

## The Mental Deficiency Act, Eugenics, and Meanwood Park Colony

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On 3 June 1920, following the lease of eighteenth-century Meanwood Hall and the surrounding 175 acres of land to Leeds City Council, Meanwood Park Colony was officially opened to provide institutional care for “mental defectives of an acute type”.<sup>1</sup> There was accommodation for 87 patients, the first of whom, Frank Tottie, was admitted aged 10, and would remain there until his death over sixty years later.

Meanwood Park was one of a number of new mental deficiency colonies which were created after the passing of the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913; institutions designed to contain the many thousands of people who now fell under its categories of “Feeble-minded and other Mentally Defective Persons”.<sup>2</sup> The facility initially centred around ‘the mansion’, which had previously been a private residence, and later a school for young gentlemen. It would later be expanded using a self-sufficient ‘village’ layout, believed to be more humane than the standard one-building workhouse or asylum. Residents were kept in ‘villas’ and facilities on site included kitchens, workshops, stores, a recreation hall, and staff housing.

Although there were undoubtedly people with genuine mental or physical conditions who could benefit from the support and care of specialised institutions, this legislation gave sweeping powers to local Boards of Control (‘control’ being the operative word) to certify and detain those it considered ‘defective’ for an indefinite amount of time. The UK was the first government to pass such comprehensive legislation,<sup>3</sup> and its creation was set against a backdrop of the fashionable new ‘science’ of eugenics and the moral panic surrounding declining birth rates in the middle and upper classes of the early twentieth century.

The 1870 Education Act brought large numbers of lower-class children into the school system, and their resulting struggles in the classroom, whether due to poor health, physical or mental conditions, or lack of previous education, resulted in the catch-all concept of ‘feeble-mindedness’ being more widely introduced into society. Whether applied to children or adults, this newly discovered phenomenon would soon become a convenient explanation for problems in society and apparent moral decline in the population, from poverty and unemployment to crime and prostitution.

In 1883, British scientist Francis Galton coined the term ‘eugenics’ to describe his theories on the genetic inheritance of human characteristics, and how selective breeding should be used for the improvement of the race (developed from the evolutionary theories of his cousin Charles Darwin). These ideas would enter the mainstream and become popular amongst the English elite with the formation of the Eugenics Education Society (EES) in 1907 and their journal, *The Eugenics Review*. There was an emphasis placed on the biology of the different classes, and a concern that by intervening in the lives of those worst off (e.g. providing poor

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Problem of the Mental Defective: A Leeds Training Colony’, *The Yorkshire Post*, 20 May 1920 <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/search/results/1920-05-20/1920-05-20?basicsearch=meanwood%20colony&exactsearch=false&retrievecountrycounts=false&sortorder=2> [accessed 20 February 2025].

<sup>2</sup> Derek Gillard, ‘Mental Deficiency Act 1913’, *Education in the UK*, 2 November 2019 <<https://www.education-uk.org/documents/acts/1913-mental-deficiency-act.html#:~:text=The%20text%20of%20the%20Mental,uploaded%20on%202%20November%202019.&text=An%20Act%20to%20make%20further,%5B15th%20August%201913.%5D>> [Accessed 20 February 2025].

<sup>3</sup> Jan Walmsley, ‘Women and the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913: citizenship, sexuality and regulation’, *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 28.2 (2000), pp. 65-70, doi:10.1046/j.1468-3156.2000.00042.x.

relief, workhouses, hospitals and schools), the state had kept alive those who should otherwise have been naturally wiped out.

These attitudes were prevalent in the 1908 report of the Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded, and over the next five years a campaign was mounted by pressure groups including the EES to influence the highest levels of government into passing legislation on the matter. Many of the supposed medical 'experts' consulted for the report were members of the EES, and the government would rely upon their views as scientific facts on which to base their conclusions. One of the most prominent concerns of the report, which illustrates the strong influence of eugenics (and misogyny) upon it, was that of women. Specifically, feeble-minded women, who were not only believed to be more fertile than their 'normal' counterparts, constantly producing illegitimate children through lack of moral restraint, but were also passing on their inferior mental capacity to future generations.

The resulting Mental Deficiency Act was passed in 1913, with any explicit references to eugenics removed, but still based upon their concepts of segregation and control. Four classes of 'defectives' were defined in the act: Idiots, Imbeciles, Feeble-minded Persons, and Moral Imbeciles. This included anyone who appeared to be "without visible means of support", was "an habitual drunkard", "found guilty of any criminal offence" or, tellingly, a woman in receipt of poor-relief whilst pregnant with, or giving birth to, an illegitimate child.

Children under the age of twenty-one could also be signed over by their parents or guardians (or by another individual if parental consent was "unreasonably withheld") and certified by two doctors approved by the local Mental Deficiency Committee. They could only be retrieved from a colony on approval of the Board, and as a result, many would remain there for life.

The Committee also employed an Executive Officer, known locally as the 'rat-catcher',<sup>4</sup> who was responsible for locating potentially certifiable candidates and placing them in an institution. In Leeds this position was held by Samuel Wormald, who, alongside his father John, was also a fully-fledged member of the Eugenics Society. In 1913 the pair had published *A Guide to the Mental Deficiency Act*, which advised local authorities on how to implement the new legislation. It leaves the reader with no doubt as to their true beliefs, that "by being allowed to repeat their type, the feeble-minded are increasing the ranks of the degenerate and wastrel classes, with disastrous consequences to the entire community",<sup>5</sup> and that the Act was "a powerful means in assisting to breed out the hereditary transmission of mental defect by preventing the propagation of a degenerate stock".<sup>6</sup>

Samuel Wormald was a notorious figure in the area during the 1920s and 30s, reputed to have removed over 2000 people to Meanwood Park. Although a figure this high is difficult to prove and likely an exaggeration, it demonstrates his reputation amongst locals; he was often seen waiting by his car to pick up school children or workers from the mills and factories nearby.

By the 1940s Meanwood Park colony had beds for over 800 patients, and the site was largely self-sufficient, exploiting able-bodied 'high-grade' patients for tasks such as farming,

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Wise, *The Undesirables: The Law that Locked Away a Generation* (Oneworld Publications, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Wormald and John Wormald, *A Guide to the Mental Deficiency Act, 1913: containing a legal and general exposition of the act, with suggestions to local authorities, managers and others for the organization and administration of the work dealing with the mentally defective* (King & Son, 1913), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

gardening, laundry and domestic work, as well as helping to feed, wash and dress the further segregated 'low-grade' patients.<sup>7</sup> Conditions remained cramped as newly built accommodation was given over to those wounded in the Second World War. Following the creation of the National Health Service soon after, the site was renamed as Meanwood Park Hospital and passed into state control.

In 1947 the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) began investigating reports of corruption and exploitation across the system and fighting for families who believed their relatives were being unjustly held under the Mental Deficiency Act. By the 1950s the NCCL were dealing with six hundred cases, and five out of six where independent experts were called found the subject not to be mentally defective after all. They published the groundbreaking report '50,000 Outside the Law' on the subject in 1957 and campaigned for reform of the mental health system, resulting in the release of thousands of people. By this point, around 30% of people certified as 'mentally defective' had been incarcerated between ten and twenty years, with 5% having lost over thirty years of their lives.

The following Mental Health Act 1959 repealed the Mental Deficiency Act, dissolved the Board of Control, and set up new Mental Health Tribunals to oversee admission and discharge of patients, which the NCCL would continue to be involved with. The categories of 'moral imbecile' and 'feeble-minded' were abolished. In the following ten years, the hospital population at Meanwood Park dropped by a hundred, with many finally being free to leave. Others would remain, many too institutionalised to cope with life on the outside or having developed genuine mental illness, having spent most of their lives detained in the colony. From the 1970s, the number of patients at Meanwood continued to drop, as many long-term patients were discharged or moved into other hospitals, NHS accommodation or independent care. By 1995 the hospital population had fallen to 200, and two years later it would close for good, being sold for housing development.

As the physical remains of the Meanwood Park colony have now all but disappeared, along with its former residents and their stories, it is vital that we bring to light the events that came to pass within its walls, and the injustices that were suffered there – “a colossal squandering of human potential.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Maggie Potts and Rebecca Fido, *'A Fit Person to Be Removed' Personal Accounts of Life in a Mental Deficiency Institution* (Northcote House, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Wise, 'The Undesirables'.

## Bibliography / Further Reading

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