

Looking out for Art at Bethlem Royal Hospital

Sally Williams, Keeper of the Inventory

Bethlem Royal Hospital in Monks Orchard, Beckenham, is set in extensive grounds that were formerly part of the estate of Wickham Park, an eighteenth-century property that the hospital purchased in 1924 as it planned its move from St George's Fields in Southwark. The name Monks Orchard is thought to derive from a sixteenth-century landowner called Monk and the name was adopted in the nineteenth century. Orchards still form part of the hospital landscape, including a plantation of 150 mature, mainly Bramley, apple trees dating from the 1930s. Indeed, horticulture and art are important components in the therapeutic treatment of patients at Bethlem, and in recent years new amenities have added immeasurably to this.

The origins of the first Bethlem Hospital date from 1247 when the Priory of St Mary of Bethlehem was founded in Bishopsgate. By 1329 it had become a hospital for the sick, and by 1403 is known to have housed the mentally ill, making it arguably the oldest hospital of the kind still functioning in Europe, if not worldwide. In 1676, a new and considerably grander Bethlem Hospital was built on the Moorfields, just outside London's City walls, designed by Robert Hooke. However, by 1815 these buildings were in a poor state and the hospital moved to Southwark, where it remained until the transfer to Monks Orchard in 1930. The Southwark building eventually became the Imperial War Museum and the grounds the Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park. The famous sculptures of 'Raving and Melancholy Madness' by Caius Gabriel Cibber made for the gates of the 'New Bedlam' in Moorfields are now in the Museum of the Mind at Monks Orchard. The Museum, formerly housed in the picturesque lodge at the entrance to the site, is now within an exceptional new facility created when the original Art Deco Administration Building was renovated. Opening in February 2015, it comprises the Bethlem Gallery (originally set up in 1997) and the Bethlem Museum of the Mind, providing a dedicated arts and learning space for mental health.

My knowledge of the Monks Orchard site began in 2002, when a group from London Parks & Gardens Trust were shown the early nineteenth-century walled kitchen garden by one of the occupational therapists as part of a tour of art and gardening projects at the hospital. The kitchen garden, which had supplied the hospital with vegetables and fruit up until the mid-1990s, once had extensive greenhouses, backsheds, a mushroom forcing house and vines; but by the time of our visit it had become much overgrown and its greenhouses semi-derelict, although it was used for gardening projects by the hospital's OT department. It eventually disappeared when a state-of-the-art medium-secure forensic unit was built, opening in 2008, named River House 'to reflect a person's journey through illness toward recovery'. A new Walled Garden was created in 2007, designed to augment the benefits of therapeutic horticulture to those recovering from mental health issues. And it was an art project connected with the Walled Garden that triggered my next visit to Monks Orchard in March 2016. A fascinating exhibition in the Bethlem Gallery entitled 'Woad, Weld and Madder: from plot to palette' was the culmination of Magic Dye House, a charitable project founded by the eco illustrator Deisa Centazzo, who worked with the OT team and engaged

<https://londongardenstrust.org/features/Bethlem.htm>

patients in making dyes from plants they themselves had nurtured and grown. They then experimented to create works of art in watercolour, textiles and other media using the natural pigments they had themselves produced.

The dye garden is just one of a number of components in the Walled Garden, which also has a herb garden and sensory area, a wild area to encourage biodiversity, and fruit and vegetables that enable service users to learn about growing their own food organically. When I visited the exhibition, I met Matthew, one of the exhibitors, and learnt of the regular walks he leads round the extensive hospital grounds. As a result I was delighted to join one of his Bluebell Relaxation Walks in early May, when I experienced one of the most magical bluebell displays I have ever seen or smelt. Our walk was imbued with Matthew's extensive knowledge and love of the flora and fauna, not to forget the works of art he has subtly inserted into the environment.

As well as the bluebell woods, we also saw evidence of the earlier landscape still visible in the hospital grounds - fine trees, meadows and remnants of the old estate's boundary walls and formal gardens. Although features of the landscape park, including its ornamental lakes, have generally disappeared, fragments of balustrading, steps, and other decorative objects remain. Near the new Walled Garden is an old orchard, restored in 2012 by hospital gardeners, occupational therapy staff and service users, with support from The London Orchard Project. Most of the trees are over 50 years old, and as well as providing delicious fruit including numerous varieties of apples, plums and greengages, the orchard contributes to the hospital's occupational therapy work.

Revisiting Monks Orchard has been an eye-opener, and I look forward to many more explorations, not least of the superbly-displayed Museum collection, which includes paintings by well-known former patients such as Richard Dadd and Louis Wain, as well as contemporary artists. Giving an insight into the fragile nature of the human mind, this reminds us that 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health problem in any given year.

To find out more about exhibitions and activities at the Bethlem Gallery and the Museum of the Mind, as well as the regular walks in the grounds see bethlemgallery.com and museumofthemind.org.uk.



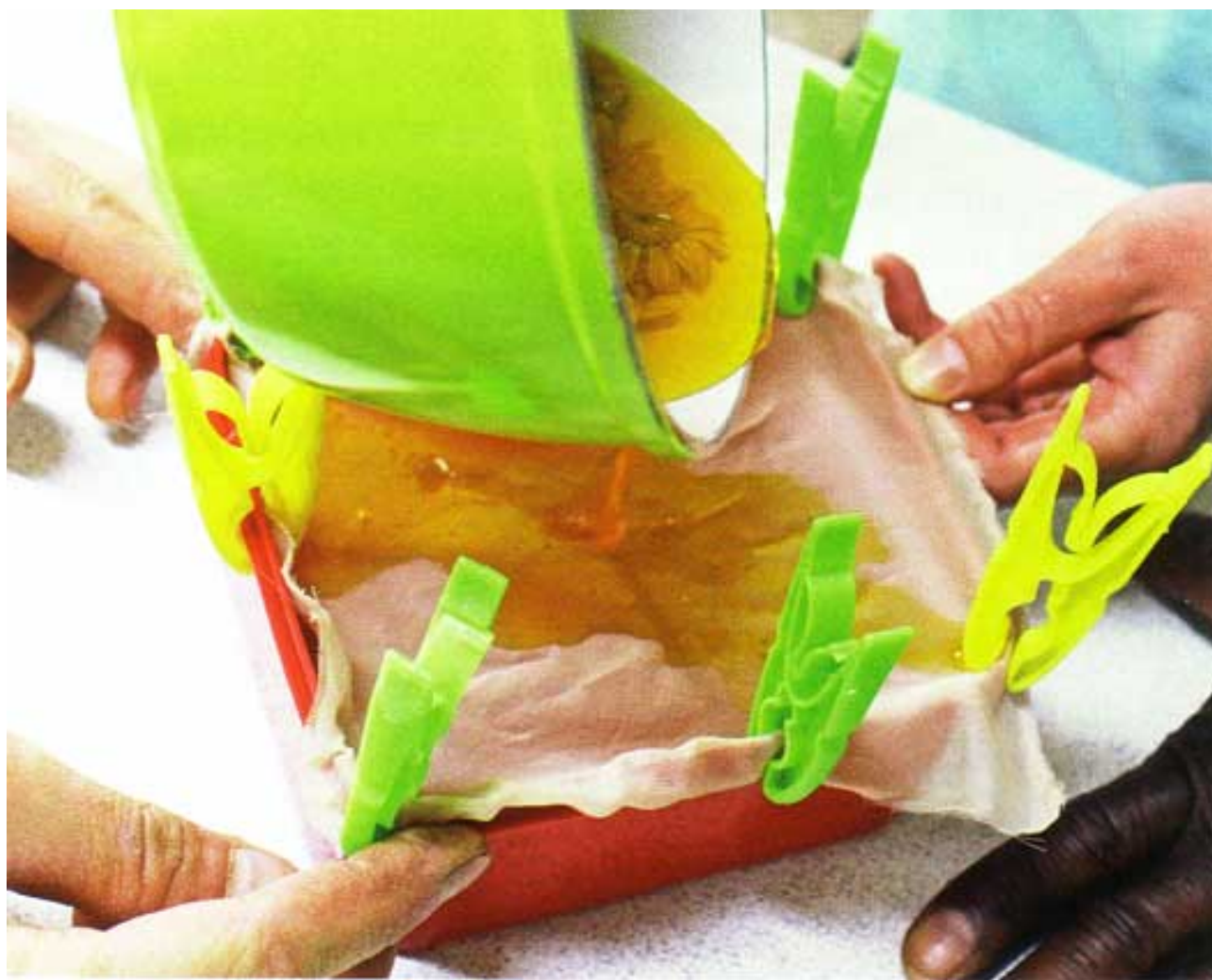
The Walled Garden
(Courtesy of the Bethlem Gallery)



The Bluebell Woods
© Sally Williams



Dyers' Chamomile
© Magic Dye House, Deisa Centazzo



Creating a work of art
© *Magic Dye House, Deisa Centazzo*



A remaining feature of the landscape park © Sally Williams