

Eighteenth-century madhouse practice: the Prouds of Bilston

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There has recently been something of a re-evaluation of the place of the eighteenth century in the development of care and treatment of the mentally disordered. It had been almost an accepted orthodoxy among historians that the mad relatives of middle- and upper-class people were likely to be incarcerated in private madhouses, where the physical conditions were poor, and where they were often subjected to various forms of ill-treatment. Roy Porter¹ has demonstrated fairly comprehensively that MacDonald's much quoted claim that the eighteenth century was a 'disaster for the insane' was well wide of the mark. He has shown that there were many examples of enlightened and progressive practice to be found in private madhouses, as well as in some of the newly emerging public asylums. Even before the elevation of 'moral treatment' to a therapeutic system at the York Retreat in the 1790s, there were madhouse proprietors whose treatment methods were based on principles of kindness and consideration, coupled with a minimum use of physical restraint. The better houses were run by proprietors who were strongly committed to their work and to the patients for whom they were caring. Indeed, this made good business sense, for families would want to be reassured that their sick relatives were being placed in good hands.

Porter has also shown that, contrary to the generally received view which was reinforced by Andrew Scull,² there was no radical break in the development of attitudes and approaches to the treatment of the mentally disordered around the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. There had been steady advances during the eighteenth century, during which the treatment of the insane had gradually emerged as a specialism. There was, though, no commonly accepted body of knowledge or 'school' to which practitioners could

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¹ R. Porter, *Mind Forg'd Manacles: A History of Madness in England from the Restoration to the Regency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Porter, 'Was there a moral therapy in eighteenth-century psychiatry?', in *Lychnos* (Stockholm, 1981), 12–25.

² A. Scull, 'The domestication of madness', in *Medical History*, xxvii (July 1983), 233–248.

adhere. Rather, each mad-doctor developed his own theories, based on the knowledge and experience gained in practice, and perhaps including ideas passed down through families. The treatment methods which were developing combined medical approaches with various techniques for the management of patients and the alteration of their behaviour. These would be aimed toward effecting the goal of 'cure' which was increasingly becoming the yard-stick for successful madhouse practice.

The medical treatments employed by mad-doctors included various forms of 'physic', particularly emetics and purgatives. They would also, on occasions, employ more overtly physical methods such as bleeding, blistering, and immersion in cold baths. The use of techniques to manage and change the behaviour of the insane person were becoming increasingly important in the systems operated by the madhouse proprietors. The employment of the instruments of physical coercion or mechanical restraint was perhaps the crudest manifestation, and that which has tended to give rise to the poor image acquired by eighteenth-century madhouses. There is little doubt that chains, leg-locks, strait-jackets, restraint chairs, bed straps, and other contrivances were in wide usage. Indeed, restraint was an integral part of the treatment system in most private madhouses and public asylums.

A key element in treatment in the madhouse was the relationship which the proprietor was able to develop with his patients. The more successful mad-doctors deliberately tried to attain a strong personal influence over their inmates. This influence might be based on the use of threat, fear, and intimidation. Some employed 'the eye' as a way of subduing the lunatic, by means of penetrating or threatening gazes. Other proprietors concentrated on the use of personal charisma in the fostering of a rapport with individual patients. Personal relationships formed an important part of the developing realization of the value of rewards in treatment. Appropriate behaviour by the patient could be reinforced by his being related to as a 'normal' person. Invitations to eat at the proprietor's table, to go for a walk with his family, or to play with his children, were privileges which in effect were part of a behavioural modification programme. The attempt to create a supportive environment in the house was also a manifestation of the early use of the 'milieu' as a therapeutic tool. The elements of 'moral treatment' or 'moral management' were all well established before they were codified into a system at the York Retreat.³

The approaches adopted in one provincial madhouse in the later eighteenth century are illustrated in an important series of correspondence which has fortuitously survived. The letters relate to the house run by Samuel Proud and his family in Bilston, a small industrial town near Wolverhampton, in the

³ Porter, *Mind Forged Manacles*, 209-214; 'Was there a moral therapy . . .?'. Scull, *loc. cit.*, 239-241. A. Digby, *Madness, Morality and Medicine: A Study Of The York Retreat, 1796-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Staffordshire Black Country. By the 1770s Bilston seems, in fact, to have become something of a centre for the care and treatment of the insane, with no fewer than three private madhouses in the town. The 'trade in lunacy' was probably as significant to the town as it was to Henley-in-Arden in neighbouring Warwickshire. One of the Bilston houses was kept by Samuel Proud, another by his brother Joseph Proud, and a third by Joseph and Edward Perry. Samuel Proud had inherited the house from his father, also called Samuel, who died in 1767. The first Samuel Proud had originally worked as a cordwainer, before starting to take lunatics into his care. He appears to have built up the business over many years, taking his sons in to work with him. With the passing of the house to Samuel junior in 1767, his other son Joseph Proud set up his own house.⁴

Samuel Proud was born on 24 June 1724. Like his father he did not receive any formal medical training, which was not uncommon among madhouse proprietors at this period. The house became well known in the locality. Proud himself attained respect in the neighbourhood, being both a magistrate and a major in the Staffordshire militia. He was an astute publicist. He had, for example, enamel boxes produced, with an engraved transfer of the house, and bearing the legend 'A Trifle From Bilston' and the name Sam Proud. The engraving shows a quite substantial Georgian building. He seems to have catered initially for a fairly exclusive clientele. The charges for his house in 1787 were 2 guineas for entrance, with an annual rate of £30. This was relatively expensive, being about twice as much as the rates charged at the house of George Chadwick in Lichfield on the other side of the county.⁵

The surviving collection of letters covers the period from 1777 to 1789, and relates to Miss Nancy Pembury, the sister of a Shrewsbury attorney. She was admitted to Proud's house in July 1777, apparently suffering from mania. This followed a good deal of agonizing in the family about the idea of sending her to a madhouse. Her brother, Edward Pembury, and sister had to make considerable efforts to persuade their parents to agree. The sister, Mrs Offrey, wrote pleadingly to their mother:

Let me beg, as my sincerest wish, that you and my Dear father will join all your friends, in leaving her, who is most dear to us all, go where she may be most tenderly, and properly taken care off, has so many as been made a perfect cure off, namely Mr Jonson, and maney more. Let the expence be what it will, for gods sake let us do all we can for My Dear Sisters recovery and then if it is not his blessed will it should be so, we shall be happy in our Conciance, that we have done our duty. (sic)⁶

⁴ Staffordshire County Record Office, Q/FAa/1/1, Accounts of Monies Received for Licences for Keeping Houses for the Reception of Lunatics (1774–1783).

⁵ W. L. Parry-Jones, *The Trade In Lunacy* (London: Routledge, 1972), 124. R. Davies, 'A trifle from Bilston', in *The Blackcountryman*, xix, No. 3 (Summer 1986), 46–8.

⁶ Shropshire County Record Office, *Wakeman Papers*, 938/595, S. Offrey to Mrs Pembury, 17 July 1777. N.B. The term 'friends' tended to be used in the eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries to refer to relatives.

The family was clearly distressed, and was seeking for a cure rather than the mere incarceration of Nancy. It is also clear that Proud's house had acquired a local reputation for the care that was offered and the results he could achieve ('has so many as been made perfect cure off').

As tended to be the case, subterfuge appears to have been used to admit Nancy to the madhouse. Once realizing what had happened she 'at first threw herself into a passion for some time'. Proud was no doubt accustomed to these situations:

But I talked to her Cooley and in a pleasing a Maner I where able & in a little time brought she to a little Reconcile and told her it was for the best – And since she as been very agreeable in her Situation in every respect, the Indulgence as fair that lies in my power . . .⁷

The family placed their faith in Proud, having 'no doubt of your Care and attention', and they sought guidance from him about visiting. Proud's response indicated that she was something of a management problem. She had been very talkative and had struck his niece, as well as some other patients. He dealt with this in restrained manner:

I spoke a few Sharp words to her & told her I would not Allow no such Practices – After some little time she came to be Reconciled and Seem'd Sorry at what had Happen'd and was not the least Displeased at my few Checking words . . .

Proud claimed that she was 'well pleased' with her situation and that the air agreed with her. He felt, however, that a visit by her sister would not be advisable, as the parting would be too upsetting. Nancy's disorder, he suggested, 'Ebbs & Flowes'. It would be 'a work of time before I can bring her About again', which he evidently had little doubt he would be able to achieve. He was careful, as in other letters, to develop the relationship with the family, sending good wishes from himself and Mrs Proud to 'you & Miss Pembury and all Friends', and assuring them of his 'good nature & Humanity' toward Nancy at all times.⁸

Over the next week Nancy's condition continued to fluctuate. At times she was well enough to be allowed to play with Proud's children and walk in the garden. She was occupying herself in knitting and other activities. She was 'now and then' being given 'gentle Medicines'. Edward Pembury, who had been permitted to visit, reassured his father that Proud and his wife were doing everything possible to get her well. A fortnight later, on 31 August, Proud advised Pembury that she had been 'as well & Comfortable to all Apearance as Any one could wish and her Situation Seemingly Verry Agreeable'. However, he had added an interesting note of caution:

. . . yesterday morning I saw her & thought she looked a little wild

⁷ *Wakeman Papers*, 938/596, Samuel Proud to Edward Pembury, 29 July 1777.

⁸ 938/597, Pembury to Proud, 5 August 1777; 938/598, Proud to Pembury, 11 August 1777.

with her Eyes which think is Owin to the Alteration of the weather or being near the Change of the moon which are great Affect of Such poor Persons who are Disordered in their Sences.⁹

Like some other eighteenth-century madhouse keepers, particularly the laymen, Proud's approach to diagnosis and treatment was very much an empirical one. By October, Nancy was being treated with 'Physic and Blistering'. Whether it was the result of the treatment regime or natural remission, her condition had improved markedly by early December. Within a few weeks she was sufficiently well to be discharged back to the care of her family.¹⁰

Proud's involvement did not cease with discharge from the house. He also offered an after-care service. He wrote to Edward Pembury in May 1778 to enquire as to Nancy's progress. He invited the family to visit at any time. Pembury responded that she had continued well since she came home. The family obviously continued to place the greatest confidence in Proud's knowledge and skills. They had anxieties about the possible return of her illness, and sought his guidance:

My father would be obliged when you write to me next if you would recommend a mode for her to live as I believe she would conform to any Rules you would lay down in a Letter & Physic or Bleeding or Shaving the Head is necessary . . .

A year later she remained well. She was continuing to take pills prescribed by Proud. These had run out and Pembury sought a further supply of '2 or 3 more boxes please'. He passed on his father's gratitude for 'your great trouble, attention & Tenderness'.¹¹

Proud continued in contact with the family, supplying pills on request. Nancy remained well until the end of December, 1781. She then had a relapse, with violent outbursts, which Pembury attributed to the loss of three nights' sleep over the Christmas period. He placed some of the blame on their mother, both for the relapse itself and for unwillingness to take the necessary steps regarding Nancy:

. . . she lives with my Mother who is exceedingly fond of her & indulges her too much & will give her improper Diet and will not be persuaded by all her Relations to let her come to you or to go out of the House.

The family was just about able to contain her at home, making use of the medication which Proud had supplied. Pembury wrote to Samuel Proud in January, outlining the problems and asking for more pills. Proud was not

⁹ 938/600, E. Pembury to Father, 17 August 1777; 938/603, Proud to Pembury, 31 August 1777.

¹⁰ Porter, *Mind Forg'd Manacles*, Chapter 4. 938/604, Pembury to Proud, 11 October 1777, 8 December 1777.

¹¹ 938/605, Proud to Pembury, 19 May 1778, Pembury to Proud, 25 May, 1778; 938/606, Pembury to Proud, 28 May 1779.

convinced that this was going to be sufficient to resolve the situation, but he was prepared to co-operate:

. . . if Pills will be of any service to her, I'll send her whatever you may want for her, But I am afraid they will not avail much if she is permitted to do what she pleases, however if she does not recover soon I would advise you by all means to remove her, as her present situation I should much fear will only fix her disorder the more firm.

He went on to prescribe the dose and frequency of the pills to be administered.¹²

Nancy did not improve greatly at home, and by April 1782 the family were employing a servant to look after her. They had tried unsuccessfully to find 'a Proper Person for that Business'. In July Pembury wrote to Proud for more pills, saying that her disorder was continuing, though not as strongly as when she had been in his house. Their mother was refusing to consent to her being readmitted. Proud was disappointed, suggesting to Edward Pembury that their mother 'does not consider her Daughters interest in the least'. 'Nothing', he said, 'would give me greater pleasure than doing every thing in my power to serve her'. He felt that little could be done for her at home. He advised Pembury to try to pursue the matter. In the event, she did recover at home after some months.¹³

Samuel Proud died in January 1787. Management of the house was taken over by his wife Catherine and his son Samuel Proud Junior who, like a number of other sons of madhouse proprietors, had qualified as a surgeon. Six months later the Pembury family were in contact. Nancy had evidently remained well for five years. However, her mother died in May 1787, and this precipitated a relapse; according to Edward Pembury she was 'sometimes tolerably cool at other times very Violent'. With Mrs Pembury no longer there to persuade the other members of the family, there was apparently not the will to cope with Nancy at home. Edward Pembury wrote to the Prouds on 11 July on behalf of the family to arrange for a readmission, requesting them to send 'a proper person to conduct her in a Chaise to your House'. In the event Samuel Proud Junior came to fetch her himself, and she was admitted on 14 July.¹⁴

It seems that, like on the previous admission ten years before, Nancy was difficult to manage in the house. Proud reported on 4 August that she was 'exceeding rude & passionate particularly if contradicted or put out of her own way'. Three weeks later her behaviour was still very volatile and she was threatening people around her. Over the following months her moods

¹² 938/608, Pembury to Proud, 19 January 1782; 938/609, Thos. Lloyd to Pembury, 20 January 1782; 938/610, Proud to Pembury, 22 January 1782.

¹³ 938/612, Lloyd to Pembury, 2 April 1782; 938/613, Pembury to Proud, 11 July 1782; 938/614, Proud to Pembury, 15 July 1782.

¹⁴ 938/615, Proud to Pembury, 29 January 1783; 938/616, Pembury to Mrs Proud, 11 July 1787; 938/617, Proud to Pembury, 13 July 1787; 938/619, Proud to Pembury, 17 July 1787. Davies, *loc. cit.* 46.

fluctuated, and she continued to be violent at times. In early December Proud reported that she was composed at the moment:

but how long this interval will continue is uncertain; her paroxysms frequently return, & in them she is violent indeed. We are sometimes when at meals afraid of her doing some one around her a mischief, of course we are as careful of her as possible.

The family, though anxious about the situation, were ever grateful for the efforts of the Prouds. They showed their gratitude by sending them at Christmas time a turkey and two fine cocks.¹⁵

In January 1788 Catherine Proud reported that Miss Pembury was rather better, 'but she still continues violent passionate and very rude'. She did not make the same progress as on her first admission. In April Samuel Proud advised Pembury that there were 'but little hopes' of her being well enough to live with her sister. In May, her two sisters visited. At the request of one of them, Mrs Lloyd, Proud applied a blister, like his father had done some years before, 'which she bore well'. A longer calm interval followed but this was not to last:

Last week she again broke out in a furious manner, was bad as ever, I again have applied the Blyster but as yet without any present effect . . . in her lucid intervals she is always sorry for what she has done.

Eventually she did settle, and by October was said to be on the road to recovery, with the possibility of a discharge being discussed. However, this did not take place, and she was still in the house in April 1789, after which the correspondence ceases. Although Catherine Proud had been reporting Nancy to be well for some time, the family now seemed in no hurry to remove her.¹⁶

The Nancy Pembury case shows how important was the personal element in the treatment armoury of the private madhouse proprietor. Samuel Proud Senior cultivated the confidence and trust both of the patient herself and of her family. He gained influence over Nancy initially by firmly laying down clear boundaries as to what was and what was not acceptable behaviour. Once she had realized and accepted where the limits lay she was treated with kindness and offered privileges, such as walks in the gardens and social intercourse with Proud's family. The use of medicine and of active physical treatments like blistering was almost incidental to the overall management regime. After she had recovered, the gratitude of the family was such that they were prepared to follow any advice

¹⁵ 938/625, Proud to Pembury, 4 August 1787; 938/626, Proud to Pembury, 25 August 1787; 938/627, Pembury to Proud, 9 September 1787; 938/628, Proud to Pembury, 16 October 1787; Pembury to Proud, 14 November 1787; 938/629, Proud to Pembury, 3 December 1787; 938/630, Catherine Proud to Pembury, 10 January 1788.

¹⁶ 938/633, Proud to Pembury, 5 March 1788; 938/634, Proud to Pembury, 5 April 1788; 938/636, Proud to Pembury, 4 June 1788; 938/641, Proud to Pembury, 6 October 1788; Pembury to Proud, 23 October 1788; 938/643, Proud to Pembury, 12 December 1788; 938/644, Catherine Proud to Pembury, 13 February 1789; 938/645, Catherine Proud to Pembury, 3 April 1789.

Proud should offer, as indeed was Nancy herself. The contents of the pills he prescribed are unknown, but their effectiveness must certainly have been significantly enhanced by the 'placebo' effect for both Nancy and the family. This lengthy after-care that was offered is particularly interesting. It suggests, on the one hand, that Proud was genuinely interested in her welfare. It also indicates that he wanted to maintain his reputation for achieving and maintaining successful cures. When she relapsed he followed the orthodox line of recommending separation from the family and readmission. He maintained his interest even though that advice was not followed.

Samuel Proud Junior's approach seems to have been rather more detached than that of his father. His communications with the family were cooler and much less frank, and he does not seem to have gone to the same lengths as his father to cultivate a therapeutic relationship with Nancy Pembury. It is probable that his training as a surgeon inclined him towards emphasizing the 'medical' as against the 'moral' aspects of treatment. He also does not appear to have been living in the house as did his father. Rather than be rewarded by eating regularly with the proprietor at his table, the better patients might now have an occasional invitation to dine at his house, as Nancy did in December 1788.¹⁷

The third Samuel Proud continued to run the house until his death in January 1828. The house of Joseph Proud, his uncle, closed after his death in 1791. It seems likely that Samuel took some of the patients into his house. He also gradually widened his clientele, by responding to the demand for accommodation for pauper lunatics. When the new Staffordshire General Lunatic Asylum opened at Stafford in 1818, some of his patients were transferred there. In 1819 there were still 21 people in the house. By 1826 the numbers had fallen to 7, no doubt as a result of the competition of the county asylum, which sought to take private as well as pauper patients. With Proud's death in 1828 the Bilston madhouse appears to have ceased to operate.¹⁸

¹⁷ 938/643, Proud to Pembury, 12 December, 1788.

¹⁸ Davis, *loc. cit.*, 46. *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 6 June 1792. Staffordshire County Record Office, D550/65, *Staffordshire General Lunatic Asylum, Apothecaries' Day Book*, 6, 24 and 31 October 1818. *British Parliamentary Papers*, 1819, Vol. XVII, *A Return of the Number of Houses Licensed for the Reception of Lunatics*, 4; 1826, Vol. XXI, *Lunatics (Return)*, 8.