

Working Paper 3

CONVENIENT CENTRES AND CONVENIENT  
PREMISES: THE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY  
OF ENGLAND'S NINETEENTH CENTURY

IDIOT ASYLUMS

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## INTRODUCTION

We cannot close...without remarking on the satisfactory change of sentiment which has taken place in regard to this deplorable class. There may be a time when, desiring to see 'the survival of the fittest', we may be tempted to wish that idiots and imbeciles were stamped out of society. But, as Mr. Darwin has somewhere said, there is a compensation for the continued existence of so pitiable a population in our midst, in the circumstance that our sympathies are called forth on their behalf; a commentary on the precept that those who are strong should help the weak (Tuke, 1882, p.318).

This passage, which appeared towards the close of the chapter on 'Our idiots and imbeciles' in Daniel Hack Tuke's monumental Chapters in the History of the Insane in the British Isles, is interesting both for anticipating the rise of 'eugenics' - a movement that, for several years at the opening of the twentieth century, saw many Western theorists arguing for the compulsory segregation and sterilization of 'defective' populations - and for suggesting, more positively, that during the second half of the nineteenth century the sympathies of the strong were being mobilised to help the weakly idiot and imbecile. This second claim might be quarrelled with, of course, but Tuke was undoubtedly correct in identifying a considerable 'change of sentiment' that had occurred over the preceding fifty or so years on the subject of how to treat the idiot and the imbecile. A concrete expression of this 'change of sentiment', both in England and elsewhere, was the appearance of specialist asylums and schools in which the idiot or imbecile - the individual who today would probably be labelled as 'mentally handicapped' or 'mentally subnormal' - became visible as a social object distinguishable from other social objects (such as the lunatic or sufferer from 'mental illness') and deserving of specialist attention in specialist institutions (rather than being mixed up with the occupants of workhouses or lunatic asylums). These new specialist establishments were not all that common, however, and in England no more than twenty-two different sites supported idiot asylums or schools over the years separating 1846 from 1898. In consequence, it might be argued that these establishments were really an irrelevancy in the history of English provisions for the mentally handicapped, and that a 'story' worth telling only began with the reports and legislation of the early 1900s, but this would be to deny the possibility of taking idiot asylums and schools seriously in their own right, and not viewing them as precursors of - or as curious aberrations in the inevitable progression towards - the institutional network of the present. My own preference in this connection echoes the historical methodology (or 'archaeology') of Michel Foucault, for whom the

oddities and shady corners of the past are equally as important as any long-term trends that we might discern [1]: to paraphrase Edith Kurzweil (1984, p.141), Foucault's scouring of the historical record 'avoids acceptance of taken-for-granted truths', concentrating instead on 'discovering previously ignored or neglected beliefs and their practical consequences'. And it is my contention that, whilst studying the idiot asylums and schools may not reveal a great deal more than studying the nineteenth century lunatic asylums [2], it remains the case that idiot establishments internalised little-remembered 'beliefs and practical consequences' that offer the researcher an intriguing new perspective on Victorian social policy.

Moreover, the specific contribution that I wish to make to the study of England's early idiot asylums and schools is to emphasise certain 'geographical' aspects that, to the best of my knowledge, have never before been highlighted in conventional historical accounts of idiocy and its treatment. The remainder of this paper is hence divided into seven sections: in the first I tackle a number of definitional issues; in the second I consider the conventional historical accounts, few of which display any sensitivity to space, place and geography; in the third I sketch in some historical details regarding the emergence of specialist idiot establishments in England; in the fourth I examine the geographical distribution of these establishments, noting in particular debates that arose over the unevenness of this distribution; in the fifth I examine the sorts of locations in which these establishments sprung up, noting in particular debates that arose over whether or not actual sites measured up to the ideal of providing cheerful 'moral' environments; in the sixth I examine the spatial arrangements internal to these establishments, noting in particular debates that arose over the need for extreme order in such arrangements; and in the final section I advance one or two concluding thoughts about the geography of England's nineteenth century idiot asylums and schools [3].

As yet, and despite the substantial amount of work conducted on issues to do with mental illness and its treatment [4], very little geographical research has touched upon the phenomenon of mental handicap. I was fortunate enough to hear an unpublished paper by John Radford (1985) entitled 'Some issues in the geography of mental handicap', and in this paper Radford introduced several possible lines of inquiry. In particular, he suggested that researchers might examine the ways in which the mentally handicapped relate to the environment around them, since this might isolate special 'spatial and environmental needs' that policy-makers in the field of mental handicap should take into account, and to some extent J. Wolpert (1980) has pursued this theme in discussing the rights and

wrongs of segregating the mentally handicapped into 'protective zones' (or sheltered institutions) away from the 'social hazards' of everyday life. Radford also suggested that researchers might examine the geographical distributions exhibited by different forms of mental handicap, since such an exercise might hint at factors significant to the aetiology of these conditions, and John Giggs (1977, pp.484-490) has echoed this claim in a brief analysis of how certain cases of mental handicap such as 'anencephaly' and 'cretinism' may be 'created by adverse subcultural and environmental factors'. In addition, Radford suggested that researchers might examine the geographical aspects of institutional provisions, and in so doing tackle the overall geography of service delivery networks (see White, 1976; 1979, who stressed the influence of inter-facility linkages on the clustering of mental health and mental retardation facilities in South Philadelphia, Manhattan and Honolulu; see Gonen, 1977, who spelt out the 'invisible' geography of community support networks for mentally handicapped adults), the 'accessibility' and utilisation of facilities, the generation of community opposition to facilities, and the socio-geographical consequences flowing from the recent closure of large mental handicap hospitals (see Radford and Phillips, 1985; Phillips and Radford, 1985). Furthermore, Radford indicated the insights to be gained from reconstructing past geographies of institutions serving the mentally handicapped, and in another unpublished paper he and Alison Tipper (1987) followed up this lead with a detailed investigation into the historical geography of the Western Counties Asylum, which was located at Starcross, near Exeter in England, in 1864. The central object of this study was to weave an analysis of the asylum's admissions policies and training programmes into a compelling account of both the benefits supposedly derived from and the modifications subsequently engineered in the establishment's immediate physical environment. The findings of this study are undoubtedly a stimulus for what follows in my paper here, and I would like my own thoughts regarding the historical geography of England's nineteenth century idiot asylums - which are drawn from a careful reading of both documents produced by government bodies and materials contained in contemporary journals and texts - to be viewed as complementing, and to some extent 'contextualising', the more locally-grounded efforts of Radford and Tipper.

## IDIOTS, LUNATICS AND THE REST: QUESTIONS OF DEFINITION

Although I do not wish to posit too neat a correspondence, there can be little doubt that the educated citizen of the nineteenth century meant by the terms 'lunacy' and 'idiocy' what we today mean by 'mental illness' and 'mental handicap' (or, in this latter case, sometimes 'mental subnormality'). The distinction that is now drawn between these two conditions runs something as follows:

[p]eople become mentally ill when they can no longer cope with the stresses and problems in their lives... People are mentally handicapped because they have a brain which will not develop as quickly or function as well as other people's...Mental illness is often a temporary condition. It can be treated successfully, although the possibility of a relapse can never be ruled out...Mental handicap is permanent, but people can be helped to overcome their disabilities with the right kind of education and support from the community in which they live (MIND, n.d.).

Furthermore, whilst the causes of almost all mental illnesses remain somewhat mysterious and opaque to science, a great deal is now known about how mental handicap can be genetic (the presence of an extra chromosome); can be related to problems during pregnancy (the mother catching German measles or having a hormone deficiency); can be provoked by a difficult birth; can be brought on if a child contracts a virus like meningitis; and can be brought on at any stage in an individual's life through a serious brain injury.

As long ago as the fourteenth century an English statute distinguished between a subject who 'beforetime hath had his wit' - and who might experience 'lucid intervals' - and the 'idiot' or 'natural fool' (see Statutes of the Realm, Vol.I, 1963, p.226), but it was not until well into the nineteenth century that the latter categories began to be widely perceived as something other than merely a subdivision of the former category. Writing in 1877 and striving to embrace both popular and scientific usages of the term, William Ireland characterised 'idiocy' as

...mental deficiency or extreme stupidity depending upon malnutrition or disease of the nervous centres, occurring either before birth or before the evolution of the mental faculties in childhood (Ireland, 1877, p.1).

He went on to suggest that idiocy resembled the 'ordinary condition of infancy', and that

[it] could not readily be confused with any form of insanity [or lunacy], though it has a superficial resemblance to dementia, much in the same way that the dotage of old age sometimes resembles the weakness of childhood (Ireland, 1877, p.2).



But these neat distinctions drawn on paper were often confused in practice, partly because there were so many 'shades' of both lunacy and idiocy - many of which possessed overlapping symptoms or features - and partly because, as P. Martin Duncan (1861, p.234) put it, 'every inmate of an idiot asylum is not, of necessity, idiotic' (which is to say nothing of the similar confusions that reigned in the lunatic asylum).

Another distinction that was commonly identified, and which sparked numerous differences of opinion amongst the Victorian 'mad-doctors', was that between 'idiocy and 'imbecility'. To quote Tuke,

[i]t is not necessary to distinguish between idiocy and imbecility...further than this, that an idiot is at the very bottom of the scale of beings born with defective mental powers, while he who labours under imbecility or feeble-mindedness is understood to be one much less completely deprived of power...We dismiss now one distinction which has been drawn between idiocy and imbecility - that the former is, and the latter is not, necessarily congenital; one arising from the supposition that infantile mental deficiency is less likely to be so grave an affection than that which has been present from the moment of existence (Tuke, 1882, pp.299-300).

Tuke's account here was accepted by most 'experts', but there were a few individuals who - like J. Langdon Down (1887, pp.4-5) - wished to restrict the term 'imbecile' to 'that class of mental infirmity which is the outcome of deteriorating organic causes, often senile' (in other words, to elderly sufferers from dementia). Tuke objected to this use of the term on the grounds that most medical writers were beginning to describe 'feeble-minded children' as 'imbeciles', but in many ways this piece of semantic innovation simply introduced a whole fresh arena of confusion into the textbooks and journals, principally because a number of commentators started to see a necessity for pencilling in a line between 'imbecility' and 'feeble-mindedness'. It was not until the 1920s, then, that a general definitional framework encompassing these various terms was arrived at, and this framework contained the following elements (after Heaton-Ward, 1978, p.2):

- i) idiots: individuals where mental defect is so severe that they cannot guard themselves against common physical dangers.
- ii) imbeciles: individuals where mental defect is less severe, but who who are still incapable of managing themselves or their affairs; imbecile children cannot be taught to manage themselves or their affairs.
- iii) feeble-minded: individuals where mental defect is less severe still, but who still require care, supervision and control for their own protection (and for the protection of others); feeble-minded children cannot receive benefit from schooling in ordinary schools.

iv) moral imbeciles/defectives: individuals where mental defect is coupled with strongly vicious and criminal propensities; moral imbeciles must be guarded for the protection of others.

It is important to keep this definitional framework in mind as I turn now to the main body of my paper, although I should perhaps add that for the most part - and unless the more fine-grained contemporary distinctions had any great bearing on the particular issue under discussion - the terms 'idiot' and 'idiocy' will be used as 'catch-alls' designed to embrace the numerous subtleties of definition and interpretation that gradually emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century.

## THE UNFINISHED MORALITY PLAY: CONVENTIONAL HISTORIES OF IDIOCY AND ITS TREATMENT

Despite the considerable number of studies dealing with the history of lunacy and its treatment, studies dealing exclusively - or, for that matter, even tangentially - with the history of idiocy and its treatment are not all that common. Moreover, whereas many of the more recent histories of lunacy and its treatment have adopted a variety of perspectives on this history [5] - stressing the patient's 'viewpoint'; the use of labels such as 'mental illness' for the purposes of social control; the medicalisation of 'madness' into 'mental illness' during the nineteenth century; the attendant professionalisation of the 'mad-doctoring' profession; and also the relationships with broader economic, social and political changes - the histories of idiocy and its treatment, from the chapter on 'Our idiots and imbeciles' in Tuke's History of the Insane (1882) to the historical chapter in W. Alan Heaton-Ward's much more recent book on mental handicap (1978), have tended to write very 'conventional' accounts woven around a fairly standard selection of so-called 'facts' or events. For instance, most of these histories talk the reader through the following [6]:

- i) the barbarism of the Ancient World, as typified by the Spartan practice of exposing the idiot child to 'death-peril' by throwing them into the River Eurotas.
- ii) the curious position of those idiots in the Medieval World who ended up as performing 'fools' or 'jesters' travelling from village to village or from castle to castle.
- iii) the dawning of some reflection - and occasionally 'medical' reflection - upon the nature of idiocy, as associated with the names of great thinkers like Paracelsus in Switzerland (1493-1541) - who supposed that the idiot was 'badly carved' from the 'wood of life' by the carpenters labouring in the vast 'workshop' where human beings were created - and Thomas Willis in England (1621-1675). It should perhaps be noted that the early historians of idiocy and its treatment were for the most part neglectful of these Early Modern 'advances', and that it is to more recent historians such as P. F. Cranfield (1966) that we owe our appreciation of Paracelsus, Willis and other figures.
- iv) the story of the 'wild boy' of Aveyron, a dirty, deaf-mute and - as the 'experts' were later to decide - idiotic child found roaming the woods of Aveyron. This child was taken to Paris and given over to the care of E. M. Itard - the celebrated physician to the National Institution of the Deaf and Dumb - in 1798, and here Itard strove to prove the truth of certain philosophical views regarding the connection between sensations and intelligence by educating the 'savage'. He failed in this project, of course, but what he did demonstrate was that, even if an idiot could not be turned into an educated and cultured being, it might still be possible to train an idiot into the ways of good habits and productive activities. As one commentator has put it, the 'savage of Aveyron' became the 'first example recorded of an idiot reclaimed from the life of a mere animal to be trained to a human existence' (see Barr, 1904, p.31).

- v) the development whereby Itard's 'mantle' was taken up by an individual whose attempts at formulating a comprehensive system of education for idiot children undoubtedly did have a dramatic impact upon the whole history of idiocy and its treatment, and this individual was Edouard Seguin (1812-1880) (see Figure 1). In various institutions - first in France and then in the United States - Seguin laboured patiently to perfect his 'physiological method of education', which emphasised the need for teachers of idiots (and, by extension, also teachers of 'normal' children) to begin not by educating the mental powers, but by training the senses. In other words, Seguin stressed the need to train pupils in the use of their various faculties, and attention was hence paid to encouraging handiwork and other practical skills, rather than to teaching grammar and mathematics (see Holman, 1914).
- vi) the accomplishments of Guggenbühl, a Swiss Physician, who in 1836 was so moved by the sight of a poor, deformed 'cretin' (a specific variety of idiot) praying before a wayside cross that he decided to devote his life to the study and treatment of idiocy. Following Seguin's example, he established a specialist asylum for idiot children, and this proved to be an inspiration to idiocy reformers in many other countries (even though in later years his reputation became seriously tarnished; so much so that he was eventually condemned as a charlatan).

The 'facts' and events documented here relate to what some writers might term the 'prehistory' of mental handicap and its treatment, and it should perhaps be admitted that the straightforward fashion in which these 'facts' and events can be presented does begin to break down when confronted by the occurrences of the twentieth century. This is in part because the latter occurrences are much more difficult to describe using an apparently dispassionate and value-free commentary, and it is telling in this respect to hear of Cranefield's suggestion that the arrival on the scene of 'eugenics' in the early twentieth century leads his historical perspective to end on a note of 'confusion and chaos' (see Cranefield, 1966, p.11). The principal claim that I wish to advance here, however, is that the seeming 'straightforwardness' of conventional accounts dealing with idiocy and its treatment is itself somewhat misleading, since what is really happening in these accounts is that certain 'high-profile' incidents are being manipulated in such a way as to produce neat, coherent stories which are unashamedly teleological or 'progressivist'. As Marvin Lazerson declares,

[t]his wisdom has tended to emphasise the inevitable and progressivist nature of reform, the importance of humane and path-breaking individuals, and an unwavering faith that further improvements will come with greater scientific knowledge and professional expertise (Lazerson, 1975, p.34).

And, as this critic of conventional histories goes on to say,

[t]he story is thus an unfinished morality play. Out of small beginnings, service to the mentally subnormal has steadily improved. Better today than yesterday, largely because we can now diagnose mental retardation and provide special services by trained professionals; reforms today will make tomorrow even better (Lazerson, 1975, p.34).



Figure 1:  
Edouard Seguin (1812-1880) (from Holman, 1914)

There are obviously many problems with the practice of writing these evolutionary 'morality plays', but not the least of these is the problem that the grandness and selectiveness of the historical vision informing this practice tends either to steamroller over or to completely ignore those myriad details of the historical record that cannot help but confuse and complicate the total picture. The resulting accounts hence approach the trap of what Foucault calls 'total history', which he describes as the fate of all those histories where 'big' organising principles - whether idealist or materialist - and the celebration of historical continuities seriously compromise any sensitivity to the many historical specificities, confusions and complications that his own enterprise of 'general history' is pledged to recover (see Foucault, 1972, pp.8-10).

Furthermore, by approaching this trap of total history the conventional histories remain largely unaware of what Lazerson refers to as the numerous different 'social and institutional contexts' within which these histories were played out (see Lazerson, 1975, p.50). They thereby fail to realise that, as Lazerson explains,

...the contexts are not simply background material, the social setting often presented in the literature, but integral to the ways in which institutions treated the mentally subnormal (Lazerson, 1975, p.50).

And it is but a short step from this claim to the complaint that the conventional histories have rarely displayed any appreciation for the great complexity - let alone for the substantive importance - of the historical realities of space, place and geography to the identification, interpretation and treatment of idiocy [7].

Having said this, though, it would be mistaken to suppose that the conventional histories have completely neglected matters geographical, given that in works such as Ireland (1877) and Barr (1904) some concern for the differing experiences of different countries does come to the fore. Barr in particular demonstrates a thoughtful awareness of such historical-geographical differences, noting that France was the 'birth-place' of the new idiot education but also acknowledging the existence of 'simultaneous' yet largely unconnected idiocy reform 'movements' in different places (see Barr, 1904, p.28 and p.36). In fact, he goes so far as to offer a comprehensive country-by-country survey, referencing on the one hand the advanced state of Scandinavian provisions and on the other hand gently chiding countries like Armenia, Turkey and Greece for having taken no steps towards improving the circumstances of their idiot populations (see Barr, 1904, pp.36-71). Moreover, from the information that he compiles it is possible to tabulate the

differing numbers of houses receiving the idiot, imbecile and feeble-minded in some eighteen different countries (and for the purposes of comparison I include the numbers reported by Ireland in 1877):

<u>Country</u>	<u>Ireland (1877)<sup>a</sup></u>	<u>Barr (1904)<sup>b</sup></u>
Austria	1	4
Belgium	1	9
British Colonies		
( Australia	1	2
( Canada	2	1
( South Africa	-	1
Denmark	3	6
England	11	13
Finland	-	3
France	5	3
Germany (or Germanic states)	26	19
Holland	1	1
Ireland	1	1
Italy	-	7
Japan	-	2
Norway	-	8
Russia	1	1
Scotland	3	3
Sweden	3	32
Switzerland	6	18
United States	11	27

<sup>a</sup> derived from Ireland (1877, pp.394-399)

<sup>b</sup> derived from Barr (1904, pp.71-77)

(Numbers exclude asylums and schools specifically for epileptics, even though there is some evidence that idiots often ended up in such establishments.)

The accuracy of the figures presented in this table must, of course, be somewhat doubtful.

Nevertheless, suggestive as the accounts of Ireland, Barr and others may be, it remains the case that in the final analysis the tight teleological organisation of these accounts - indeed, the 'total historical' logic of what they set out to achieve - cannot help but leave them insensitive to the sub-national, as opposed to international, geographies of institutions designed to service the mentally handicapped. They cannot help but neglect the way that idiot establishments have not been - as it were - 'ubiquitous' in given countries at given times, but have been confined to certain quite small locations distributed in more or less discernible patterns across national landscapes. And these histories hence neglect the phenomenon of institutions being sited in particular locations (for

example, urban or rural) and in particular environments (for example, upland or downland), and in addition they have paid scant attention to the spatial arrangements internal to (or inscribed in the plans and architectures of) idiot asylums and schools.

It is my central contention, then, that the three 'geographical' aspects mentioned here - namely, distributions, sites and internal spatial arrangements - have been inextricably bound up with all the many substantive issues usually considered by histories of idiocy and its treatment, and that these aspects should not be seen as somehow standing apart from the histories - as features that can be tackled in splendid isolation (as the 'spatial scientists' of the 1960s 'new' geography might have supposed). Rather, these aspects must be seen as vitally important to the very substance of the histories that we might write of idiocy and its treatment, and as aspects whose inclusion will greatly enhance any attempt to capture these histories in textbooks. The chief ambition of this paper is hence to secure these interlocking claims by spelling out - albeit in a somewhat preliminary fashion - the significance of distributions, sites and internal spatial arrangements to the history of England's nineteenth century idiot asylums.



## THE IDIOT DISCOVERED AND SENT TO SPECIAL PLACES

Before tackling directly the 'geographical' aspects of England's nineteenth century idiot asylums, it will be instructive to outline a few background details pertaining to the way in which the nineteenth century - as it were - 'discovered' idiocy and then decided that this was a condition warranting special attention in special places. In rehearsing these details it is important to keep in mind the tendency of an emergent industrial capitalism to generate both 'deviants' - those who would not, or could not, adapt to the demands of a new labour process - and 'casualties' - those injured in industrial accidents, or those dependent old, lame and sick individuals who working class families were finding it increasingly difficult (both money-wise and time-wise) to support. And in a sense the figure of the idiot straddled both of these categories, being little able to cope with exacting capitalist time-work disciplines and also being a burden that poor families increasingly could not bear. However, I do not propose to elaborate upon this sort of argument - which, after all, simply mirrors the account that Andrew Scull (1979, pp.30-36) provides with respect to the lunatic - and instead I will ask about what Foucault and his followers might term the specific 'surfaces of emergence' upon which idiocy moved from its relative historical obscurity to become an identifiable object worthy of debate and practical engagement. It is possible, I think, to isolate three such surfaces of emergence, and it is to these that I must now turn.

### Communities, workhouses and lunatic asylums

The first of these surfaces was the wider community, since there can be little doubt that a great many nineteenth century idiots were left to fend for themselves as best they could, and that for every kindly-treated 'village idiot' there were more whose lives were made a misery by the malicious and the fearful. It would be churlish, therefore, to deny the genuine humanitarian impulse that inspired Guggenbühl upon seeing the cretin praying at the wayside cross, or that affected the English reformer Andrew Reed (of whom, more below) during his journeys of the 1840s. Indeed, as Reed's biographers put it,

[b]oth in Wales and in Cornwall he had seen the wretched idiot, chained like a felon or a maniac in the common pound or lock-up house of the village green, or chased hither and thither, the scoff and the outcast of the whole hamlet (Reed and Reed, 1863, p.384).

A significant additional point here is that, whereas the idiot at large probably did not constitute too great a nuisance in thinly-populated rural and agricultural areas, this character must have become a much more visible and disruptive influence

amidst the gathering throng of an urban-industrial populus where individuals spent their days living and working in such close proximity to one another. As a result, the first attempts to remove the problem of idiocy from the realm of everyday life may well have taken place in growing urban-industrial centres, and this suggestion is perhaps born out by a writer on French insanity statistics who in 1854 commented that

...at Paris idiots are readily admitted into asylums in order to prevent them from becoming a spectacle or being ill-treated in the streets; whereas, in the country, great numbers not being dangerous are allowed to be at large, and are generally treated kindly by everybody (Anon., 1854, p.63).

The second surface of emergence was the workhouse, which had the ostensible function of disciplining the idle into the ways of the Protestant-capitalist 'work ethic', but which ended up being swamped (under both Old and New Poor Laws) with all manner of 'deviants' and 'casualties', the idiot (and, I should add, the lunatic) included. It is not easy to gain much impression of the circumstances endured by the workhouse idiot in the nineteenth century, but a 'sad little story' of one particular individual is related in the Asylum Journal of Mental Science for 1856. The idiot in question, one David Crook, was also a dwarf (height 38½ inches; weight 24½ pounds), and up until his twenty-seventh year he had been supported by his mother (who had laboured in the fields from dawn until dusk to keep him clothed and fed). But, on March 21st., 1856, his mother died, and he was admitted to the local workhouse and then to the county lunatic asylum at Littlemore, Oxfordshire. Unfortunately, in both of these establishments he experienced difficulties in eating, his tongue becoming exceedingly dry, and it was not long before he died (on April 17th.), just twelve days after being transferred from the workhouse to the asylum (see Sankey, 1856, p.506).

The debates that circled around the workhouse idiot were actually rather confused, principally because some 'experts' could see no harm in the practice whilst others felt it to be a grave injustice to both the idiots and the workhouse's more 'normal' residents. As early as 1807 Sir Andrew Halliday condemned the keeping of idiots as 'common paupers' in the workhouse, where they received attention no different from that visited upon other pauper inmates (see Report from Select Committee, 1807, p.81), but the most influential statements on the matter were probably those from the government's Commissioners in Lunacy, for whom the chief objective was to ensure that 'true', recent and potentially curable cases of lunacy were not detained (against the law) in

places other than bona fide lunatic asylums. In an appendix to their Further Report of 1847 - an appendix addressed to their colleagues at the Poor Law Board - the Commissioners suggested three broad classifications of those generally (if a little misleadingly) designated as 'workhouse lunatics', and these were (see Commissioners in Lunacy, 1847, pp.257-265):

- i) those individuals who have displayed a deficiency of intelligence from birth. This classification included those individuals who would subsequently be divided into idiots, imbeciles and the feeble-minded, although it was added - curiously enough - that 'proper' congenital idiots 'wholly or almost wholly devoid of reason' were not all that common in workhouses.
- ii) those individuals who, through age, accident or disease, have become 'demented or fatuous'. This classification obviously included those individuals who we would now suppose to have become mentally handicapped after contracting a viral infection or sustaining severe brain damage, but it also included those elderly 'demented' people who Ireland (1877, p.2) wished to debar from the category of idiocy.
- iii) those individuals who labour under a 'positive mental derangement'. This classification obviously included those individuals that the Commissioners would identify as 'true' cases of lunacy.

From a return of 1845 the Commissioners calculated that the total number of 'workhouse lunatics' in England and Wales (living in both union workhouses and houses established under either local acts or other legislation) amounted to 4,785 (see Commissioners in Lunacy, 1847, p.240), and since they supposed the first classification of 'workhouse lunatics' - the classification containing most of the workhouse idiots - to comprise around two-thirds of the total 'workhouse lunatic' population, the conclusion is that the workhouses of England and Wales must have been home for at least 3,190 pauper idiots at this time [8]. But the crucial thing to notice is that, whilst the Commissioners were anxious to remove inmates in the third classification from the workhouse, they could see little reason why the 3,190 or more 'harmless, tractable and potentially industrious' idiots should not continue to reside in the workhouse. It was not felt that these idiots would gain greatly from transmission to lunatic asylums, as the Commissioners explained in their Third Annual Report:

[t]he great bulk of those who are now detained in workhouses under the denomination of lunatics or idiots are persons who are congenitally imbecile or idiotic, and in all probability incapable of deriving much (if any) benefit from treatment in a lunatic asylum, and with few exceptions they are also tractable and harmless. At the same time their defect or infirmity of intellect would render it unsafe or imprudent to leave them altogether without some degree, however slight, of care or supervision (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1848, p.387).

Hence, the workhouse seemed a perfectly acceptable home for the idiot.

Furthermore, rooms designated as 'idiot wards' began to appear in a few workhouses, and it is these rooms that can perhaps be described as England's first accommodation in which idiots were incarcerated in their own right. Indeed, the Commissioners in Lunacy remarked in their Further Report of 1847 that 'it has sometimes been the practice' to collect together the various types of workhouse idiot

...under the charge of one or the other paupers in a separate ward, usually called the 'idiot ward', having a day-room and occasionally also a distinct yard appropriated to their exclusive use, where their diet and accommodation are upon a more liberal scale and where they cannot annoy or endanger the other inmates (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1847, p.260).

It is difficult to determine precisely how many workhouses actually contained these wards, chiefly because it is impossible from the relevant appendices to the reports of the Commissioners in Lunacy to distinguish between idiot wards and the 'lunatic wards' that a substantial number of workhouses certainly did maintain, but a geographical division seems to have existed between small, chiefly rural houses which

...are not provided with the means of effecting...a separation; and in them the idiotic and idiots of all descriptions are dispersed throughout the house, sometimes mixing indiscriminately with the other inmates of the same sex; at other times placed with the sick or, more frequently, with the aged and infirm (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1847, p.260),

and the larger, chiefly urban houses where separation was much more likely (see also Commissioners in Lunacy, 1859, p.8) [9]. Whereas the 'expert' consensus was generally against having specialist lunatic wards - since these gave some spurious legitimacy to the practice of keeping curable lunatics in cheaper but less effective circumstances than those afforded by the lunatic asylum - there was much less opposition to specialist idiot wards, and in 1858 one commentator who was extremely hostile to lunatic wards explicitly recommended sending idiots to properly supervised workhouse idiot wards (see Bucknill, 1858, pp.581-582). It might be added, though, that a slightly different line of reasoning supposed these 'poor creatures' to be happier when 'distributed about the house' than when 'kept in those confined wards' (see Farnall's evidence in the Report from Select Committee, 1859, p.236).

For a number of 'experts', however, the whole practice of placing idiots in workhouses - whether they mixed with the rest of the pauper host or lived apart in special accommodation - was an unjustifiable evil, and this view was forcefully expressed in the Charity Organisation Society Report of 1877 (of which, more below) with these words:

[m]ore than 10,000 [idiots] are scattered in union houses where they cannot receive the training and supervision they require, and often seriously interfere with the comfort of the other inmates, meeting in return with ridicule and unkindness (quoted in Ireland, 1877, p.343).

As far as these 'experts' were concerned, then, the arguments usually employed to justify decanting lunatics from the workhouse - namely, that these individuals did not receive adequate care or treatment, and that their presence both upset other workhouse inmates and brought upon themselves 'ridicule and unkindness' - were necessarily extended to the condition of idiocy. But more than this, for the arguments almost always went on to complain that the association between idiots and lunatics was itself unjustifiable, and that there was a pressing need for idiots to be transferred not just out of the workhouse, but out of the lunatic asylum as well.

And this brings me to the third surface of emergence for the idiot, which was comprised of all those spaces technically reserved specifically for the lunatic: the public county and borough lunatic asylums, the charitable lunatic hospitals and the private 'madhouses' (or licensed houses) [10]. It is clear that right from the earliest days of specialist institutions for the lunatic - which can be dated, broadly speaking, to the early 1700s - the superficial similarities between lunacy and idiocy ensured that idiots made up a substantial percentage of the total lunatic asylum population. Admittedly the entry qualifications for an establishment such as the small Bethel Hospital at Norwich (founded in 1713) specified 'not such as are fools or idiots from birth' (see Commissioners in Lunacy, 1855, p.597), but the obvious presence of idiots in all manner of lunatic asylums by the mid-nineteenth century suggests that such specifications were either rare or ignored. Indeed, from an official return of the early 1860s (see Return of Lunatics, 1862) it can be calculated that, out of a total inmate population of 20,723 living in the forty-four English and Welsh public county and borough lunatic asylums, some 1,327 inmates (or 6.4 percent) were classified as idiots: and these aggregate figures disguise the fact that in some asylums nearly a fifth or even a quarter of the residents were actually idiots (at the North Wales Counties Asylum 58 out of 235 (or 24.7 percent) were idiots; at the Oxfordshire and Berkshire County Asylum 83 out of 494 (or 16.8 percent) were idiots; at the North and East Ridings County Asylum 84 out of 499 (or 16.8 percent) were idiots).

The phenomenon of idiots in lunatic asylums was not seen as a problem by most 'experts' until the 1850s, and even then there were many voices prepared to defend the practice. For instance, in a summary of the annual reports of lunatic

asylums for 1855 (written up in the Asylum Journal of Mental Science) the views of Mr. Hill - the medical superintendent of the North and East Ridings County Asylum - were referenced:

[h]e...calls attention to the class of institutions springing up here and there devoted to the care of idiots, and he doubts the wisdom of collecting these unfortunates in masses separate from the other insane, who make compassionate and watchful attendants upon them...He also points to the fact that a sufficient staff of trustworthy paid servants, possessing the rare qualifications of forethought, skill in teaching and tact to command, would, without the aid of insane assistants, render the separate care of idiots more expensive than it is now [in lunatic asylums] (Bucknill, 1856, pp.281-282).

But Hill's position was gradually becoming less popular, and in its place was emerging the argument that idiots required a regime of care, treatment and training quite different from the supposedly more therapeutic and less disciplinary regime experienced by the lunatics. This new argument may have originated in the empirical observation that, with the increasing size of lunatic asylums, it was becoming increasingly difficult to curb the disruptiveness of the idiot, and some commentators even began to wonder if the proximity of 'unsightly idiots' might itself retard the recovery of lunatics and so contribute to the growing need for mammoth asylums where uncured cases of lunacy could be sheltered (see Ireland, 1880, p.217). Moreover, the idiocy reformers must have been influenced by the messages diffusing from the continental experiments of Seguin, Guggenbühl and others to the effect that idiot children and young adults could be taught good habits and productive activities if placed in specialist establishments, and if thereby segregated from those wild and obscene lunatics who they were so prone to imitate. A powerful statement in this connection was offered by Ireland:

...idiots suffer much injury from being shut up in district or pauper lunatic asylums. Naturally gentle, timid and defenceless, they suffer much from the violence of maniacs, and, inexperienced in evil but imitative and prone to debasing influences, they learn in a few days indecent practices, curses and oaths which they never unlearn in the rest of their lives. Thus, an imbecile child who has been a short time in a lunatic asylum is often very troublesome and unmanageable when shifted into a training school. The whole scheme of the ordinary lunatic asylum being designed for the treatment, care and retention of the ordinary insane, all that is done for the idiotic and imbecile is to attend to their bodily wants, and to let them wander about (Ireland, 1880, p.218).

Elsewhere the same author declared that 'imprisonment in lunatic asylums' was the 'most grievous hardship' visited upon idiots by the country's lunacy laws (see Ireland, 1877, p.341), and remark after remark in the journals and textbooks echoed the sentiment that founding specialist idiot asylums would enable the lunatic

asylum to 'be freed from a certain important contingency' (see Bucknill, 1857, p.420). In a sense, therefore, just as lunacy had emerged as a distinctive socio-medical object from the depths of confinement in seventeenth and eighteenth century houses of industry and 'hopitaux generaux' (see Foucault, 1967, Chapter VIII), so idiocy was beginning to emerge as a distinctive socio-medical object from the depths of confinement in nineteenth century lunatic asylums.

#### The arrival of specialist institutions

During the second half of the nineteenth century the demand for specialist institutions to serve idiot populations quite quickly matured from the tentative nature of one medical superintendent's call for

...the experiment of an idiot home, the primary objective of which should be the physical well-being of its inmates, 'since this without doubt is obtainable, while the extent to which the mental training of idiots is possible is yet very uncertain' (Bucknill, 1856, p.264).

It was only four years later when - in a letter to one of the Scottish Commissioners in Lunacy - Dr. John Conolly could claim that both physical and mental training were indeed possible in idiot homes, and that

[f]rom what you have seen on the continent and at our large institution of Earlswood, near London [of which, more below], you have been able to decide how possible it is to raise apparently hopeless idiots from a degradation, and a state of helplessness which reduces them below the level of the lower animals, to a state of comparative intelligence, usefulness and happiness (Conolly, 1860, p.294).

As this optimistic quote so amply demonstrates, by the 1860s idiocy reform was gradually filtering from the journals and textbooks into bricks and mortar, although it was not until the Idiots Act of 1886 [11] that official recognition began to catch up with those largely philanthropic enterprises - England's first idiot asylums - which started to dot themselves about the country. But what were the details - the where, the when and the who - of this new institutional departure? My initial impression from scanning the conventional histories was that these were really quite straightforward, but a closer inspection of contemporary sources leads me to realise that things were actually a little more complicated than they might at first appear. And in Table 1 I attempt to tease out some of the places, dates and institutional connections comprising this complicated picture. The table is semi-chronological in its organisation, since I enter institutions roughly in the order that they were opened for 'business', but I interrupt this chronology on occasion to group together institutions that were somehow related to one another (through relocation; through one establishment

Table 1:  
England's nineteenth century idiot asylums and idiot schools (prepared from various sources)

Institution	Status	1851	1877	1882	1889	1898
B = 'branch' of above institution	Ch = charitable; patients are elected Pa = pauper; patients sent by parishes and paid for from rates Pr = private; patients pay for themselves					
A) The house of the Misses Whites, Bath (1846-1850)	Ch					
B) The house of the Misses Whites, Belvidere St., upper part of Bath (sometimes known as Rock Hall House) (1850- )	Ch	*	*	*		
C) Idiot Asylum, Parkhouse, Highgate, nr. London (1848-1855)	Ch	*				
D) B: Essex Hall, nr. Colchester (1850-1855)	Ch	*				
E) B: Severals Hall, nr. Colchester (mentioned in 1854)	Ch					
F) Earlwood Asylum, Redhill (1855- )	Ch		*	*	*	*
G) Eastern Counties Asylum, Essex Hall, nr. Colchester (1859- )	Ch		*	*	*	*
H) Western Counties Asylum, Starcross, nr. Exeter (1864- )	Ch/Pa		*	*	*	*
I) Royal Albert Asylum, Lancaster (1864- )	Ch		*	*	*	*
J) Brunton House for Idiot Boys, Lancaster	Ch					*



	<u>Institution</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>1851</u>	<u>1877</u>	<u>1882</u>	<u>1889</u>	<u>1898</u>
K)	Normansfield, Hampton Wick, nr. London (1867- )	Pr		*	*	*	*
L)	Midland Counties Idiot Asylum, Knowle, nr. Birmingham (1869- )	Ch		*	*	*	*
M)	Caterham 'Imbecile' Asylum, Caterham, nr. London (for harmless & chronic lunatics, idiots and imbeciles) (1870- )	Pa		*	*	-	-
N)	Leavesdon 'Imbecile' Asylum, Leavesdon, nr. London (for harmless & chronic lunatics, idiots and imbeciles) (1870- )	Pa		*	*	-	-
O)	House at Hampstead (disused fever hospital) (for idiot children removed from the 'imbecile' asylums) (1873-1874)	Pa					
P)	House at Clapton (disused orphanage) (for idiot children removed from house at Hampstead) (1874-1878)	Pa		*			
Q)	Darenth School, Dartford (for idiot children removed from house at Clapton) (1878- )	Pa			*	*	*
R)	Darenth Asylum, Dartford (for the training of young adult idiots too old to stay in Darenth School) (1880- )	Pa			*	*	*
S)	Infirmary for sick and aged idiots, Tooting Bec, London (1888- )	Pa					
T)	Separate accommodation for idiots in grounds of Warwick Lunatic Asylum	Pa		*	-	*	
U)	Separate accommodation for idiots at Northampton Lunatic Asylum	Pa				*	*

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>1851</u>	<u>1877</u>	<u>1882</u>	<u>1889</u>	<u>1898</u>
Downside Lodge, Chilcompton, nr. Bath	Pr				*	*
The Magdalene Hospital, Bath	Ch					*

V)

W)

Key

Source for 1851: Commissioners in Lunacy (1851)

Source for 1877: Ireland (1877)

Source for 1882: Tuke (1882)

Source for 1889: Report of Royal Commission (1889)

Source for 1898: Report of Departmental Committee (1898)

\* : mentioned in source

- : not mentioned in source, but known to be in existence

==== : no direct connection between institution and the one tabulated above

\_\_\_\_\_ : direct connection between institution and the one tabulated above (i.e. the second is the first relocated; the second is a 'branch' of the first; both the first and the second are part of the same 'service delivery system' (as in the case of the seven establishments that were, at one time or another, part of the same 'service' for metropolitan idiots and imbeciles - as run by the Metropolitan Asylums Board))

⌈ : first institution relocates to second institution  
⌋

being the 'branch asylum' of another; through several establishments being part of the same 'facility complex'). I have checked each asylum 'against' primary sources for the five years, 1851, 1877, 1882, 1889 and 1898, but it should be noted that one or two of the asylums listed in the table do not feature in any of these sources: nevertheless, it is obvious from other sources that they did enjoy an existence, however brief.

It is perhaps worth elaborating upon some of the information contained in this table, and in the first place it is valuable to reference the Idiot Asylum established at Highgate by an individual - the Rev. or Dr. Andrew Reed (see Figure 2) - whose earnest endeavours on behalf of so many disadvantaged groups surely deserve to be better remembered. As early as the 1830s Reed had begun to worry about the plight of idiots left at large in the community (see above), and in his pocket-book he had scribbled a note to the effect that 'an asylum is greatly wanted for indigent idiots' (see Reed and Reed, 1863, p.384). After much planning this hope eventually became a reality with the opening of the Highgate establishment on April 26th., 1848; an event that, as Reed reported, was not entirely successful. Many of the idiot children who arrived on that day were very disturbed; many were 'clamorous without speech' or 'rebellious without mind'; some hid in corners; some smashed windows and defied boundaries; and Reed recalled how

[i]t seemed to me as though nothing less than the accommodations of a prison would meet the wants of such a family (Reed and Reed, 1863, p.392).

Reed and his colleagues were not easily deterred, however, and through their painstaking efforts discipline and order were instilled, the asylum grew in numbers and popularity, and by the early 1850s two 'branch asylums' had been opened near Colchester. In 1855 the Highgate establishment rejoined with its offspring at a new location near Redhill, but Reed worked hard to prevent the Essex Hall asylum from closing as a result of this move, and in 1859 the house near Colchester reopened as the Eastern Counties Asylum for Idiots. Then came the founding of three more institutions - the Western Counties Asylum (1864), the Royal Albert or Northern Counties Asylum (1864/8) and the Midland Counties Asylum (1867) - and these, together with the Earlswood Asylum near Redhill and the Eastern Counties Asylum, were the 'big five' facilities that have since been concentrated upon by conventional histories of idiocy and its treatment in England.

Another interesting development was the appearance of a small private undertaking (charging its inmates not inconsiderable sums) at Hampton Wick in 1867. This was run by Dr. John Langdon Down (see Figure 3), the physician who coined the (now



Figure 2:  
Andrew Reed (1787-1862) (from Reed and Reed, 1863)



Figure 3:  
John Langdon Haydon Down (1828-1897)  
(from Wolstenholme and Porter (eds.),  
1967)

largely discredited) term 'mongolism' to describe a certain variety of idiocy (now known simply as Down's Syndrome) which he supposed to exhibit physical features ('broad faces and squat bodies') similar to those natural in the Mongolian racial type (see Langdon Down, 1887, pp.7-13). Down opened the doors of his asylum to idiots after having left the post of medical superintendent at the Earlswood Asylum, and he managed the house with the help of his two medically-trained sons until his death in 1897, at which time his two sons took over the affairs of the institution (see Brain, 1967, pp.4-5).

This brings us, then, to the crucial developments that followed from the Metropolitan Poor Act of 1867, which created the so-called Metropolitan Asylums Board and in so doing unwittingly introduced a whole new element into the story of idiocy reform. Gwendoline Ayers has this to say of the Metropolitan Asylums Board:

[a]lthough [its] name suggests that the sole function of the new body was the care of the mentally ill, this was not the case. It was called upon, initially, to erect and administer fever and smallpox hospitals, as well as mental institutions (Ayers, 1971, p.vii).

Perhaps the most significant thing about this new body, though, was that it existed as a public provision with authorisation to fund institutional reforms from the rates paid in the various unions and parishes comprising an area known as the Metropolitan Asylums District. One of the first acts of the Board was to open two large institutions - one at Caterham and one at Leavesdon - that were designed to accommodate all of those chronic and harmless cases which were crowding out public, charitable and private lunatic asylums all over the country, but which were also chargeable to unions and parishes in the metropolitan area [12]. As the Caterham and Leavesdon establishments began to fill up it rapidly became apparent that the majority of the decanted chronic and harmless cases were actually idiotic, imbecilic or demented - in consequence of which the two asylums became known to many as the 'imbecile' asylums (see Ayers, 1971, Chapter 4) - and the implication is that these asylums should be viewed as providing the first foray into the realm of specialist public arrangements for the idiot. A sort of 'knock-on' effect ensued in the metropolitan 'facility complex':

[a]t first children as well as adults were admitted to the Caterham and Leavesdon Asylums...After a year or two, however, the medical superintendents urged the Asylums Board to separate the children from the adults. This was agreed, and in 1873 the first children left Caterham and Leavesdon for Hampstead, where they were housed in the Board's temporary fever hospital. Teachers were appointed, and the experiment of educating idiot children began. In 1878, after a temporary move to a disused orphanage at Clapton in north-east London, the children were brought to Darenth,

Kent, where the Board had established a new institution, complete with classrooms, to accommodate about 560 young patients. But, when these children reached the age of 16, most of them were still unfit for discharge. In order to spare them from the detrimental effects of associating once more with the chronic adult patients, the Board erected a separate institution adjacent to the school, with accommodation for 1,000. This was opened two years later, in 1880. The scheme was to receive into the school children from 5 to 16 years; to subject them to a special course of education and manual instruction; to retain the 'improvable' after the age of 16 for training in the workshops set up in the adjacent institution; and to transfer the more severely handicapped older children - by far the larger group - to the remaining part of the new building (Ayers, 1971, p.45).

The idea was that the idiots transferred to the 'remaining part of the new building' the 'adult department' - would be kept there 'for life' (see Report of Royal Commission, 1889, p.150), although by 1888 a site had been acquired at Tooting Bec for an infirmary to which some old and sick inmates of the adult department could be removed (see Ayers, 1971, p.46).

A handful of other establishments opened their doors during the later years of the century [13], but I need to add little more here beyond a brief comment upon the actual numbers of idiot pupils and adults that the skeletal network of provision was able to deal with. Ireland (1877, p.394) drew up this table:

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Number of Inmates</u>
Bath Asylum (Rock Hall House)	-
Essex Hall, Colchester	98
Earlswood, Redhill	594
Starcross, Exeter	40
Royal Albert, Lancaster	251
Normansfield, Hampton Wick	94
Midland Counties Asylum, Birmingham	20
Clapton (the temporary accommodation for idiot children of the metropolis, soon to become the Darenth 'Schools')	355

Summing the figures in the right-hand column gives a total of only 1,452, and this looks fairly inconsequential besides both the 3,190 idiots living under workhouse roofs in 1847 and the 1,327 idiots living under lunatic asylum roofs in 1862 (indeed, the first figure amounts to only 32.1 percent of the latter two figures combined). It is true that the Caterham and Leavesdon 'imbecile' asylums must have provided beds for a substantial number of idiots during the thirty years prior to 1900 (see Ayers, 1971, Table A) - since each asylum was initially designed to house over 1,500 patients - but it remains the case that England's early idiot asylums made small inroads into the total number of idiots that many 'experts' reckoned to be in need of public assistance. In 1877 this total was

estimated to be 28,348 (see below), and the difference between this figure and the figure of 1,452 derived above (the latter amounts to only 5.1 percent of the former) is a salutary warning to any historians wishing to make grand claims about what the idiocy reformers managed to achieve by the close of the century.



## THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE EARLY IDIOT ASYLUMS

In the previous section the question of where the early idiot asylums appeared began to be touched upon, and in this section I propose to consider in greater detail the geography of the resulting distribution, noting along the way that most of the 'processes' shaping the emergent network of provision - the relocations, the splitting off of 'branch asylums' and the growth of 'facility complexes' - exhibited some sort of geographical 'logic' or 'constraint'. If we examine a map of the institutional distribution (see Map 1), however, it can be seen that - with the exception of a small knot of establishments in the vicinity of Bath (three of which may have coexisted) - there is no obvious patterning other than the clustering of establishments around London and its environs. In fact, the distribution is extremely 'patchy' or 'spotty', and an inspection of its uncluttered geography immediately gives the lie to those histories that speak of a blossoming in the numbers of idiot asylums and schools as if these were replacing 'at a stroke' all of the earlier institutional arrangements for idiots in workhouses and lunatic asylums.

### An unequal geography

But the extreme 'patchiness' or 'spottiness' of the distribution actually signposts an important issue that was debated at some length during the second half of the nineteenth century, and which was clearly central - not incidental - to the whole history of institutional developments for idiots at this time. And this, of course, was the issue of geographical inequalities in the network of provision. A forceful depiction of this problem was published in a 'Charity Reform Paper' of 1880 (which was reprinted word-for-word in the Journal of Mental Science later that year), and in this paper the author - a W. M. Wilkinson - introduced his argument with these claims:

[i]n January, 1877, the number of imbeciles [by which Wilkinson seems to have meant idiots, imbeciles and the feeble-minded] requiring the benefits of public provision was calculated to be 28,348...Of these only 1,210, or 3 percent of the whole, are in charitable institutions. Of the rest there were at that date in the Metropolitan District Asylums 4,205, all excellently cared for and the young separated from adults and educated, trained and improved, whilst the country cases were neglected in workhouses, misplaced in lunatic asylums, or living as out-door paupers wearing down the energies of poor families, and merely kept without teaching or training of any kind (Wilkinson, 1880, p.141).

As has already been explained, the comprehensive metropolitan 'facility complex' for idiots young and old came into being chiefly as a result of the founding in 1867



Map 1:  
The geographical distribution  
of England's nineteenth century  
idiot asylums

Key: letters a-w correspond to  
institutions identified a-w  
in Table 1

of the Metropolitan Asylums Board, an event that made it possible for the large 'imbecile' asylums at Caterham and Leavesdon, the two sections of the Darenth 'Schools' and the infirmary for elderly idiots at Tooting Bec all to be funded from the rates paid in the Metropolitan Asylums District. Elsewhere in the country, where idiot asylums either possessed charitable status or were run privately for profit, building up such a comprehensive 'facility complex' was never going to be a realistic proposition. Wilkinson commented in some detail upon the metropolitan idiot asylums and schools, and then he cast his eye beyond what he called the 'charmed circle ruled over by the Metropolitan Board', and in so doing he lamented the absence of publicly-funded institutions in the provinces (see Wilkinson, 1880, pp.142-144). There was undoubtedly a considerable demand for such provisions, so he argued, and this was evident from the experience of Reed's Earlswood asylum:

[s]uch...is the rush to get children into the charity institutions that at Earlswood there are always long lists of candidates both from town and country, of whom, after great expense and anxiety, only a small percentage is admitted half-yearly, and then only for 5 years, excepting a small number elected annually of life cases, to the extent of 100 cases altogether (Wilkinson, 1880, p.143).

Wilkinson was certainly not alone in complaining about the unequal geography of the early idiot establishments, and his claims obviously echoed the general position of the Charity Organisation Society (of which, more below), which first published his paper and with whom he had a close association (see editor's footnote to Wilkinson, 1880, p.141). In addition, the Royal Commission of 1889 worried about

...idiot asylums outside the metropolitan district being so few (Report of Royal Commission, 1889, p.97),

whereas E. H. Wodehouse - in giving evidence to the same Commission of 1889 - basically agreed with this worry, but elaborated slightly on the precise pattern of the unequal geography:

[t]he six northern counties and London are well provided, but for the rest of the country there is nothing (Report of Royal Commission, 1889, p.1064).

Furthermore, the Royal Commission of 1889 made the following remark about provisions for idiot children:

[a]t present Darenth is the only asylum exclusively for paupers to which they can be compulsorily sent, and then only from the metropolitan district; at the other institutions the inmates are admitted either by election or payment (Report of Royal Commission, 1889, p.103).

And these simple geographical realities led the Commission to conclude that any law seeking to make it compulsory for parents to send their idiot children to

specialist institutions would remain a 'dead letter' until a more extensive and equal geography of idiot schools had been created.

#### Visions of a more equal geography

This brings me to the matter of visions regarding a more equal geography of idiot establishments, then, and it is perhaps appropriate to begin by examining the thinking of the Rev. Reed in this respect. It is quite clear from his memoirs that Reed considered it vital to achieve a truly national coverage in institutional places for idiots, and it has already been mentioned how anxious he had been to prevent the closure of the Essex Hall facility when he removed his 'own' idiot children from here to the Earlswood asylum in 1855. Moreover, there is even a suggestion that Reed had deliberately sought out a 'branch asylum' at some distance from his Highgate establishment for the very purpose of - as it were - 'spreading the word' about idiot asylums as far and wide as possible. As he wrote in his memoirs,

[a]s to Colchester [the nearest town to Essex Hall], I proposed that we should take the house, knowing of course the difficulty of distance; but I had another object. I have never allowed myself to regard it as a final step for us. My hope is to nurse it up to independence, and in the meantime to teach the Eastern Counties their duty (Reed and Reed, 1863, p.399).

But this was not all, for in the very next sentence he declared that

[m]y eye too is upon Edinburgh, Dublin and Bristol, as other centres (Reed and Reed, 1863, p.399).

And it is hence unsurprising to learn that he was in regular correspondence with various influential authorities on the subject of founding idiot asylums to serve the North, the West and so on. Up to a point this vision was realised, of course, but the demand for asylum places turned out to be much greater than Reed had ever envisaged, and this meant that an equal geography was going to require many more buildings in many more locations than he had ever supposed.

A second and rather more comprehensive vision in this connection was that harboured by the Charity Organisation Society, an organisation founded in 1869 with the objective of investigating and commentating upon the progress of charitable (and lack of progress by the state in achieving) involvement in all manner of pressing social problems (see Mowat, 1961). In June, 1875, the Society appointed a committee under the secretaryship of Sir Charles Trevelyan which was to study the education and care of idiots and imbeciles, and in 1877 a report was published that was to become something of a landmark in the researching of the subject [14]: it was used at length by the Royal Commission of 1889 and was

taken as something of a manifesto by 'experts' like Ireland and Tuke (see Ireland, 1877, pp.342-352; Tuke, 1882, pp.311-318). What is of especial importance for this paper, though, is the report's recognition that

[a]fflictions of this class [of idiocy] can only be effectively dealt with as a common burden by public administrative arrangements. As they prevail in a certain fixed ratio to the whole population, the means of mitigation or remedy should be provided not merely at favoured points like the metropolis and a few large towns, but generally throughout the country (quoted in Ireland, 1877, pp.343-344).

And more specifically, it was recommended that the example of the Metropolitan Asylums Board should be followed elsewhere: it was urged that groups of counties should unite in order to build and maintain from the local rates (and perhaps with some assistance from the 'imperial rates') - in the vicinity of some large central settlement - residential idiot schools for 500 children and adjacent idiot asylums for 2,000 adults. This set of proposals hence amounted to a detailed and all-encompassing 'model' for a genuinely equal geography of idiot establishments.

Little progress was made towards this ideal during the rest of the century, however, and this is why the Royal Commission of 1889 was still citing the Charity Organisation Society report of 1877 as a possible guideline for future developments. Indeed, when discussing facilities for idiot children the Commission explicitly drew upon this report in asserting that

...there should be for every group of counties an institution similar in character to Darenth, divided into two sections, one of which should be confined solely to educable imbeciles, where the children of those parents who are either paupers or cannot afford to pay for the maintenance of their children... could be sent by the [union or parish] guardians or school authority (Report of the Royal Commission, 1889, p.104).

An intriguing additional matter raised by the Commission was the possibility that the unequal geography of existing idiot schools, which placed considerable distances between many parents and their nearest idiot school (hence creating a problem of what medical geographers call 'accessibility'), was actually deciding these parents against sending their idiot children away. The conclusion to be drawn from this state of affairs, so the Commission argued, was that

[i]f...asylums were made more numerous in England, and situate at more convenient centres, there would be less objection to sending the children to a neighbouring place than there would be to sending them to a large asylum at considerable distance from the parent's home (Report of Royal Commission, 1889, pp. 103-104).

The Commission even speculated that such an improvement in 'accessibility' would

do away with the necessity of introducing legislation compelling parents to put their idiot children in specialist idiot schools.

## THE SITING OF THE EARLY IDIOT ASYLUMS

Having examined the geographical distribution of the early idiot asylums, I propose now to consider in more detail the precise sites - the particular locations (for example, urban or rural) and environments (for example, upland or downland) - that idiot asylums 'gravitated towards', or which were seen as ideals against which could be measured the limitations of those actual sites where idiot asylums 'found themselves'.

### The continental experience: high places and attractive places

Perhaps the best-known nineteenth century 'yard-stick' in this respect was Guggenbühl's institution in Switzerland, which was established in 1842 only 100 feet below the summit of the Abendberg mountain in Canton Berne, some 4000 feet above sea-level and also several hundred feet above the fir-line. The principal reason for placing the asylum at such a great altitude lay in the fact that 'cretinism' (the principle form of idiocy in this district) was unknown at such an elevation [15], and Guggenbühl thought - I suppose quite logically - that the physical and mental conditions of cretinous children would improve if they lived so high above sea-level (see Figure 4). This idea was later challenged, as I will show, but the remarkable site of Guggenbühl's asylum did bring with it other important benefits. Indeed, to quote Barr,

Guggenbühl in his experiment had not only proved that the cretin, transported at a tender age to a higher and purer atmosphere, immediately began to improve physically, but he sought also to utilise the glorious panorama of nature's wonders, there continually presented, as a means to quicken and arouse dormant faculties and to fix the wandering attention of the child. 'In such a neighbourhood', he tells us, 'all the phenomena of nature, such as the rising and setting of the sun and moon, tempests, thunder-storms, rainbows and the like, are seen in perfection and found of infinite value in awakening the sleeping soul' (Barr, 1904, pp.38-39).

The physical geography of the Abendberg was hence seen by Guggenbühl as a vital tool in helping to train the senses of the idiot (and note that Guggenbühl pursued methods that, in being directed chiefly at the senses of the idiot child, closely paralleled those of Seguin): the asylum's site was hence seen as far from incidental to the difficult task of 'moralising' and 'spiritualising' the idiot inmates of the institution.

The significance of site began to be discussed by a number of continental 'experts', and in 1857 the thoughts of Dr. Kern - a German - on the matter reached the attention of a British readership through a review by J. C. Bucknill in the Asylum Journal of Mental Science. Kern was clearly critical of the location



Figure 4:  
Guggenbühl, three nurses and several idiot children standing  
outside the Abendberg asylum (from Howells (ed.), 1975)



adopted by Guggenbühl's asylum - and by several other establishments - and of one establishment he had this to say:

Mariaburg, which was once a convent, lies upon the Suabian Alps; the inclement and isolated position of which might be very adapted for the former purpose of the place (Bucknill, 1857, p.414),

but which - so he might have gone on to claim - was not so well adapted for its new purpose. He evidently preferred the site of a second Wurtemberg asylum, that at Winterbach, which - rather than being perched precariously on the top of a mountain - lay within a 'beautiful wide, open valley'. The implication must be that Kern favoured scenic sites so long as these were not too remote from centres of population, and in summary of his views on location he declared that

[t]he locality in which the institution ought to be established should, above all things, be free from endemic idiocy. It is indifferent how many feet it lies above the level of the sea; but it is wrong that idiots should be separated from the rest of mankind, and that the institution should be established where people who do not belong to it seldom come (Bucknill, 1857, p.420).

For Kern, therefore, Guggenbühl's emphases on high elevation and physical attractiveness were translated into emphases on freedom from endemic idiocy, 'accessibility' and also physical attractiveness. (The notion that institutions should be 'accessible' to 'people who do not belong to them' is particularly interesting, and I will briefly return to this notion in my concluding comments.)

#### The English experience: railway magnates and moral atmospheres

As the asylum system began to grow in England, so the precise concerns of the continentals - notably those to do with high elevation and freedom from endemic idiocy - disappeared, but this did not lead to a carelessness about the issue of siting on the part of England's early idiocy reformers. This is not to deny that the particular pieces of land upon which particular asylums 'alighted' were usually chosen for immediate, even trivial, reasons to do with land availability and the contacts of the reformers involved, and a good example of this occurred when Reed's 'branch asylum' opened at Essex Hall a mile from Colchester in the vicinity of the railway station there, on a patch of land donated by Sir William Peto, the railway magnate (though even in this case the move into East Anglia may have had more to it than first meets the eye).

Nevertheless, certain broad locational principles were subscribed to by England's idiocy reformers, and some impression of what these principles entailed can be gained from a contemporary illustration of the Earlswood establishment (see Figure 5). In short, it was thought that sites should be scenic, within easy reach



Figure 5:  
The Earlswood Asylum for Idiots (from Reed and Reed, 1863)

of open country, and set within large grounds or gardens, and on each of these counts the objective was to produce what the Royal Commission of 1889 called a 'healthy moral atmosphere'. In fact, this Royal Commission was explicit in acknowledging the role played by 'surroundings' in the training of idiots, and it was also satisfied that by and large the existing idiot asylums did offer

...a cheerful and healthy atmosphere, both physical and moral, to stimulate and encourage the dawn of intelligence (Report of Royal Commission, 1889, p.102).

In a not dissimilar vein the Commissioners in Lunacy, writing in 1851, had this to say about the Essex Hall 'branch asylum' (see Figure 6):

[t]he site and aspect are good. The house stands on a gentle eminence, and attached to it and surrounding it are about seven acres of ground, which are enclosed by a substantial paling. Of the seven acres, one is occupied by the buildings and by the yard used for sports and systematic exercise. The remaining six acres are laid out as garden shrubbery and recreation ground. These are encircled by a good gravel walk, which runs round their whole extent and is stated to be one-third of a mile in length (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1851, p.391)

Furthermore, the Commissioners went on to record their favourable impressions of the 'cheerful airing-grounds', of the 'exercising-yard' and of the habit of taking children on regular walks in the surrounding countryside.

The significance of site to both asylum proprietors and 'expert' commentators was perhaps even more obvious in another report presented by the Commissioners in Lunacy during 1851, and this considered the small idiot institution in Bath. As the Commissioners explained, then,

[t]his establishment, which was several years ago set on foot and organised chiefly through the active benevolence of two ladies of the name of White, and was the earliest institution of the kind in England expressly devoted to the mental training of idiots, has been recently removed from its original site to a new and more convenient premises in a street called the Belvidere, in the upper part of the city of Bath. In this respect the new is decidedly superior to the old mansion; its site, which is on the slope of the hill at a considerable elevation, is more airy and cheerful; and, although like the other, it is very deficient in airing grounds, being close to the street in front and having only a small yard in the rear, it is within a moderate walk of the high open Downs which surround the city (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1851, p.395).

According to the Commissioners this change of location had benefited the twenty or so pupils, for at the time of the Commissioners' last visit these pupils

...showed a decided improvement in point of physical appearance since the time when we saw them in their former house, now upwards of a year ago (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1851, p.397).

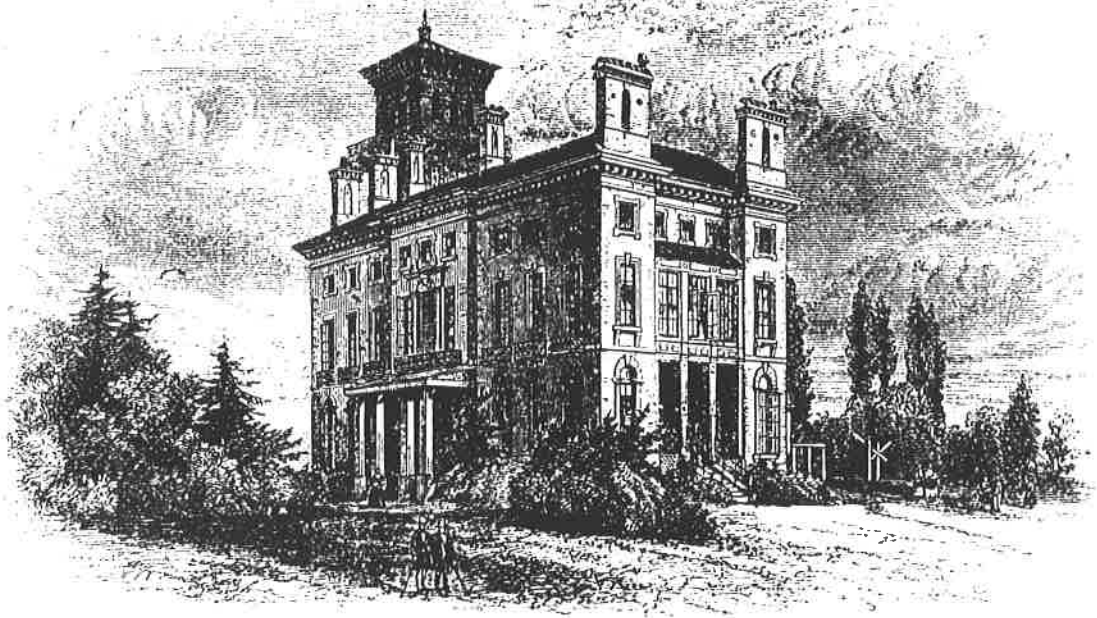


Figure 6:  
The Essex Hall 'branch asylum' (later to become the Eastern  
Counties Asylum for Idiots) (from Reed and Reed, 1863)

From these observations it is not hard to detect a definite official vision - and one that was shared by most asylum proprietors - which envisaged an ideal site possessed of a 'healthy moral atmosphere', and which also used this ideal as a measure of the pros and cons associated with actual asylum sites.

Modifying existing sites: bringing in nature and bringing in work

A chief attribute of an ideal site was considered to be its 'naturalness', and this translated into a desire for sites to be either rural or located within a short walk of open countryside. For some idiot asylums, however, these desires could not be met because of a basically urban situation, and this meant that some sort of compensation - in the guise of 'naturalising' the existing site - was called for. An apocryphal story in this respect tells of how the Rev. Reed once discovered in the grounds of his Highgate establishment a small idiot child - a 'little fellow' who had never before been known to show emotion - 'crying piteously over a dead bird', which later turned out to have been this child's 'favourite robin'. And this incident, so the story goes, led Reed to introduce birds and animals of various sorts into the asylum, since he was now convinced of how a 'sentiment of love' for creatures could help to 'moralise' his idiot children (see Reed and Reed, 1863, p.397).

The Highgate asylum was positioned on the crown of Highgate Hill, but the total area of the site amounted only to sixteen acres on account of its presence in a fairly built-up district, and the impression is that this site quickly became perceived as too cramped for the asylum's requirements. Indeed, in 1850 the Commissioners in Lunacy remarked that

...the accommodation afforded by the present premises at Highgate having proved inadequate to meet the increased and increasing numbers of applications for admission, it has been determined to extend the buildings (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1850, p.403).

The extension was the Essex Hall 'branch asylum', of course, and this relieved much of the pressure on the main establishment - as too did the project of 'putting in order' the garden land and exercising grounds comprising the Highgate Hill site. Nonetheless, there is some indication that the Commissioners in Lunacy continued to be a little unhappy about this rather urban site, and in 1851 they suggested that in order to overcome the site's deficiencies and ensure a varied selection of 'amusements and recreations'

...singing birds, rabbits and guinea pigs might be usefully placed in the list of favourites, and some domestic animals, such as cows and poultry; and perhaps a donkey or a goat,

which could be harnessed so as to draw the very young children in a small chaise, would be valuable auxiliaries in promoting the health and developing the faculties of the inmates (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1851, p.390).

Moreover, the Commissioners argued that a 'good bowling green and skittle ground' might easily be installed in the asylum's grounds.

The subject of bringing farm animals into the asylum grounds relates to a second site attribute that was increasingly thought to be of importance as the second half of the nineteenth century progressed, and this was the availability of land to support extensive agricultural and industrial employments for inmates (and particularly the older ones). Lying behind this increased emphasis on labour for idiots may have been a largely unacknowledged faith in the necessity for - and 'correctness' of - people being enmeshed in capitalist work disciplines, but a more specific determinant of this emphasis was Seguin's claim that idiots needed not scholarly education, but prolonged and detailed training of their physical senses. Seguin's 'physiological education' placed great stress on the need to 'train the hand', since he supposed that training the shaky and unco-ordinated hand of the idiot child would help that child to express itself - to translate thoughts into actions - in a manner not otherwise possible (see Holman, 1914, pp.86-93), and he thereby recognised the need for idiot establishments to provide a great many facilities which would encourage this 'training of the hand'. Furthermore, he firmly believed that paramount among these facilities was the presence of a garden in which the idiot child could play and work with spades, wheelbarrows, walls, ditches and obstacle-courses [16], and - although he did not elaborate upon this point - he clearly envisaged the growing idiot child making a transition from the garden to the farm:

[s]oon the...children become able to pave the garden-walk with pebbles, or make gutters at their sides; they learn in short sessions the use of the spade, hoe, rake, watering-pot and other things according to their strength...We will not follow our children, grown stronger, in the farm to see them helped by the animals which they treat kindly, and above all, aided by nature. This is essentially the work for them (Holman, 1914, p.95).

It is not entirely surprising, then, that numerous official documents began to complain about scholarly instruction being pursued at the expense of sensory instruction [17], and neither is it surprising that England's earliest idiot institutions quite soon looked to improve their outdoor facilities and to found farms and workshops. Following a visit to the Earlswood asylum, for instance, the Royal Commission of 1889 reported that

[t]here is an acreage of 218 acres. There is a tailor's shop in connection with the asylum...Basket-making and mat-making, carpentering, brush-making, shoe-making, mattress-making and stuffing are carried on...There is also a tin plate shop...The farm is separate, and the farm establishment pays £300 a year, as rent, to the institution, which buys the farm produce for its requirements...[S]everal of the inmates who were employed about the farm showed great aptitude for agricultural work and fondness for animals (Report of Royal Commission, 1889, p.166).

These sorts of developments were obviously only possible if an asylum had sufficient land upon which gardens could be laid out, farmland cultivated and workshops erected, and it is obvious that some asylums could not improve in this connection without relocating their operations to less cramped surroundings. An example here might once again be the Highgate asylum, which - despite putting its grounds in order - was still criticised by the Commissioners in Lunacy (1851, pp.388-389) for giving inadequate 'practical instruction in useful occupations and employment', and these criticisms must have had an influence in inducing the institution's relocation to the much more spacious site at Earlswood. Finally, though, it might be added that the appearance in an asylum's grounds of agricultural and industrial pursuits must have had a significant visual impact simply in terms of what Radford and Tipper (1987) call the 'crafting of a landscape'.

## THE SPATIAL ARRANGEMENTS INTERNAL TO THE EARLY IDIOT ASYLUMS

In this penultimate section I wish to offer a few remarks about the spatial arrangements internal to the idiot establishments, but it should be noted at the outset that these arrangements were never the subject of debates as informed, prolonged and occasionally heated as those which grew up around the plans and architectures of nineteenth century lunatic asylums. Nevertheless, one or two interesting points can still be made about the use of space in the establishments under study here.

### Order, neatness and drill

It is revealing, then, to contrast the Rev. Reed's despair at the disorder of Earlswood's opening day (see above) - when unruly idiot children 'smashed windows and defied boundaries' - with his pleasure at the ordered state of Earlswood several years later. As he exclaimed,

[h]ow different the scene now at Highgate! There is order; obedience to authority; classification, improvement and cheerful occupation. Every hour has its duties; and these duties are steadily fulfilled. Windows are now safe; boundaries are observed without walls; and doors are safe without locks (Reed and Reed, 1863, p.400).

Similarly, it is revealing to consider the following recommendations that the Commissioners in Lunacy made in 1851 when discussing the small idiot asylum at 35, Belvidere Street, Bath:

...the most scrupulous order and neatness should be observed in the arrangement of the various articles in the school room and all the other apartments of the institution; and...the pupils themselves should be carefully trained to arrange and keep everything at their disposal 'such as books, toys, pictures, maps and c.) in an orderly and methodical manner (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1851, p.398).

And in the same year the Commissioners also observed that at Reed's Highgate asylum a 'more precise and effective method of conducting the drill exercises has been adopted' (see Commissioners in Lunacy, 1851, p.388), and this emphasis upon 'drill' provides another window on the attempt to impose order upon both the behaviour and the surroundings of the idiot pupil or adult.

In addition, this emphasis recalls the writings of Seguin on his 'physiological education', most of which displayed a thorough-going concern for the minutest details of the furniture, rooms and other places in which the institutionalised idiot child was to live out his or her days. In the words of Henry Holman, who attempted to 'rediscover' the principles by which the 'great man' worked,



[t]he thoroughness and completeness of Seguin's system, from the practical point of view - down to the smallest details - is well shown by his descriptions of the apparatus, furniture and furnishing of rooms and other places for special purposes (Holman, 1914, p.93).

Many of the 'smallest details' described by Seguin were designed to be of assistance in the project of educating the idiot's senses, and an apt illustration in this respect was his recommendation of a large room in which the 'ladder lying down', the treadmill, the rising blocks and the 'painted footmarks on the floor' would all help the idiot child to discipline the movements of his or her feet (see Holman, 1914, pp.94-95). Another detail was his intention that the idiot school's garden should be a vital instrument in training the thought processes of the idiot child:

[t]he very youngest of the children are sent in squads to dig little holes a few inches apart; to deposit a precise number of seeds in each hole, without missing any; and to cover the seeds with light dirt, etc. Later, being made familiar with the shape of a few leaves, they are set in groups to weed out from a large patch every green thing showing itself under a form different from the one expected to grow on the spot (Holman, 1914, p.95).

In these proposals Seguin was obviously looking to employ spatial arrangements - even those involving holes and plants in the garden - as part of a more general strategy orientated towards training both the thinking and the actions of his idiot charges.

Whilst this is not exactly the rigorous 'time-space segmentation' demanded by an ideal-type disciplinary institution such as Jeremy Bentham's 'Panopticon' (see Foucault, 1977, Chapter 3.3; Driver, 1985), there is still some indication that the managers of nineteenth century idiot establishments saw space - or spatial arrangements - as crucial in the battle to instil order (and hence discipline and even 'morality') into the idiot mind. It might be objected that this use of space emerged quite directly from the peculiar educational needs of the idiot, but I would argue that the fascination of idiocy reformers with spatial techniques may have reflected a much deeper desire to secure what David Sibley has recently termed the 'purification' of space (see Sibley, 1987; also Sibley, 1981). There are perhaps two aspects to this claim, since in the first place the idiocy reformers were apparently using space to instil order into the idiot mind, but in the second place they were also concerned with the more specific task of inculcating into idiot pupils and adults a strong sense of spatial order - an ability not just to be ordered in general thinking and behaviour, but to be ordered in the more specific matter of understanding and using both

space and things arranged spatially. And more than this, for it might be speculated that the acute disorder, unpredictability and 'messiness' of the idiot - the propensity for smashing windows and transgressing boundaries - constituted a serious threat to the 'purity' of nineteenth century spaces, and that the early idiot asylums were hence arenas where strenuous efforts could be made to defuse this threat by teaching idiots to appreciate both the beauty of spatial order and the sanctity of spatial boundaries.

## CONCLUSION

Because of public attitudes regarding segregation of the deviant, this land [the land occupied by an institution for the mentally handicapped] was...usually removed from the city by some distance and in the lowest land-cost section. If the city has grown in the intervening years, the institution is more often than not encapsulated by slums or commercial zoning or both. If the city has not grown, the institution remains a place apart - the 'nuthouse' out there - strange, mysterious and forbidding (Cleland, 1963, p.125).

A not uncommon vision of the locations that were colonised by the earliest institutions for the mentally handicapped is, as the above quote neatly demonstrates, that these were deliberately placed at some remove from centres of population in order to fulfil what Bramwell (1966, p.335) describes as the principle of 'out of sight, out of mind'. The implication of this vision is that at root the remote rural sites of many idiot establishments resulted from a nineteenth century 'police action' by which all manner of 'deviant' populations - the idiot or mentally handicapped person included - were segregated into distant compounds where their obscenities and disruptions could no longer cause offence or interfere with the smooth running of society's 'normal' activities. Furthermore, an argument along these lines pays little heed to the actual claims voiced by the original reformers themselves, since their theories about the benefits that even idiots could gain from the 'moral atmosphere' of a remote rural asylum site were clearly a 'smokescreen' - an attempt at 'scientific' justification - disguising their true desire both to cleanse the city of its evils and to wall up the 'deviant' in isolated bastilles.

It should be obvious, though, that this sort of vision is not one to which I have subscribed in this paper. Rather, I have been 'guilty' of listening to the things that were said by England's early idiocy reformers, by the Commissioners in Lunacy and by other contemporary 'experts', and I have also committed the crime of taking these things seriously in their own terms and of trying to mobilise them in my own project of reconstructing and interpreting the historical geography of the country's nineteenth century idiot asylums. But there are two points that I would like to make in my own defence. Firstly, whilst it must be the case that on occasion particular idiots were institutionalised to prevent offence and disruption in public places - and, it must be added, there can be no doubting the insidious nature of the segregationist spatial strategies ushered in by 'eugenics' during the early 1900s - it is hard to believe that there was nothing genuine in the ideas of Seguin, Guggenbühl, Reed, Down and others. And, moreover,

what would the adherents of an 'out of sight, out of mind' account make of Kern's call for idiots not to be separated from the rest of humankind (see above)? My second defence rests on the suggestion that a distinction should be drawn between the initial motives that shaped the geography of early idiot asylums and the subsequent effects that this geography - complete with its remote rural establishments - was to have upon the way in which the mentally handicapped were perceived. In other words, it may be that, whereas idiots were once accepted and little feared by the wider community, with the removal of these individuals to distant, supposedly therapeutic environments - and with the consequent reduction in community familiarity with their nature and behaviour - so idiocy began increasingly to be regarded as something that was very alien, socially unacceptable and necessarily placed apart from society's 'normal' activities [18]. The idiot asylum (now renamed a mental handicap hospital) on the edge of the city would hence become popularly interpreted as - to recall Cleland's phrase - the strange, mysterious and forbidding 'nuthouse out there', but simply to identify these prejudices is not to offer an adequate portrayal of the various forces that helped to mould the institutional geography of idiot asylums in the first place.

Having entered these two caveats concerning my understanding of the materials discussed in this paper, I can now conclude by stressing that my chief objective here has been to illustrate how - to borrow a phrase from Doreen Massey (1984) - 'geography matters' even when we are studying such a seemingly 'ageographical' phenomenon as the emergence of idiot asylums in nineteenth century England. These asylums could not avoid having a geographical distribution, and this distribution was far from incidental to contemporary debates about both problems with the embryonic idiot asylum 'system' and ways in which these problems might be overcome. These asylums had to be sited somewhere - in particular locations and environments - and contemporaries argued at length about what might be an ideal site, as well as about the pros and cons associated with the actual sites chosen by the managers of the country's early idiot establishments. In addition, the spatial arrangements inside idiot asylums were undoubtedly thought to be important for a number of reasons.

And so, whilst we must retain a sensitivity to the sorts of international comparisons common in conventional histories of idiocy and its treatment (see above), we should strive to avoid following these histories into what Foucault describes as the trap of total history: the trap of emphasising supposedly fundamental organising principles and teleologies over the specificities,

confusions and complications of historical detail. Falling into this trap inevitably squares with inattentiveness to the 'patchiness' and inequalities of geographical distributions; to the questions of where things are, and why; and to the significance of the spaces and places inscribed in institutional plans and architectures. In short, falling into this trap blinds us to the very real substantive importance of what Ron Johnston (1986) might term the 'vernacular geography' of the world.

## NOTES

- 1) In fact, Foucault would argue that we have no grand epistemological terrain upon which to judge the 'importance' or otherwise of oddities and shady corners as opposed to that of long-term trends. Moreover, he would assert that the 'importance' of the materials encountered in a particular case study (or 'case history') cannot be judged by appeal to their 'widespreadness', their 'statistical representativeness' or their status as 'origins' of something currently supposed to be of significance. Rather, all that he would hope to achieve is a careful description of these materials; a description which would render these materials 'intelligible', insightful (perhaps with respect to current practices) and maybe revealing of the specific mechanisms through which one social group attempts to oppress, control and 'discipline' another. Foucault spells out this vision of historical inquiry in Foucault (1972, esp. Introduction; 1984), and see also the useful commentaries in Lemert and Gillan (1982, esp. Chapter 2); Cousins and Hussain (1984, esp. Introduction).
- 2) Indeed, my investigation here of the idiot asylums is effectively a 'microcosm' of the rather more extensive and intensive study that I am presently conducting for my PhD thesis, and which is provisionally entitled The Space Reserved for Insanity: Studies in the Historical Geography of the English and Welsh Mad-Business.
- 3) I will tend to use the terms 'idiot asylums', 'idiot establishments' or 'idiot institutions' when referring to both idiot asylums and idiot schools. In practice, though, most of the institutions that I discuss were principally idiot schools dealing with idiot children: there were very few institutions dealing exclusively with the adult idiot, who would often - so it seems - end up in the workhouse or the lunatic asylum even after having received specialist attention when younger.
- 4) I provide a near-comprehensive review and critique of geographical research into the spatial distribution of mental illness - what one writer calls 'psychiatric geographies' - in Philo (1986, Part 3). The major statement regarding geographical research into institutional provisions for the mentally ill is probably Dear and Taylor (1982), although a number of themes that have emerged in the geographical literature in connection with the distribution, 'accessibility', utilisation and community acceptance of mental health facilities are not taken up at any length in this volume.
- 5) The key text in modern developments remains Foucault (1967), who almost completely overturned - even inverted - traditional 'Whiggish' accounts of how the 'mad-business' gradually emerged over the centuries to become the 'enlightened' institution that it is today. A steady stream of works have appeared in the wake of Foucault's text, and these have tended to quarrel with Foucault, refine some of his historical interpretations or place an additional humanistic or radical gloss upon what he had to say. Two recent reviews and commentaries dealing with these works are Skultans (1979, Introduction) and Scull (1983).
- 6) In preparing my discussion and critique here of the conventional histories of idiocy and its treatment, I have drawn upon the following works: Ireland (1877, esp. Chapter XVIII); Tuke (1882, Chapter VIII); Barr (1904, esp. Chapter II); Pritchard (1963, Chapter III); Cranefield (1966); Lazerson (1975); Heaton-Ward (1978, esp. Chapter 6); Woods (1983, esp. Chapter 1).
- 7) The link can be stated quite simply, in that Lazerson's sensitivity to 'social and institutional contexts' is similar in spirit to the development whereby

a number of geographers are urging social scientific inquiries of all sorts to pay more attention to the spatio-temporal contexts in which the structural categories of person, class, economy, state and so on - categories that are usually 'abstracted' and 'inspected' for their 'logical' interrelationships - are actually embedded. In short, these geographers are urging a move from 'compositional' social theories to a 'contextual' social theory fully cognisant of the complex ways in which categories, phenomena and events hang together in particular times and places (see Thrift, 1983, pp.27-28; Gregory, 1986).

- 8) In their Ninth Annual Report the Commissioners argued that "a very large proportion of the paupers so classed [as 'lunatics'] in workhouses, especially in the rural districts and perhaps four-fifths of the whole, are persons who may be correctly described as harmless imbeciles, whose mental deficiency is chronic or congenital" (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1855, pp.573-574).
- 9) A similar geographical division undoubtedly existed with respect to the lunatics in workhouses, and in addition there was considerable contemporary debate over the relationship between workhouse environments - and particularly the cramped and often squalid circumstances of most workhouses in large urban areas - and the possibility of properly caring for and treating the workhouse lunatic. I tackle this matter in Chapter 3 of my thesis. It might be noted that very little historical research has been concentrated on the thorny question of lunatics in the workhouse, and in consequence I hope that the relevant chapter in my thesis will make more than simply a 'geographical' contribution to the literature.
- 10) Although it is not overly vital to do so here, it is usually important to distinguish between these three different sorts of 'institutional spaces' in which nineteenth century lunatics were incarcerated. They were funded differently, managed differently, occupied by different classes of patient, had different sorts of relationship with official and 'expert' bodies, and - moreover - exhibited subtly different geographies.
- 11) This act "permitted the detention of mental defectives in idiot asylums run by voluntary bodies. These idiot asylums were not intended to provide life-long care for patients, but their aim was education and cure" (Heaton-Ward, 1978, p.53).
- 12) This notion, of providing cheap 'auxiliary asylums' designed to shelter incurable lunatics who were crowding out - and thereby interfering with the curative ambitions of - the existing public establishments, had become a key suggestion of the Commissioners in Lunacy by the 1860s (see, for instance, Commissioners in Lunacy, 1856, pp.524-525; 1859, p.537).
- 13) I ought perhaps to mention that several institutions opened their doors for feeble-minded children towards the close of the century, but given this specific function they cannot really be included within the category of idiot asylums and schools. In the Report of the Departmental Committee of 1898 it was declared that there were six privately-run institutions for 'defective children who are not idiots' and also six homes for 'feeble-minded girls' supported by a mixture of voluntary contributions and moneys from the poor rates (see Beach's evidence in the Report of Departmental Committee, 1898, p.61).
- 14) I am yet to track down a copy of this report, although its findings and arguments can be found written up at length in Ireland (1877, pp.342-352) and Tuke (1882, pp.311-318). In addition, I have found useful some 'clippings' about the report contained in several issues of the Charity Organisation Reporter for 1877, and see also Mowat (1961, pp.59-60).

- 15) 'Cretinism' is a form of mental subnormality which appears to be very common in the 'shut-up' valleys of mountainous countries, and is almost always associated with the thyroid disorder known as 'goitre'. It is now thought that this condition is generated by local soil nutrient deficiencies, particularly of iodine, although the fact of 'inbreeding' in these remote valleys may be an influence of some importance (see Giggs, 1977, pp.484-490; Thomson, 1980).
- 16) Seguin clearly thought it imperative that his idiot schools should be set in the midst of extensive gardens, and in fact the principle of 'garden schools' for children of all descriptions was - as Holman (1914, p.224) put it - the 'crown and completion' of the whole theory of 'physiological education'.
- 17) As the Commissioners in Lunacy remarked about the Bath idiot establishment, "it seems to us that comparatively little has been done or attempted towards rendering the instruction of the children subservient to the acquisition of useful arts or trades, such as knitting, straw-plaiting or the making of nets, mats and baskets. We are disposed to think that the amount of time spent in mere school instruction might be advantageously diminished, and that arrangements better calculated to prepare the children for entering on various occupations suited to their physical powers and mental capacity might be gradually introduced" (Commissioners in Lunacy, 1851, p.397).
- 18) I admit that what I have provided here is little more than a caricature of an argument that needs to be sharpened both theoretically and substantively, but in many respects it squares with Foucault's account of the 'Modern' fear and 'silencing' of madness (see Foucault, 1967), and it also squares with a handful of provocative claims that Anthony Giddens offers in a recent book when discussing the 'sequestration' of 'psychologically troubling experiences': "[t]he demands of early health reformers to remove burial grounds from churches and city centres were...an initial symbolic expulsion of the dead from the community of the living. It preceded and helped shape the 'suppression' of death that is characteristic of more recent times...Not only death is sequestered from the ordinary activities of daily life; so are other phenomena which, in becoming 'detached' from the normal run of social life produce specific sources of anxiety or distress [my emphasis] - including both madness and physical illness of a serious sort" (Giddens, 1985, p.195). It might be added that my distinction between initial motives and subsequent effects also owes something to Giddens, in that it was through his theoretical attempts to 'capture' the 'structuration of social life' that I first encountered the notion of 'unintended consequences of action' which allows this sort of distinction to be drawn (see Giddens, 1979, esp. Chapter 2).



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