



Devon Family History Society
Joint Project Publication with
Devon Record Office



DEVON RECORD OFFICE

LUNATIC PAUPERS IN EXMINSTER ASYLUM

1ST JANUARY 1881

DRO Reference – QS/2 Easter 1881

DFHS Book Reference - D069

In 1845 the County Asylums Act was passed, enforcing the building of asylums for the care of paupers suffering from mental illness. Detailed records had to be kept of the admissions, medical care and discharges or deaths of patients. At the same time, the 1845 Lunacy Act established the Lunacy Commission, a small group of men who were responsible nationally for the care of lunatics moved from the workhouses or from outdoor relief to the new asylums. The Commissioners worked with the Justices of the Peace in each county to monitor the regulation of county asylums and the admission and discharge of patients. Under the County Asylums Act, pauper lunatics had to be housed in a county asylum unless it was full, in which case they could be sent to a licensed house or a hospital with provision for the insane.

The medical officer of each county asylum was required to send in a list of patients on the 1st January and 1st July every year, giving the names of all the non-paupers and, in the case of pauper patients, stating their names, the length of their stay in the asylum, whether they were chargeable to a poor law union or the county, and whether they were criminal lunatics. Criminal lunatics were those who had been convicted of a crime, but confined because they were judged to be insane. Proprietors of private houses which received patients had to apply annually for a licence and submit a list of the inmates, giving their names and gender and stating whether they were private or pauper patients. Both of these types of list are found in Quarter Sessions records.

The Devon County Asylum at Exminster for pauper lunatics was opened in July 1845. Before this date, paupers who had learning difficulties or who had mental health problems were kept at home, in workhouses or in private asylums and maintained from the poor rates. The returns indexed here were submitted on 1st January 1881 and are part of the series made half-yearly by the clerk to the asylum and sent to the Justices of the Peace at the Devon County Quarter Sessions. They contain the names of pauper patients, in alphabetical order, and their dates of admission.

Although there are no personal details in the returns, once the admission date is known, it is easy enough to find a patient in the admission registers, 3769A/H3, and papers, 3769A/H2, from Exminster Hospital, deposited at the Devon Record Office. The admission documents contain the patient's number, which can help to find the patient in the Medical Case books, 3769A/H9. Using these hospital records, it is

possible to discover information on a patient's age, religion, address and next of kin and details of their illness, its supposed cause, duration and treatment.