

## The Museum of the Mind

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<https://rootsreconnected.wordpress.com>

I had a very interesting day at [Bethlem Museum of the Mind](#). Probably better known as Bedlam, it is thought to be one of the first hospitals set up to help people with mental health problems. The two large statues you can see were above the entrance to the hospital, and represent the binary way that mental health was diagnosed at the time – a patient was diagnosed either with melancholia or mania. Now there are several hundred diagnoses!



A Rake's Progress, by William Hogarth, 1735

It was sad to see the methods of restraint that were used in Victorian times, including a 'strong dress' which I'd never heard of before. The appalling practice of allowing the public to view the patients (for entertainment) had stopped by the 1800s. The Museum is small but there's a lot to look at. I was glad to see that occupational therapy had a little (historical) display. A photographer called Henry Hering visited Bethlem in the 1850s and photographed patients on admission and discharge, and several of these photos were on display. The display about ECT was interesting; it's a controversial treatment, and I was interested to watch a short documentary showing both sides of the debate – a man whose monthly ECT treatment keeps his severe depression at bay, and a lady who lost two years of her memory after one treatment.

A 45-minute talk on Bethlem's history set the scene, but the highlight for me was looking at a patient casebook from 1891. Records up to 1919 are available on Findmypast. Notes in the casebook contrast with what would be written today, with almost nothing written about treatment but a great deal of observation of patient behaviours. Bethlem was funded by donations so treatment differed from the county pauper 'lunatic asylums' and the emphasis was much more on providing a nice environment, with plenty of activities to occupy the patients – the Victorians believed that talking about your problems encouraged people to dwell on them. Consequently indicators of a patient interacting with their environment, such as being 'industrious' or 'sociable', were seen as signs of improvement.

Unfortunately the Bethlem (art) Gallery was closed but there was plenty of art to see in the Museum, including a painting by Boris Johnson's mum, who was a

patient there due to having OCD; apparently hands feature large in her art because of her compulsive hand-washing.

Bethlem is still an active mental health hospital, and the Museum has its own building on the hospital site. The current location (near Croydon) is actually the hospital's fourth location – one previous location was what's now The Imperial War Museum. If you're in the area, it's worth a visit!

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