

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

Two Vanished Fishponds Houses

by H. T. Phillips and C. R. Hudleston
1976, Vol. 94, 136-140

© The Society and the Author(s)

Two Vanished Fishponds Houses: A Follow-up Study

By H. TEMPLE PHILLIPS and C. ROY HUDLESTON

SOME 35 YEARS ago, one of us (C.R.H.) and the late A. Bruce Robinson wrote for these *Transactions* a paper entitled 'Two Vanished Fishponds Houses'.¹ These houses were Fishponds House (otherwise known as the Fishponds Private Lunatic Asylum) and Beechwood (known earlier as Upper Fishponds House). The present contribution incorporates fresh information which has come to light during recent research, and should be read in conjunction with the earlier article.

FISHPONDS HOUSE

Dr Joseph Mason, who founded 'Mason's Madhouse' at Fishponds in 1740, was, we now know, the eldest son of a licensed 'chirurgion' (also Joseph Mason) who practised at Wickwar. Joseph Mason senior died insolvent in 1738, and his son carried on his practice in Wickwar for a couple of years before moving to Fishponds.

The first 'Mason's Madhouse', which continued for about 25 years, was accommodated in rented premises, part of which survived until recently as the offices of Sweetheart (Bristol) Ltd—formerly the Hygienic Straw Company. These were situated at what is now the junction of College Road and Glaisdale Road, but the vicinity was then known as Tovey's (or Turvey's) Corner. From c. 1765 until the formation of the Clifton Union in 1836, the premises served as the Stapleton poorhouse. Later still (from 1877 to 1946) they housed the Fishponds Laundry. The premises were sold by Sweetheart (Bristol) Ltd in 1972, following an extensive fire in June of that year. The historic old house, though it had survived the fire, was demolished in the summer of 1973 with a view to housing development.

Not surprisingly, references to the early years of this first 'Mason's Madhouse' are scanty, but Bristol City Reference Library does possess a set of documents relating to the allegedly wrongful detention of Edward Goldney in 1745.² The latter was a relative of Thomas Goldney of Clifton, who gave his name to Goldney House. In May 1745 his wife and other relatives, being concerned about his behaviour (and in particular about a certain reckless wager) arranged for him to be waylaid in London and persuaded on a false pretext to travel to Mason's house at Fishponds, where he arrived on 1 June. Here he was confined as a lunatic for nearly eight weeks, and according to his own account subjected to 'very rough and severe discipline'. He alleged that Mason 'drenched and poured nauseous medicines down his throat, frequently vomiting, bleeding, and purging him, and forceably detained and kept him in irons . . . denying him the privilege of writing and complaining to his friends for relief'. He was released on 24 July, having signed documents renouncing any claim against his relatives. However, this does not seem to have deterred him from commencing litigation, which dragged on till January 1747. The case was eventually settled out of court, Edward Goldney's costs being paid by his relatives.

The incident would, no doubt, have attracted a good deal of attention, occurring as it did at a period when Daniel Defoe and others had been seeking to expose the evils of private madhouses, and in particular the ease with which sane people could be 'put away' by unscrupulous relatives or friends. No medical certificates were required for a patient's admission, and accusations of wrongful detention must have been hazards to which keepers of madhouses were constantly exposed.

1. *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, LX (1959), 238-59.

2. Bristol City Reference Library, Jefferies Collection.

It is difficult after the lapse of more than 200 years to form a reliable judgement as to whether or not Edward Goldney was insane. A letter which he wrote during his confinement seems rational enough, and one has the impression, on reading the documents, that his relatives may have been more concerned about his financial indiscretions than his mental health. Joseph Mason in his affidavit claims that Goldney 'had a frenzy on his brain and was distempered with some degree or kind of lunacy'. Mason doubtless acted in good faith, but one is left with the impression that, had the incident occurred 220 years later, Goldney could hardly have been regarded as detainable under the Mental Health Act of 1959.

We know something of Joseph Mason from a volume of his personal diary written in 1763. This was until recently in South Africa, but is now, through the kindness of Mr George Gwinnett Bompas, of Howick, Natal, on indefinite loan to the Medical Library of the University of Bristol. Mason was probably by no means a typical madhouse keeper, his primary interests apparently being first religion (he was a staunch supporter of Broadmead Baptist Church), and secondly his twenty-acre farm at Starveall (now Speedwell) in the parish of St George.

For treatment of his patients Mason relied heavily on such physical measures as 'medsons', 'pils', 'vomitts', 'glisters' (*i.e.* enemas), and bleeding. However, when they began to recover they seem to have joined freely in the activities of the household, and there are records of their taking tea and dinner with the family, participating in family prayers, and accompanying Mason on visits to his farm and to Bristol. In this respect he was well in advance of his time, as such a regime is comparable with the 'moral treatment' introduced by William Tuke at the York Retreat in the 1790s.

One entry in Mason's diary (22 April 1763) is of particular interest: 'Betwene 5 and 6 in the morning Mrs. Chanler's man came with a letter from his mistris to informe me her son was coming under my care, the other side of the letter a certificate sign'd by several persons of the parish of Southrop to ascertain his disorder of insanity'. This shows that a sort of informal certification was used long before it was required by law. Patients were charged an entrance fee of one guinea, and between £1 12s. 0d. and £2 12s. 6d. per month for board. 'Medsons' were extra—in one case a guinea for one month.

About 1764 Joseph Mason bought from Charles Arthur (Norborne Berkeley's coalmining superintendent) a house close to the Lower Fishpond. He demolished this about 1770 and built Fishponds House on the site. As well as providing for his own family, this could probably accommodate up to 45 or 50 patients—a large number for 1770. An unusual feature of the house was the inclusion of a private chapel.

Under an Act of Parliament of 1774 it became necessary for private asylums to be licensed by Quarter Sessions. Mason's first licence, dated 4 October 1774, can be seen at Gloucester City Library.³ Mason's was the first such establishment to be licensed in Gloucestershire. The only other one to be licensed during the 18th century was that opened by Richard Henderson at Hanham in about 1780 (he moved to Cleeve Hill in 1792 but died soon afterwards and was succeeded by Edward Long Fox).

After Joseph Mason's death in 1779, the asylum was maintained for another 73 years by his descendants. The most distinguished of these was his grandson, Joseph Mason Cox, who was superintendent from 1788 to 1817. He had an international reputation, his textbook *Practical Observations on Insanity* being published in France, Germany, and America, as well as running to three editions in this country. He is perhaps best known for his treatment of patients by the revolving swing, though this technique fell into disfavour soon after his death. Many of Cox's patients came from distant parts of the country, and at the beginning of the 19th century Fishponds had the highest admission rate, and was probably the largest, of all the provincial private asylums.

Various buildings were added to Fishponds House both by Joseph Mason Cox, and by his cousin George Gwinnett Bompas, who succeeded him. Plate I shows the asylum as it appeared during the 1850s. To the left of the picture can be seen St Mary's Church and the old Free School (Hannah

More's birthplace), with the village green (now Fishponds Park) in front of the latter. Stoke House (now part of Stoke Park Hospital) is visible in the top right corner.

George Gwinnett Bompas died in 1847 and was succeeded by one of his sons, Joseph Carpenter Bompas, who was then only 24 years of age. The following year the Gloucestershire justices, led by their Chairman, Purnell Bransby Purnell, launched a determined attack on the asylum, and there were allegations of ill-treatment of patients and shortcomings in keeping the statutory records. An official enquiry was held and the youthful Dr Bompas forced to resign, but other members of his family continued to run the asylum for several years. In 1852 it was leased by Dr J. D. F. Parsons, who continued to run it until it was finally closed down in 1859. Dr Parsons and his wife had several children. A son, born at the asylum on 17 December 1853, grew up to become the well-known Bristol artist Arthur Wilde Parsons.

The private madhouses or asylums of the 18th and 19th centuries have been much maligned, but they performed a valuable service at a time when the few public hospitals could cope with only a fraction of the demand. The Fishponds asylum is of particular interest as it is probably better documented, over a longer period, than any other private asylum. Copies of its history⁴ have been deposited in Bristol City Reference Library and in Gloucestershire Record Office.

UPPER FISHPONDS HOUSE, later known as BEECHWOOD

Much of the history of this house is contained in the earlier article already quoted,⁵ and need not be repeated. The following information relates particularly to the schools kept successively by Joel Lean and George Joseph Bompas.

There are references to the former, which existed from 1816 to 1837, in the literature relating to several well known members of the Society of Friends. Both Samuel Lucas of Hitchin, the artist, and his brothers William and Francis, received part of their education there. Hine⁶ recounts how the sentence of the family was playfully passed on the latter in 1828: 'For sundry deficiencies in school learning and general roughness of manners, thou art sentenced by the Court of Tilehouse Street to be transported for the term of one year to Fishponds in the County of Gloucester, there to be kept on plain fare and in full employment, and under all necessary restraint'. He is said to have left Fishponds three years later 'an accomplished and elegant scholar'.⁷

Wemyss Reid, in his biography of William Edward Forster, comments:⁸ 'Mr Lean's school was probably neither better nor worse than most private schools of that era. If the worthy Friend who conducted it erred at all, it was on the side of omniscience. He undertook not merely to give his pupils the "rudiments" of a polite education, but instruction in every known branch of literature and the sciences'. One of the highlights of Forster's stay at Fishponds was a 30-mile walk to Tintern Abbey and back, in the company of a master and a number of his schoolfellows.⁹ Francis Fry's biographer¹⁰ refers to 'a large school, kept by a Friend named Joel Lean, an establishment quite as advanced in the instruction given as most of that period'.

Perhaps the most graphic account of Joel Lean's school is to be found in the diary of William Lucas of Hitchin (1804-61). He describes Lean¹¹ as a self-taught man who was originally a Cornish miner. 'In the present day,' he says, 'he would hardly have been considered quite the man for a schoolmaster; he was a sallow, taciturn, dyspeptic person, and ill-health made him at times very irritable.' Joel Lean's wife, he writes, was a fine woman but very capricious and partial, not good qualifications in a school mistress. He goes on to describe how on one occasion, in her husband's absence, she interfered with some sport of the boys and the whole school broke out into rebellion, refused to go to their lessons, and marched up and down the playground with great sticks in the

4. Phillips, H. Temple, 'The History of the Old Private Lunatic Asylum at Fishponds, Bristol, 1740-1859' (M.Sc. thesis, University of Bristol, 1973).

6. Hine, R. L., *Hitchin Worthies* (1932), 277.

5. *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, LX (1939), 255-9.

7. *Ibid.*, 278.

8. Reid, T. Wemyss, *Life of the Right Honourable William Edward Forster* (1889), 28.

9. *Ibid.*, 30.

10. Fry, T., *A Brief Memoir of Francis Fry, F.S.A., of Bristol* (1887), 15.

11. Bryant, G. E., and Baker, G. P. (ed.), *A Quaker Journal*, I (1934), 36-7.

most determined mood of insubordination. As a result a number of boys narrowly escaped expulsion.¹²

A 'Course of Instruction' in the Library of the Society of Friends¹³ shows that the curriculum was both arduous and comprehensive. Instruction began at 6.30 a.m. and included reading, writing, arithmetic, higher mathematics, French, German, Latin, Greek, English grammar and literature, geography, drawing, and divinity. It was the custom on May Day for the scholars to present to their master an 'Annual Address' consisting of poems in English, French, Latin, and sometimes Greek. In return, they were given a day off from lessons. These addresses were embellished with a small woodcut of the school (pl. II). This print is of the greatest interest as, to the best of our knowledge, it is the only existing picture which shows either of the two 'Fish Ponds' from which the district takes its name. FIG. 1 shows the position of the school, the ponds, and the asylum in relation to present-day Fishponds.

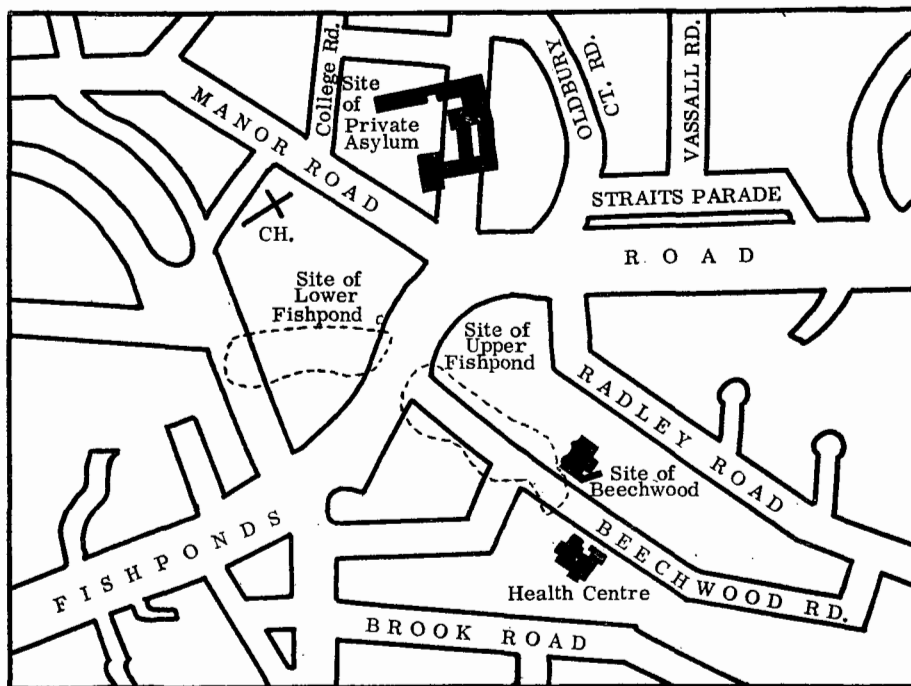


FIG. 1

Joel Lean was evidently a man of considerable talent and versatility. In 1825 he patented a 'Machine for Effecting an Alternating Motion between Bodies Revolving about a Common Centre or Axis of Motion'.¹⁴ It was claimed that the principle could be used for the construction of a steam engine, but the design was probably more ingenious than practical, as no one appears to have seen fit to exploit it. Joel Lean's son Charles is said to have been a competent engineer, and to have assisted Robert Stephenson in the construction of the difficult Kilsby tunnel.¹⁵

Joel Lean figures as the subject of one of the verses 'Quakerieties for 1838':¹⁶

12. *Ibid.*, 38-9.

13. Library of the Society of Friends, Gibson MSS., Vol. vi.

14. Patent Specification A.D. 1825, No. 5228.

15. Lean, Oscar B., personal communication, 1972.

16. Printed as Appendix XII to *The Diaries of Edward Pease, the Father of English Railways*, edited by Sir Alfred E. Pease, Bart. (1907).

Joel Lean, Joel Lean,
 All acknowledge thy sheen
 Yes, *nemine contradicenti*
 And many an urchin
 Hath learnt from thy birching
 The force of his *as in presenti*,
 etc., etc.

The poetry possesses, perhaps, little merit, but the mere fact that Lean is included shows that he was one of the most prominent Friends of his day. He was appointed an overseer of Frenchay Monthly Meeting in 1817, clerk in 1819, and an elder in 1831. It is recorded that on a number of occasions he suffered seizure of goods for refusal to pay tithe, in 1817 a cow, in 1818 two pigs, in 1820 a cow, in 1822 a cow and hay, in 1825 12 pigs, in 1829 £21, and in 1834 goods unspecified.¹⁷

In 1836, Joel Lean suffered misfortune in the death of two of his six children, Sophia, aged 29, and George, aged 19.¹⁸ The following year his school was wound up, reputedly after an incident in which he boxed a boy's ear and inadvertently ruptured the drum.¹⁹ He returned to Cornwall in 1838, and died, aged 76, at Briton Ferry, Neath, in 1856,²⁰ probably at the home of his son Charles. His widow, Sophia Lean, died at Birmingham in 1865, aged 87.²¹

In 1838 Dr George Gwinnett Bompas secured the house as a home for his eldest son, Dr George Joseph Bompas, who was shortly to be married. He did this by purchasing the remaining portion (about 17 years) of a long lease. In 1839 a plan of the house was submitted to the Gloucestershire Quarter Sessions with a view to its use 'for convalescent and other female patients in connection with the Fishponds Asylum'.²² Whether it was ever actually used for this purpose is uncertain. At all events, by January 1844 George Joseph Bompas had given up practising medicine and had opened a boys' school at Upper Fishponds House.

Bristol Museum and Art Gallery possess a copy of a prospectus of the school dated 1852, which incorporates a picture of the house. In a somewhat effusive address, the proprietor 'in the fulfilment of his duties towards his pupils desires constantly to bear in mind that the proper end of their education is to secure their happiness, both in this and in a future state of existence; and to promote . . . the welfare of their fellow-men'.

George Joseph Bompas qualified M.D. at Edinburgh in 1836 with a thesis entitled 'On Unsoundness of Mind and its Relation to Jurisprudence'. Presumably he intended to make a career in psychiatry, and we do not know why he abandoned this goal in favour of schoolmastering. His younger brother, Joseph Carpenter Bompas claimed that he 'removed from the practice of the profession in order to leave him his post',²³ but it is unlikely that this was his only motive. He probably found medicine, and particularly psychiatry, little to his liking.

His school at Fishponds came to an end in 1855, presumably on the expiry of the lease. In the same year he opened a school at Upper Park Street, Clifton, but moved in 1856 to Ellenborough Buildings, Redland. About 1860, he emigrated to Quebec, together with his wife Marianne and a family of twelve children. Here he again engaged in teaching. He died in 1889, but his wife survived him by 23 years, and at the time of her death at the age of 97, she had 124 children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and great great grandchildren.

After the departure of George Joseph Bompas, Upper Fishponds House continued as a school under W. H. Paglar until 1861, when it was bought by Mr Alfred Robinson. The latter, who renamed the house Beechwood, died in 1901, but his widow continued to occupy it until 1934, when she died at the age of 100 years. The house was demolished in the following year.

November 1973

17. Lean, Oscar B., personal communication, 1975.

19. Lean, Bevan, personal communication, 1931.

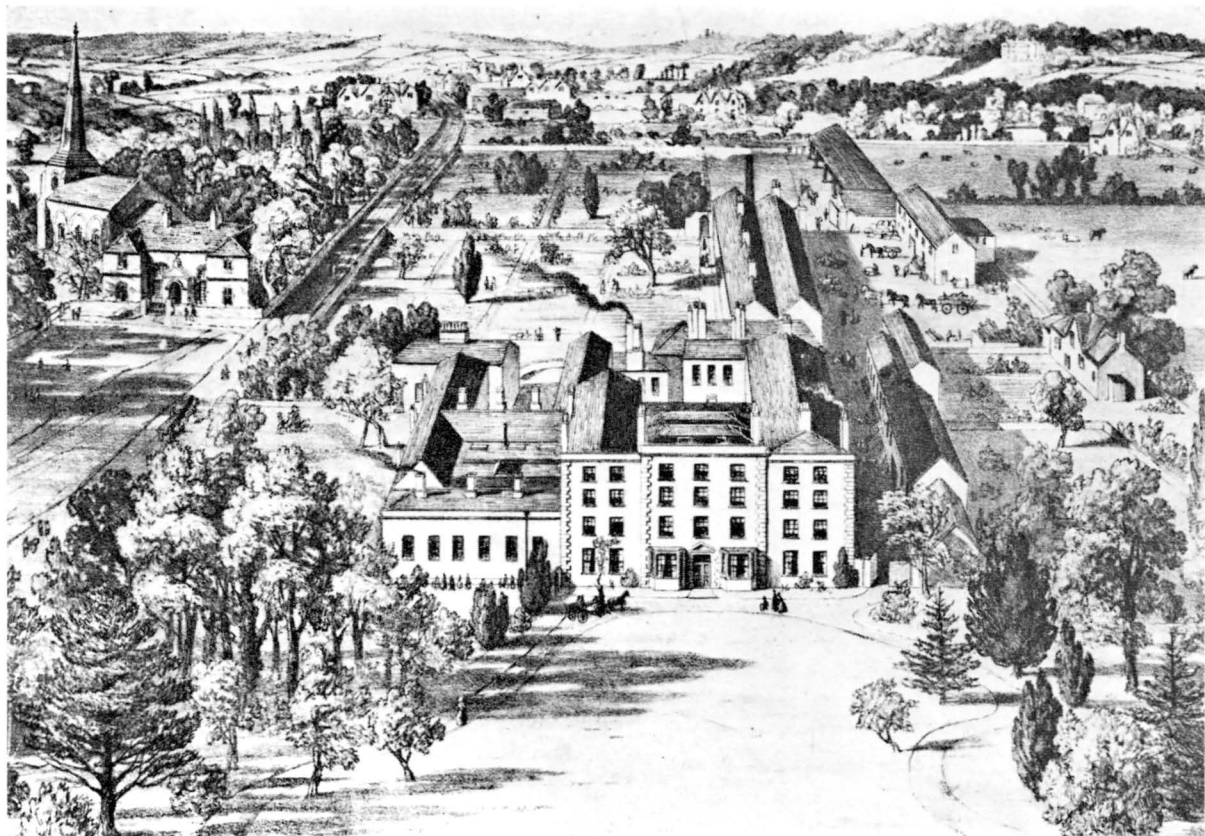
21. *Ibid.* (1866), 71.

23. *The Evidence taken on the Inquiry into the Management of the Fishponds Private Lunatic Asylum* (1848), 585.

18. *Annual Monitor* (1838), 35.

20. *Annual Monitor* (1857), 92.

22. *Glos. R.O.*, Q/AL 38.3.



Two vanished Fishponds houses
PLATE I. Fishponds House, c. 1850