



The Victorian Asylum (Shire Library)

Sarah Rutherford

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The Victorian lunatic asylum has a special place in history. Dreaded and reviled by many, these nineteenth-century buildings provide a unique window on how the Victorians housed and treated the mentally ill.

Despite initially good intentions, they became warehouses for society's outcasts at a time when cures were far fewer than hoped for. Isolated, hidden in the countryside and surrounded by high walls, they were eventually distributed throughout Britain, the Empire, the Continent and North America, with 120 or so in England and Wales alone.

Now the memory of them is fading, and many of the buildings have gone or are threatened. Most have been closed as hospitals since the 1980s and either been demolished or turned into prestigious private apartments, their original use largely forgotten.

Their memory deserves rehabilitation as a fascinating part of Victorian life that survived into modern times. In *The Victorian Asylum*, Sarah Rutherford gives an insight into their history, their often imposing architecture, and their later decline, and brings to life these haunting buildings, some of which still survive today.



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