The 19th century was characterised by a growing reform movement which led to major statutory changes. The therapeutic energy and optimism of the reform movement was, however, eventually defeated by the excessive confinement of people who might be mildly socially deviant rather than insane.

How did things change in the 19th century?

- The County Asylum Act of 1808 established the principle that the care of the poor insane was a public responsibility; it was a permissive Act which mandated counties to invest local funds in their own asylums. The 1828 Act made it mandatory that all counties build an asylum.

- The first half of the 19th century was characterised by considerable legislation to ensure proper licensing and monitoring of establishments for the insane. The drivers were well publicised cases of cruelty or neglect in public and private madhouses, leading to public concern.

- The insane were treated generally with more dignity and respect, particularly by exponents of ‘moral therapy’ which stressed the importance of social and environmental factors in shaping behaviour.

- However, by the second half of the 19th century, the way the insane were viewed and managed had deteriorated. This was because:
  - the asylum population had increased several fold beyond predicted asylum capacity
  - moral therapy had given ground to regimented approaches and chemical restraint
  - the asylums became repositories for anyone deemed socially deviant
  - therapeutic nihilism infected psychiatric practice
  - public opinion about the insane swung back to that of fear and revulsion.

Early 20th century mental health legislation

- After World War I, there was a change in people’s attitudes towards mental disorders. Many felt that:
  - those with mental disorders should be treated like those with physical disorders and should be able to access in-patient treatment and out-patient clinics on a voluntary basis
  - aftercare following discharge was very important
  - the quality and qualifications of staff looking after the insane was important and should be improved.

Further reading


