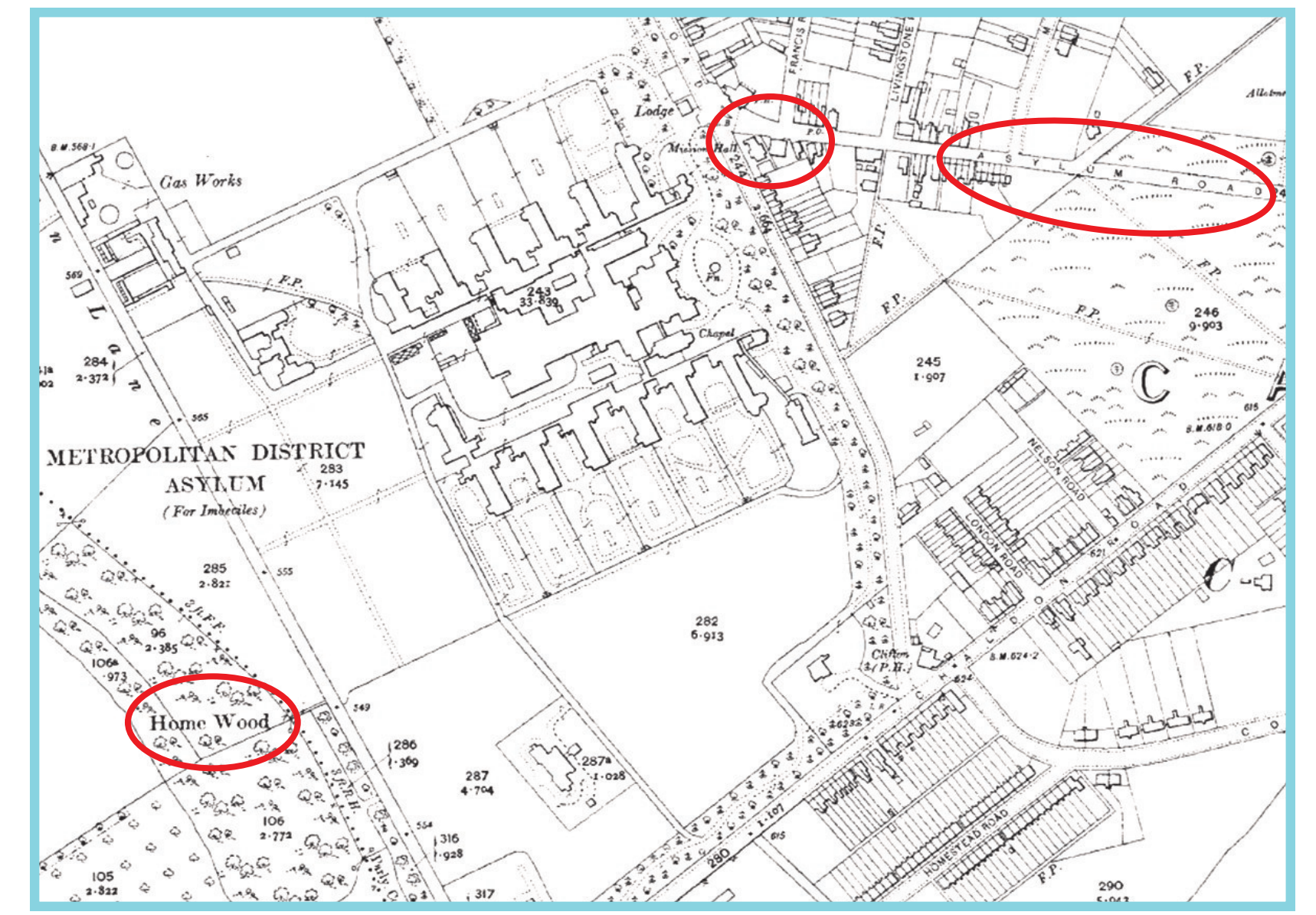
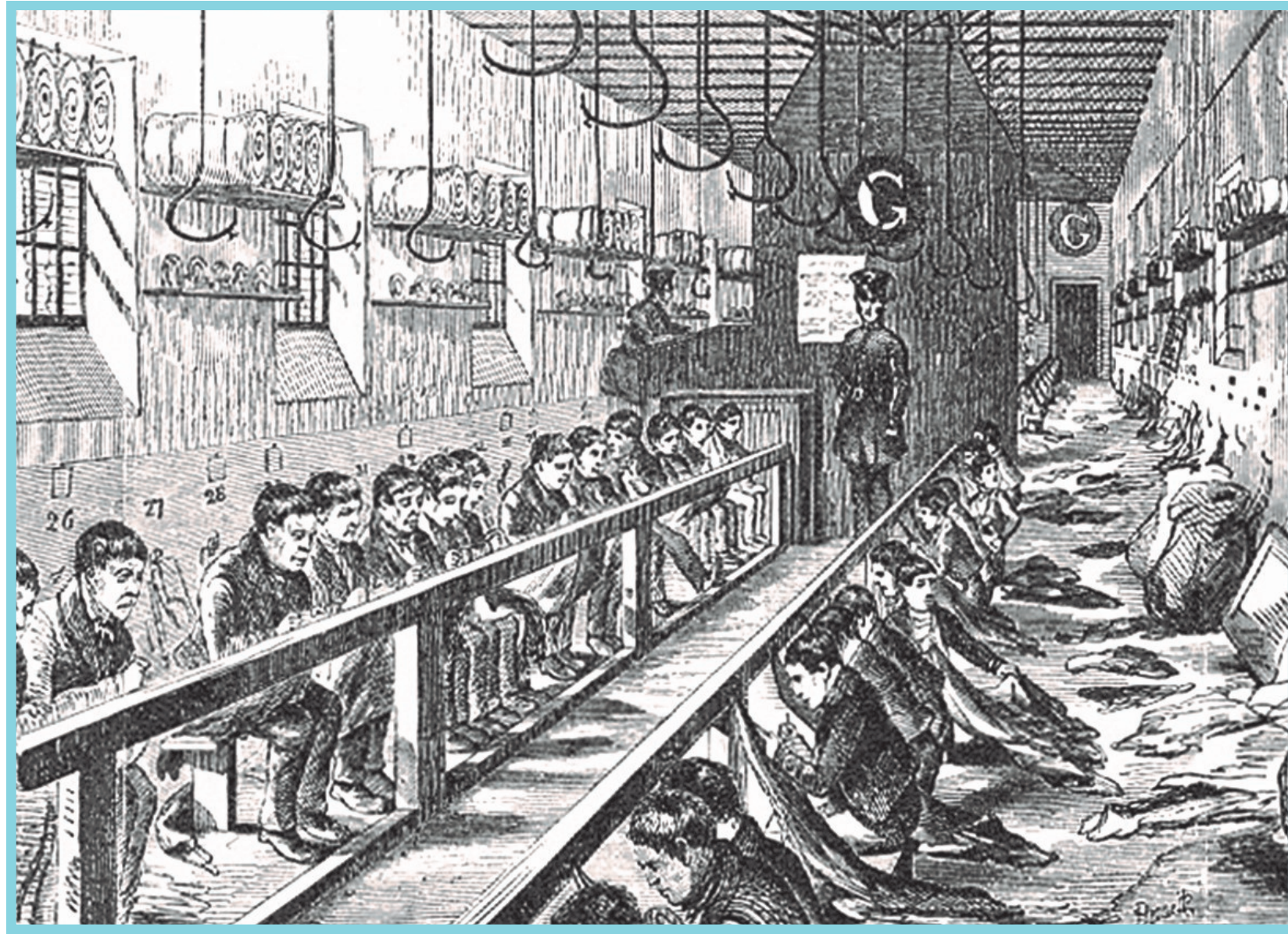


‘Relieving gloomy and objectless lives’.

Workhouse reform and the design of Caterham Imbecile Asylum



WORKHOUSE REFORM

In the 1860s English workhouses were at saturation point, with around 10 per cent of the inmates classified as idiots and imbeciles. A contemporary description of idiocy states that it was a condition which had ‘much resemblance to the ordinary condition of infancy...the mental state...fixed in the infantile state’, with the term imbecility ‘used to denote a less decided degree of mental incapacity’.⁽¹⁾

In 1866, following a number of exposes, *The Lancet* commissioned a report into the state of London’s workhouses, and their description of the Strand workhouse illustrates the workhouse environment ‘the unfortunate imbeciles...are placed in wards which offer the reverse of the conditions which ought to distinguish rooms used for such a purpose, and their life appears to be gloomy and objectless’.⁽²⁾

In response to the crisis, Parliament passed the Metropolitan Poor Act in 1867 for the ‘establishment in the metropolis of asylums for the sick, insane and other classes of the poor...’⁽³⁾

INTRODUCTION

Caterham Imbecile Asylum opened in September 1870. Capable of accommodating 2,000 patients, it was the first purpose built public asylum for the reception of adult idiots and imbeciles in England. Unlike county and borough lunatic asylums, built following the psychiatric reforms of the early nineteenth century, Caterham was born of workhouse and public health reforms of the mid 1860s.

Built and managed by the Metropolitan Asylum Board, an off shoot of the Poor Law Board, Caterham was to provide healthy, hygienic and sanitary long-stay accommodation for the ‘chronic’, ‘harmless’ and ‘incurable’ insane paupers of the Metropolis.

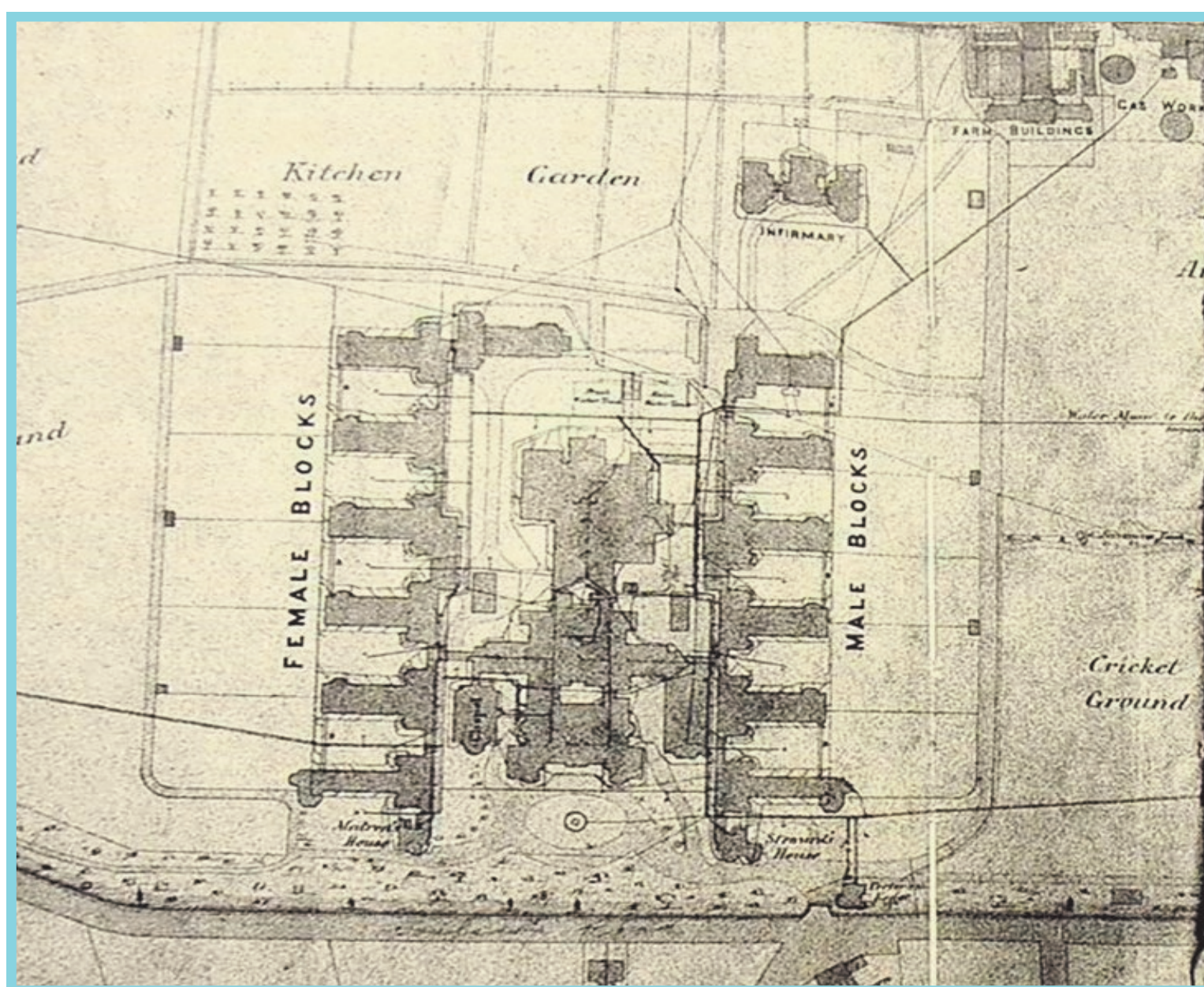
Asylums have frequently been presented as segregated institutions, with the patients isolated from society and isolated from one another. Through a spatial examination of the design, location, geography and regime of Caterham it is possible to question this view and reveal the ways in which the asylum population, and the asylum more broadly, were integrated.

GEOGRAPHY

As well as borrowing the name of the local village, the asylum gave its name to a number of local features, that suggest the walls were permeable and that Caterham was not an isolated institution or wholly segregated from the local community.

The road leading up to Caterham was named *Asylum Road*, and remained so called until the 1930s. The pub opposite the asylum gates was called the *Asylum Tavern*. A number of patients were in the habit of climbing over the asylum walls to have a few pints, returning to their wards worse for wear and receiving a ticking off from staff.

Home Wood and White Hill were two local beauty spots on neighbouring farmland that were favourite destinations for patient walking parties and picnics. Due to its popularity and picturesque quality, Home Wood was eventually fitted up with picnic tables, benches and swings, paid for by the asylum and with the landowners permission.



LOCATION

Caterham Asylum was built on a 72 acre site in a quiet Surrey village, overlooking the Caterham Valley, from which the asylum took its name.

The asylum’s location capitalised both on the sanitary efficiency of the design, the hygienic environment and the tranquil landscape. The site was described as having ‘excellent drainage’, a good ‘chalky subsoil’ and ‘bracing south-westerly winds’.

Caterham had to be well connected to London, for easy transportation of patients, who were drawn from the metropolitan workhouses, the asylum management committee, and patient families. Located 20 miles from London, the asylum was just one mile from the local railway station.

The medical superintendent was well aware of the detrimental effect of removal from ones familiar environment. By 1872 the asylum managers arranged cut-price train tickets for patient families, to encourage visits. In one bank holiday weekend over 600 families visited the asylum.

DESIGN

Caterham’s design was not that of a typical asylum, many of which were built on the *linear* plan. Caterham was built on the *pavilion* plan, a layout typically used in the emerging modern hospitals and infirmaries, it was a design championed by public health and sanitary reformers, such as Florence Nightingale.

Segregated along gender lines, females on the left, males on the right, there were a number of spaces which were mixed. For example, male and female patients worked in the vast asylum laundry and the cavernous kitchen.

The Recreation Hall, built in 1873, hosted a variety of entertainments, such as dances, during which around 800 patients, male and female, were gathered together to dance the night away.



REGIME

Outside of the formal institutional regime, there were a number of activities that destabilized the gender segregation of the asylum, and also assisted in the greater integration of the institution within the local community.

Cricket and football were played regularly between staff and patients, as well as against local teams. Both male and female patients would watch these matches, as would staff. When outside teams came to compete the local community were invited to spectate.

Theatrical entertainments, held monthly in the Recreation Hall, were given by professional, staff and local troupes. Summer fetes also saw the local community and patient families pass through the asylum gates.

Works Cited:
(1) William Wortherspoon Ireland *On Idiocy and Imbecility* (London, 1877) pp.146-8
(2) *The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses* (London, 1866) p. 71
(3) Gwendoline Ayers *England's First State Hospitals and the Metropolitan Asylums Board, 1867-1930* (London, 1979) p. 254