

HERStory: Making Invisible Women Visible

Research notes

Group Number and Researcher Name: Team 3 - Annie Finegan, Sofia Swenson-Wright	
Name of Research Focus: Immoral moral treatment at the Retreat: The Case of Gertrude Watson	
Date of Birth: 9 February 1861	Date of Death: Unknown
Main Reason to Research: Uncovering the truth about the treatment of women in asylums	
Are there any other connections to key geographical locations or people? Gainsborough House, Scarborough	
Key Words: Mental Illness, Moral Treatment, The Retreat, Wrongful Confinement	
What have you found out?	
<p>There are inconsistencies in the reason for Gertrude Watson's confinement at the Retreat. Some of the justification for her confinement is dubious. This relates to the Victorian idea of 'wrongful confinement' and calls into question our perception of the Retreat as a pioneer for moral mental health treatment.</p> <p>Admission to The Retreat - 3rd May 1888 to 1st May 1889 Private patient, 27 years old, admission requested by her father, declared on admission as having 'no mental or bodily disorder', included stay at The Retreat's seaside retreat Gainsborough House, Scarborough (from Sept 14th)</p> <p>Questioning her confinement 7th June 1888: The Office of Commissioners in Lunacy wrote to Dr Baker questioning the Gertrude's confinement: <i>'They are not satisfied...that there is now sufficient cause for the patient's detention under certificates'</i>. Suggested that: <i>'If she would agree to remain in the Hospital as a Voluntary Border, the Commissioners think this might be tried as an experiment'</i>. Dr. Baker responds, arguing for her continued detention for these reasons: <i>'Miss Watson is a young lady of feeble mental development liable to paroxysms of uncontrollable excitement...unhealthy views respecting her father & mother [...]</i> Dr. Baker was a family friend: <i>'I would have the grave responsibility of guarding my friends' daughter from any possibility of evil when I know that she has unhealthy sexual proclivities'</i> (These 'unhealthy sexual proclivities' are not mentioned at any point in her Case Notes or other medical files, nor are the 'unhealthy views respecting her father & mother') The Commissioners agree to: <i>'let this matter rest until their next visit.'</i></p> <p>Complaints about conditions at The Retreat 30th July 1888: Gertrude's mother (Ann Watson) also complained about The Retreat's treatment of Gertrude: <i>'After six weeks of ominous silence, I have received a very unhappy letter from Gertrude'</i> She writes that Gertrude wrote to her: <i>'I am obliged to sew a great deal. It tires my eyes very much.'</i> Ann explains that: <i>'Her eyes have always been weak, especially her left eye, and sewing is a trying and even depressing occupation to her - she does very little at home'</i>. Other complaints include not being able to wear her own nightdress and being made to go out with Miss MacNay(?), whom she</p>	

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doesn't like. She also asks to be excused from the Sunday Meeting.
(See Appendix for further case notes)

Why is this interesting and what impact have they had?

Moral Treatment

The Retreat pioneered a seemingly revolutionary approach to mental health treatment in the Victorian era. This approach was known as moral treatment; it was seen to be more humane.

Immoral moral treatment i.e. wrongful confinement

Gertrude's case is interesting as it highlights a more problematic side to moral management. Why was she being held despite lack of symptoms and this being questioned at the time? Rising concern at the time about wrongful confinement in private asylums contextualises the potential immorality of Gertrude's confinement.¹

Evidence

The Office of Commissioner's concern for the justification of her confinement suggests that Gertrude's confinement could have been wrongful. R. Baker's response highlights the power medical men had over patients.² The focus was on the request of Gertrude's father, not Gertrude's mental state.

Impact

The Lunacy Act of 1890 suggests the cases of women like Gertrude had an impact on reforms in the treatment of Victorian mental health patients.

Wider Significance

Micheal Foulcalt's denounced The Retreat as a 'duplicitous exercise in social coercion'³. In Gertrude's case, although a seemingly more humane approach, may have been used to control female patients and as a disguise for wrongful confinement. Though The Retreat proudly boasts that it was a pioneer of moral treatment⁴, there is a darker side to its history.

Are there opportunities for follow up research?

Further correspondence held in the Retreat Archives (by year) - unbound letters may include more information about Gertrude.

Other women held at the Retreat at the time of Gertrude's confinement.

Gender disparities at the Retreat

In your research have you discovered any connection to the Castle Museum collections/sites

[Key collections/buildings or items held by YMT to support the research]

- Victorian pin cushion sewed at The Retreat: Collection Item: PinCushion Collection: Costume and Textiles: Gertrude was recorded as sewing at the retreat and complained about it. Metaphor darker side to Retreat's history and Gertrude's treatment.
- Lots more information in Retreat Archives (see appendix).

¹ Margaret Homberger, "Wrongful Confinement," *Deviance, Disorder and the Self*, <http://www7.bbk.ac.uk/deviance/wrongconfine/index.htm>.

² Sarah Hayley York, "Suicide, Lunacy and the Asylum in Nineteenth-Century England," (Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2009), 152.

³ Louis Charland, "Benevolent Theory: Moral Treatment at the York Retreat," *History of Psychiatry* 18, no. 1 (2007): 62.

⁴ Homberger, "Wrongful".

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Appendix

1. Further case notes:

24th May: *'Still employed hourly(?) doing needlework'*

15th June: *'Regularly employ{ed} hourly(?) doing fancywork'*

'No change' from then on, except going to Scarborough where she stays until her discharge on 1st May

No mention of changes as a result of her mother's letter

She's described as exhibiting very few to no symptoms during her stay at The Retreat

2. Further Correspondence

1888: RET/1/5/1/91

1889: RET/1/5/1/92

3. Gender Disparities

RET/6/14: advertisements printed for escaped patients - all men

RET/6/19/2/2/3: Papers, 1880s, relating to unidentified patients - can't seem to access online

RET/1/8/6/7: photographs of patients - far fewer women than men

4. Relevant Retreat Archives

RET/6/1/9: page 274-6 - Gertrude Watson's admission papers

RET/6/5/1/14: page 36-7 online (17-18 physical) Gertrude Watson's casebook notes

RET/6/5/1/10 - 19: page 49 - Gertrude Watson listed in Index

RET/8/11/5: page 3 and 23 - early 19th century engravings of The Retreat

RET/7/3: Gainsborough House: 'In 1886 Gainsborough House, Sarony Square, South Cliff, Scarborough was offered to the Retreat on lease. The Retreat occupied Gainsborough House as a seaside/convalescent home from the end of 1886 to May 1902. It accommodated ten resident lady patients and had room for convalescents and relays of holidaying patients in the summer.'

RET1/8/9/1: Album of photographs of The Retreat

RET1/8/10/2: Photographs of Gainsborough House, Scarborough

RET/1/8: photographs of The Retreat generally

RET/1/8/6/7: photographs of patients - far fewer women than men

RET/1/8/6/2: photographs of Retreat staff

Correspondence:

1887-1888: RET/1/5/2/18:

Physical page numbers: 124-6, 247-9, 271

Online image numbers: 299-304, 567-572, 615-18

Content of letters:

Mr Coor(?) Parker asking on behalf of John Watson (Gertrude's father) for a cost reduction (£1 instead of £2)

Letters between the Office of Commissioners in Lunacy and Dr Baker, discussing whether Gertrude should be confined.

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Anne Watson (Gertrude's mother), writes to Dr Baker, passing on Gertrude's complaints about The Retreat

1888-1889: RET/1/5/2/19:

Physical page number - 67, online image number - 174, letter from Gertrude's brother (?) discussing the cost of her stay at Scarborough

Loose 1: RET/1/5/1/91

Loose 2: RET/1/5/1/92

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