REGISTER OF LUNATIC PAUPERS

LIFTON TO WONFORD HUNDREDS

1828

DRO Reference – QS 114/1

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Following the 1601 Poor Law, paupers suffering from any kind of mental disability, like any other persons who were incapable of supporting themselves, were the responsibility of the overseers of the poor. As such they could be supported by poor relief or given a home in the parish poor house. From 1714, justices of the peace were allowed to confine pauper lunatics if they were thought to be dangerous. The Acts of Parliament which authorised this did not specify where the lunatics were to be confined, but most were put in parish workhouses. The County Asylums Act of 1815 gave justices of the peace the power to order overseers of the poor to draw up a list of lunatic paupers in their parishes and submit the names to the Clerk of the Peace. This was reinforced by the County Asylums Act passed in 1828, the year that this register was compiled.

Counties were encouraged to set up an asylum for pauper lunatics by the County Asylums Act of 1808, which enabled justices to use the county rates for this purpose, but few local authorities opened asylums for the mentally ill or disabled until they were obliged to do to by a later County Asylums Act, which was passed in August 1845. In Devon, there were a few privately run, licensed houses for those with mental health problems, such as Bowhill House which opened in 1801, but the county asylum in Exminster, built specifically to house paupers, was not opened until July 1845, and Digby Hospital, for paupers from Exeter, was built much later, in 1886. Thus in 1828, at the time this register was drawn up, there were several options for the care of lunatic paupers in Devon: they could be cared for at home, receiving out-relief from the overseers of the poor, or they could be housed in the parish workhouse, or they could be sent to a private 'madhouse' or hospital or to a pauper asylum outside Devon, in both cases with the fees paid from the poor rates.

The information in this register, from the Devon County Quarter Sessions records, is set out by hundred and then in alphabetical order of parish. Some parishes have no lunatics at all. In the case of those which have, much detail is provided about that person: their name, age and sex, whether they are classed as an idiot or a lunatic, whether they are dangerous or not, the length of time they have been 'disordered', whether or not they are confined and the expense of keeping them. The overseers were not asked to give a medical diagnosis apart from specifying if the pauper was an idiot (having learning disabilities) or a lunatic (mentally ill), nor is there any attempt

to define the severity of the disability or illness; the crucial fact was that the pauper was unable to maintain him, or her, self and was reliant on parish assistance. The register shows that most lunatic paupers in Devon remained in their place of settlement; they lived with family members or were boarded out with a carer or resided in the parish poorhouse. Even those described as 'dangerous' were often living in their place of settlement and not confined. The overseers paid for their food and clothing and, whether the lunatics were living in a private house or the parish workhouse, the doctors employed by the parish overseers of the poor were responsible for their medical care.

This book is useful for family historians for the additional information it provides about people and their lives at a time before descriptions of households become available with the census. Finding an ancestor's name in the register may reveal that an elderly person was cared for by a married daughter or explain why a family was receiving poor relief.

It may be possible to find out more about these lunatics and those who cared for them by reading the account books of the overseers of the poor for the parishes where the lunatics were settled.