melancholy, Mad and Distracted People" and this is where his son gained his early experience. Two years after he died, Joseph, who had taken over the business, opened a new asylum in Fishponds.

"His constant method has been to keep them (i.e. patients) with good Usage and wholesome Food,

until being succeeded by Mason's great-grandson Dr George Gwinnett Bompas ... and so it went on, though by the 19th century the men running the place - female members of the family also took charge, though only temporarily - had legitimate medical qualifications.

At the heart of Mike Jempson's book is an inquiry conducted into conditions at the asylum in late 1848. The hearing, in the room of the Lawford's Gate police court, effectively put Dr Joseph Carpenter Bompas in the dock. It wasn't a criminal trial, but his licence to run an asylum was on the line, and his methods were exposed for all to see.

Dr Joseph Bompas had only recently taken over the management on the death of his father, but he had been involved in the running of the place for a couple of years before this.

His medical credentials were impressive, but the inquiry was told of how patients were mistreated - chained up, manacled, put in straitjackets. He was accused of withholding letters between patients and relatives on the outside - a serious charge at a time when families might have relatives committed in order to get their hands on family assets. He was also accused of not keeping accurate records of medications or incidents.

The book outlines a number of individual cases that were brought up in the inquiry, and it is these which anyone interested in Victorian medical or social history will find interesting.

There was also a wider argument about the advisability of using "restraints" on patients. Here, Dr

Conolly tried to avoid chains and straitjackets at all costs, because his inmates almost always responded more positively to humane treatment. Everything that Conolly said at the hearings comes across down the years as just plain common sense.

Bompas may not have been ill-intentioned, but he was certainly out of his depth running a mental health facility. He was found wanting on over 100 counts and fined £1,710 - a huge sum. He withdrew his application for the renewal of his licence and emigrated to Australia with his family shortly afterwards.

"Mason's Madhouse" remained in the family before finally closing in 1859.

Mike Jempson started his research project during the Covid pandemic and he admits that this took him down "numerous rabbit holes" which "provided lots of fascinating facts about Fishponds" as well as the asylum itself.

Of his most surprising discoveries he cites "the shock treatments and the use of 'rotational therapy', which gave rise to the contemporary expression 'spin doctor'."

"And the discovery during lockdown that the Wellcome Foundation had digitised the verbatim record of the public inquiry that brought the dynasty down, really helped to bring the story to life and a fitting conclusion."

In Bristol we like to tell ourselves that the city was a pioneer in many aspects of the treatment of mental illness, with things like the Burden Institute, Dr Donal Early's 1960s "industrial therapy" or the 18th/19th century Long Fox asylum at Brislington.

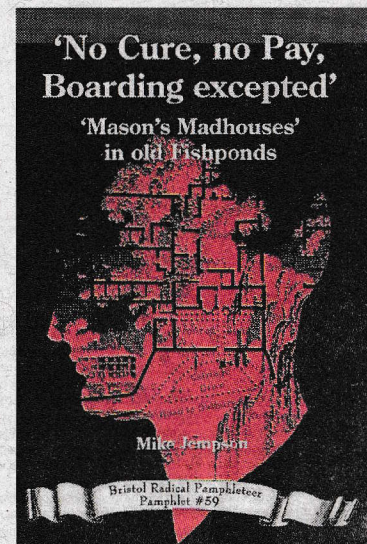
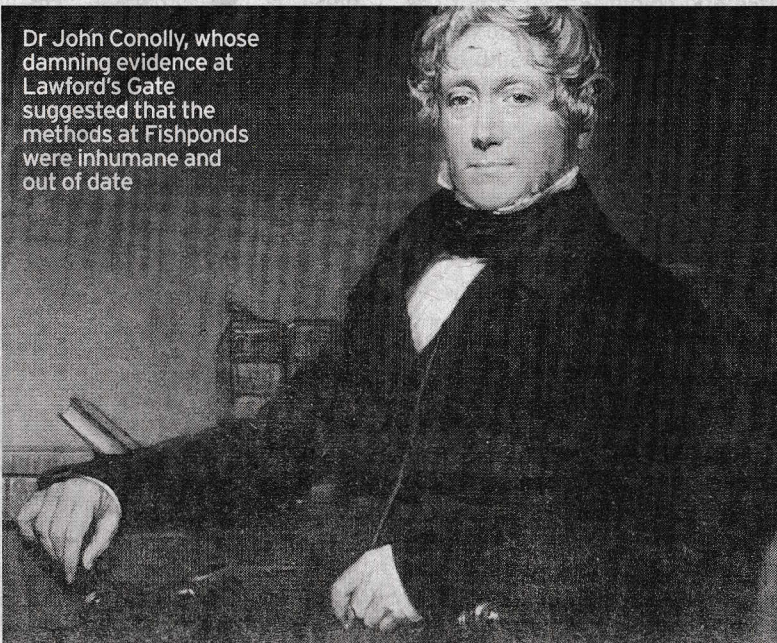
But was it really better to be a patient in the city in Victorian times

tale. There is no doubt that some good was done in the numerous private asylums set up around Bristol, though we do have to ask about what really motivated these businesses.

"It was incarceration in Long Fox's Brislington House that persuaded John Perceval to set up the Friends of Alleged Lunatics Society, precursor to today's MIND.

"One of the important things about local history organisations like the Bristol Radical History Group is that they help to illustrate the 'warts and all' minutiae so often glossed over by mainstream/establishment historians."

Dr John Conolly, whose damning evidence at Lawford's Gate suggested that the methods at Fishponds were inhumane and out of date



» *'No cure, no Pay, Boarding excepted': 'Mason's Madhouses' in old Fishponds* by Mike Jempson is published by Bristol Radical History Group and should be available in some local museum shops and bookshops.

It can also be ordered for £11 (including p&p) from [tinyurl.com/4pndk8xk](http://tinyurl.com/4pndk8xk)