

Dr Blake Marsh and the Blake Marsh Lectures

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At the Council meeting of the Royal Medico-Psychological Association in November 1963 the Treasurer reported that "a handsome legacy of about £20,000 in shares had been made to the association by the late Dr Blake Marsh and arrangements are being made to take over these shares". The actual amount was in fact a little over £23,500 – a considerable sum by today's standards. Numerous suggestions were made as to how this generous gift might be honoured including naming the Association's Bronze Medal after Blake Marsh but Council finally accepted a recommendation of the Education Committee "to found an annual lecture of a standing equal to the Maudsley Lecture on a subject connected with Mental Deficiency to be known by his (Dr Blake Marsh's) name" and this was ratified at the Annual Meeting in 1965.

There is surprisingly little information in the College about one of its major benefactors and the following brief account of Blake Marsh's life and work and of the lectures that bear his name is an attempt to rectify this.

Rex Godfrey Blake Marsh (Fig. 1) was born in June 1897 in West London where his father was a physician and honorary medical officer to the Shipmasters Society. He went to school in Cheltenham and received his medical training at St Thomas's Hospital Medical School qualifying MRCS (England) and LRCP (London) in 1924. Like his father he is listed as Marsh in the *Medical Directory* but always signed himself as Blake Marsh – Blake being a family name on his father's side. Between 1924 and 1928 he held Clinical Assistant posts in the Department of Dermatology, St Thomas's Hospital London, the Maudsley Hospital and Colney Hatch Mental Hospital, Hertfordshire. This was a period of active research, for which he showed considerable flair, publishing papers on carbohydrate metabolism in malaria (Rudolf & Marsh, 1927), and acid-base regulation in mental disorders, under the tutelage of Professor Golla (Golla *et al.*, 1928; Mann & Marsh, 1928; Marsh, 1929).

After obtaining his DPM in 1928, Dr Blake Marsh was appointed Assistant Medical Officer at Claybury Mental Hospital, Essex in 1929 and moved into the 'mental deficiency' field in 1932 when he became Deputy Medical Superintendent at Leavesden Hospital, Hertfordshire. In 1937 he

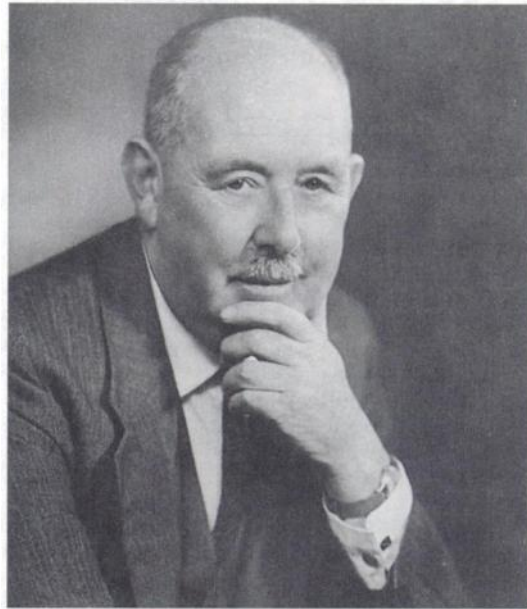


Fig. 1. Dr R. G. Blake Marsh. Photographed on his retirement in 1957 (reproduced by kind permission of the Bedford and Shires NHS Trust)

was appointed the first Medical Superintendent of Bromham House Colony for Mental Defectives, near Bedford, a post which he held single-handed for 20 years until his retirement in 1957. The duties were all-encompassing and included the general and financial management of the Colony, medical supervision, daily visits to the wards and performing post-mortems.

Bromham House Colony had opened in 1931 and at the time of his appointment consisted of a 19th century mansion house (Fig. 2), which housed "24 high-grade employable male defectives" cared for by a staff of three attendants. Plans for a major expansion of the 135 acre estate had already been drawn up and during his early years as a superintendent Blake Marsh presided over a major development of the site to provide 260 places in five villas for 'male and female defectives' including 100 places for children, a



Fig. 2. The Mansion House, Bromham Hospital. Dr Blake Marsh lived in a flat in one wing throughout his Medical Superintendancy. Bromham Hospital currently houses 60 residents and is scheduled to close in March 1997

training centre, workshops, a large farm and market garden and a sports field. The first phase of these new developments was opened in September 1938 by Sir Lawrence Brock, Chairman of the Board of Control, who addressed the assembled company on the value of institutional care. In 1942 the Colony's farming and other activities attracted a visit from the then Minister of Health, Colonel Walter Elliott. Further expansions followed in 1954–55, including two new single storey villas, one for "cot and chair patients" being named after Blake Marsh, and the acquisition of the 17th century Hasells Hall, Sandy for 60 male patients, taking the residential capacity to 300. Contemporary accounts indicate an active, progressive and outward looking hospital with all patients fully occupied, a comprehensive range of occupational, training and recreational activities, education for the children, good links with the local community and an emphasis on rehabilitation and discharge.

Dr Blake Marsh was elected an ordinary member of the Royal Medico-Psychological Association in 1921 and quickly became an active member of the Mental Deficiency Committee (later the Mental Deficiency Section) serving as Secretary from 1943 to 1951 and Chairman from 1954 to 1957. During this period the section membership doubled to 160, and the present pattern of regular clinical meetings held in turn in Mental Handicap hospitals throughout the country, although surprisingly never at Bromham, was established. He represented the section on Council from 1943 until his retirement and was a long-standing member of the Parliamentary, Education and Papers and Discussion Committees.

Dr Blake Marsh retired in 1957 to Lewes, Sussex where he died at the age of 63 years in October 1960. His death was announced at the 1960 Autumn meeting of the Association. There were no published obituaries.

So what of the man? Those who knew him well describe Blake Marsh as a gentle, kindly, hard-working, rather reticent man with a quiet persistence and a good sense of humour. He seems to have exemplified the best of the old style Medical Superintendent fulfilling the role of father figure and devoting his life to his patients and the hospital where he was much loved and respected. Bromham was undoubtedly a happy and well-run hospital under his care. His approach was forward looking and balanced "Nursing care for the more helpless and socialisation and return to the community wherever that is at all possible" being his stated philosophy.

Blake Marsh was married but had no children. Outside of his professional life he enjoyed shooting, food and pewter. He had a fine collection of antique pewter, was a past President of the Society of Pewter Collectors and a distinguished liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, to which he was elected Upper Warden – the second senior officer of the Company, in August 1960 but was unable to attend the crowning Court due to illness. On his death he left the Company a quantity of pewter and a substantial monetary legacy and is remembered as a benefactor in their annual church service.

The Blake Marsh Lectures

The first Blake Marsh Lecture was delivered at the Winter quarterly meeting of the Association in 1967 by Professor C. Dent FRS and the lectures have continued unbroken every year since, with the exception of 1988 when the speaker withdrew at the last moment. The first lecturer was selected by the Education Committee but responsibility was then passed by Council to the Executive Committee of the Mental Deficiency Section where it remains. In the early years the lectures were rather grand affairs open to the public, advertised widely, presided over by the President and followed by a special dinner at one of the major London clubs. The latter tradition continues with a Blake Marsh Supper held at the College.

Lecturers were chosen from home and abroad for their eminence and contribution to the speciality and include neurophysiologists, neuropathologists, biochemists, clinical psychologists, paediatricians and geneticists as well as psychiatrists. Many were prominent members of the Royal Medico-Psychological Association/Royal

College of Psychiatrists. Notable names from the United Kingdom include Professor Dent FRS, a renowned biochemist, and Professor Polani FRS, a renowned geneticist, each of whom made important discoveries in the area of causation; Professor Lionel Penrose FRS, whose contribution to the scientific study of mental retardation in all its aspects is unsurpassed and Dr Alex Shapiro CBE, doyen of the British mental handicap scene in the 1960s and 70s and co-founder and second president of the International Association for the Scientific Study of Mental Deficiency (IASSMD). International notables include Professor Hans Forssman, a clinical geneticist and epidemiologist from Sweden; Professor Robert Guthrie, USA, inventor of the heel prick test for phenylketonuria, which opened up new possibilities for prevention; Professor Frank Menolascino, who pioneered the psychiatry of mental retardation in

the USA and wrote many classic texts on the subject; Dr Annalise Dupont from Denmark, a distinguished researcher in many aspects of mental retardation and a former president of the IASSMD, and most recently Professor Gillberg from Sweden, for his outstanding research on autism.

Together the lectures (Table 1) provide a fascinating insight into thinking and research in the field of mental retardation during a 30 year period which has witnessed major scientific discoveries, in the field of causation and prevention, significant advances in clinical phenomenology and treatment and dramatic changes in philosophy of care and service provision. Many present pioneering work. Most embody a lifetime's experience and contain many words of wisdom for today's practitioners. Causation is an enduring theme and most of the early lectures

Table 1. Blake Marsh lecturers and lectures

Year	Speaker	Lecture
1967	C. Dent	Mental Deficiency and Amino Acid Metabolism
1968	A. Shapiro	The Clinical Practice of Mental Deficiency*
1969	L. Penrose	Measurement in Mental Deficiency*
1970	H. Forssman	The Mental Implications of Sex Chromosome Aberrations*
1971	W. Gardner	Operant Conditioning: Applications to the Treatment of Developmental, Behavioural and Rehabilitation Difficulties of the Mentally Retarded
1972	B. Richards	Mongols and Their Mothers*
1973	J. Dobbing	Another Vulnerability of the Developing Human Brain
1974	J. Jancar	Neurocutaneous Disorder and Mental Functioning*
1975	N. O'Connor	The Psychopathology of Cognitive Deficit*
1976	A. Heaton-Ward	Psychosis in Mental Handicap*
1977	A. N. Davison	The Biochemistry of Brain Development and Mental Retardation*
1978	F. Esher	Unsuccessful Adaptation of Stress as a Cause of Psychiatric Symptomatology that Includes Mental Deficit
1979	D. J. Dondorp	Health Services for the Mentally Retarded in The Netherlands: Ideas, Possibilities and Problems
1980	Valerie Cowie	Injury and Insult - Consideration of the Neuropathological Aetiology of Mental Subnormality*
1981	P. E. Polani	The Influence of Genetics on Psychiatry
1982	P. Sylvester	Nutritional Aspects of Down's Syndrome with Special Reference to the Nervous System*
1983	D. Primrose	Changing Sociological and Clinical Patterns in Mental Handicap*
1984	F. Brimblecombe	The Needs of Young Intellectually Retarded Adults*
1985	Annalise Dupont	Socio-Psychiatric Aspects of the Young Severely Mentally Retarded and the Family*
1986	P. Harper	Genetics, the Nervous System and Mental Handicap
1987	R. Guthrie	Screening and the Prevention of Mental Handicap**
1989	K. A. Day	Male Mentally Handicapped Sex Offenders*
1990	F. Menolascino	Mental Illness in Persons with Mental Retardation: Current Perspectives**
1991	Lorna Wing	Problems of Community Care for Adults with Mental Handicaps**
1992	R. Sovner	The Diagnosis and Treatment of Atypical Bipolar Affective Disorder in Persons with a Mental Handicap**
1993	A. Reid	The Psychiatry of Mental Handicap: An Appraisal*
1994	L. F. Szymanski	The Price of Freedom of Persons with Mental Retardation**
1995	W. I. Fraser	Whatever Happened to the All Wales Strategy for Community Care?*
1996	C. S. Gillberg	High-functioning Autism and Asperger Syndrome**

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**Published in Abstracts of the Winter Quarterly Meeting

were concerned with biochemical and genetic causes and syndromes. In the late 1970s the emphasis shifted to service delivery, service systems and the problems of carers. The dominant theme in recent years has been the psychiatry of mental handicap.

Conclusion

The Blake Marsh Lectures are firmly established in the College calendar and are the highlight of the Mental Handicap Section's annual programme. They afford an opportunity for all members of the College to hear at first hand some of the most distinguished scientists and researchers in the field of mental retardation. The Lectures are a valuable part of the College archive and it is the authors' earnest hope that they may eventually be published as a collection.

Acknowledgements

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