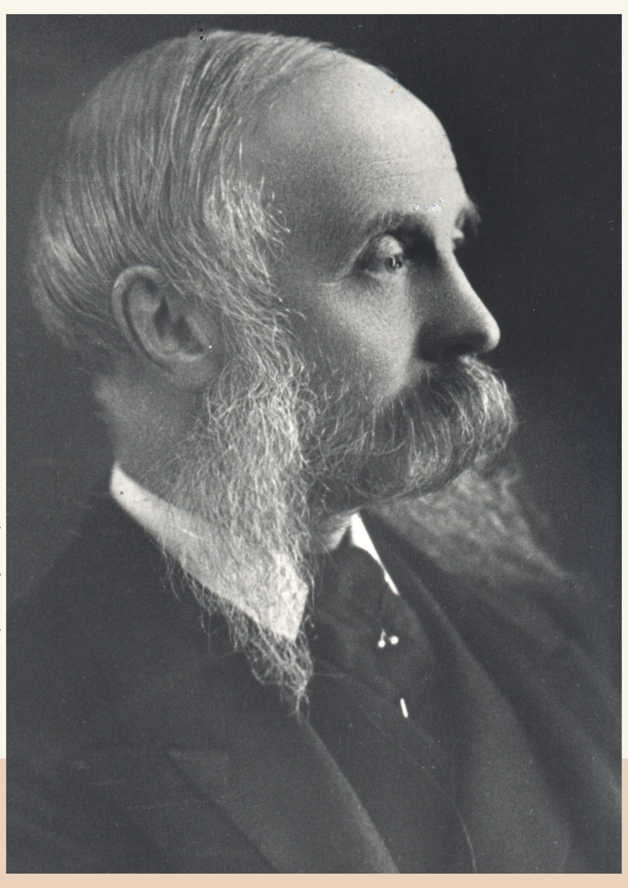
Psychiatrists and the Eugenics Society, c.1900–1950

Graham Ash



Archives, Royal College of Psychiatrists

Prominent members of the Royal Medico-Psychological Association (RMPA), such as James Crichton-Browne and Frederick Walker Mott, helped to develop and shape the relationship between eugenic thinking and psychiatry in Britain after 1900. Their contributions, particularly during the interwar period, were made in the context of widespread social fears that 'hereditary degeneracy' would cause cultural and political breakdown. Some of them argued for the sterilisation of so-called 'feeble-minded' individuals, others insisted on their institutionalisation and segregation. Some of the important legislation debated in England and Scotland concerning the psychiatric treatment of people with intellectual disabilities, such as the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act, and the proposed Sterilisation Bill of 1931, relied on expert evidence from psychiatrists. In 1934 the RMPA's Council decided to appoint a representative to a committee of the Central Association for Mental Welfare, which was 'being set up to press for legislation' to permit the voluntary sterilisation of some patients with mental disorders. Although their recommendations floundered, the lingering effects of scientific racism and eugenics continued to be felt in psychiatric practice into the 1950s.

Above: **James Crichton-Browne**

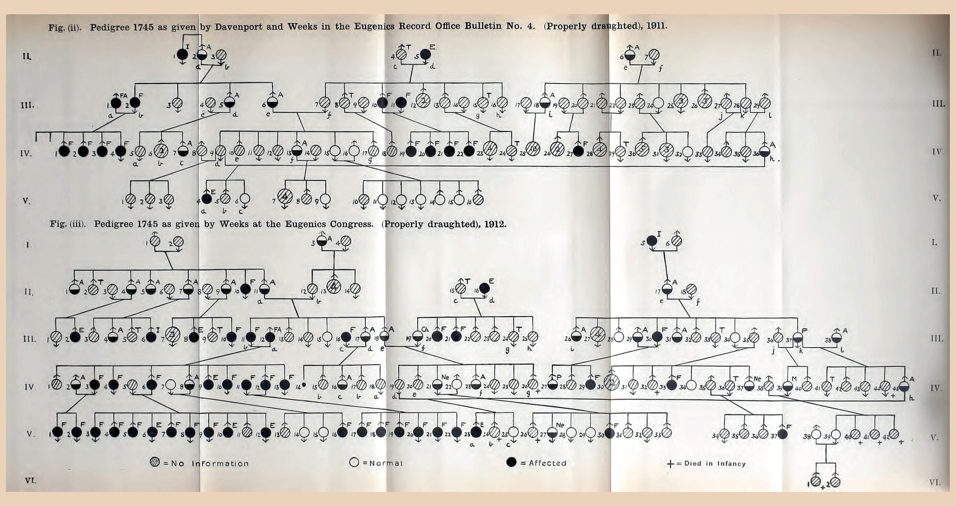
Sir James Crichton-Browne (1840–1938) was co-founder of the renowned journal *Brain*. Between 1866 and 1875 he was director of the West Riding Pauper Lunatic Asylum at Wakefield in Yorkshire (known as the Wakefield Asylum). In 1875 he was appointed Lord Chancellor's Visitor in Lunacy, a post he occupied for 45 years. Queen Victoria knighted him in 1886. He was a founder member of the Eugenics Education Society in 1907, serving as its president for the first year and as vice-president for several years afterwards. In 1908 he spoke before the Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded, recommending that the so-called 'degenerate' classes of society be prevented from reproduction.

After 1945, organisations working in the related fields of mental welfare and mental hygiene distanced themselves from eugenics, seen as a racist 'science' and directly connected to the crimes against humanity committed by the Nazi regime. Despite changes in organisational names and policy, there remains an ongoing need to examine, reflect and learn from the legacies of eugenics in psychiatry.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists believes in the necessity of the exploration of the histories of eugenics and encourages critical evaluation of psychiatric thinking and practices today. The College feels it is important to support the current global movement of coming to terms with the legacies of eugenics and to recognise the involvement of British psychiatry in the history of eugenics. Only by publicly accepting this history can we challenge systemic inequality in health care and treatment.

Right: **Pedigrees of 'defective' families used by Charles Davenport and David F. Weeks, Superintendent and Medical Director of the New Jersey State Village for Epileptics**

According to some Mendelian eugenicists and proponents of 'degeneration theory' such as the American Charles Davenport, so-called 'feeble-mindedness' was inherited as a simple Mendelian recessive trait, producing 'unworthy' people. British statistician David Heron (1881–1969), the Galton Research Fellow in 1913, was one of the few in Britain who rejected Davenport's Mendelian theory of mental defect. Heron purported to show that 'feeble-minded' parents had 'normal-minded' offspring, but these children should not have existed if Davenport's single-gene Mendelian recessive model was correct.



David Heron, *Mendelism and the Problem of Mental Defect*, 1913, p. 34/35

More on the Royal College of Psychiatrists' plan to promote equality can be found at: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/equality-action-plan

Below: **Maudsley Hospital, London, ca. 1935**

With financial support from Henry Maudsley (1835–1918), a new institution for the study and treatment of mental illnesses opened under the administration of London County Council on 31 January 1923. Some of Maudsley's psychiatrists such as Edward Mapother (1881–1940) and C. P. Blacker supported the policies of the Eugenics Society, including legalisation of voluntary sterilisation, while others such as Aubrey Lewis (1900–1975), became critical of them. Another important psychiatrist, Eliot Slater (1904–1983), joined the Maudsley in 1931 and the Eugenics Society in 1937. In 1934–35 Slater travelled to Germany where he studied psychiatric genetics with prominent Nazi racial scientists such as Ernst Rüdin and Otmar von Verschuer. Slater later became Director of the Medical Research Council Psychiatric Genetics Research Unit at the Maudsley and remained ambivalent about eugenic sterilisation for many years.

Below: **Charles H. Bond**

Sir Charles Hubert Bond (1870–1945) was awarded the Medico-Psychological Association's Gaskell Medal and Prize in 1898. Between 1903 and 1907 he was medical superintendent of Ewell Epileptic Colony and became a senior commissioner of the Board of Control for Lunacy and Mental Deficiency (created in 1914). He was president of the Medico-Psychological Association in 1921–22 and, after 1925, also served as a consultant in mental disorders to the Royal Navy. He was one of the architects of the Mental Treatment Act of 1930. He was a member of the Council of the Eugenics Society.

Thomas Bewley, *Madness to Mental Illness, A History of the Royal College of Psychiatrists*, 2008, p XI, plate 18

Left: **Frederick W. Mott**

Sir Frederick Walker Mott (1853–1926) was immensely influential as a neuropathologist, first at Claybury Asylum in Essex (established in 1893) and then the Maudsley Hospital in London. He edited *Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry* and conducted extensive research on the heredity of mental illness and its eugenic importance. He was a member of the Council of the Eugenics Society. In 1912 he presented a paper to the First International Eugenics Congress, entitled 'Heredity and eugenics in relation to insanity' and in 1914 he published *Nature and Nurture in Mental Development*. He served on the Council of the Eugenics Society. In 1925 he was President of the Medico-Psychological Association.

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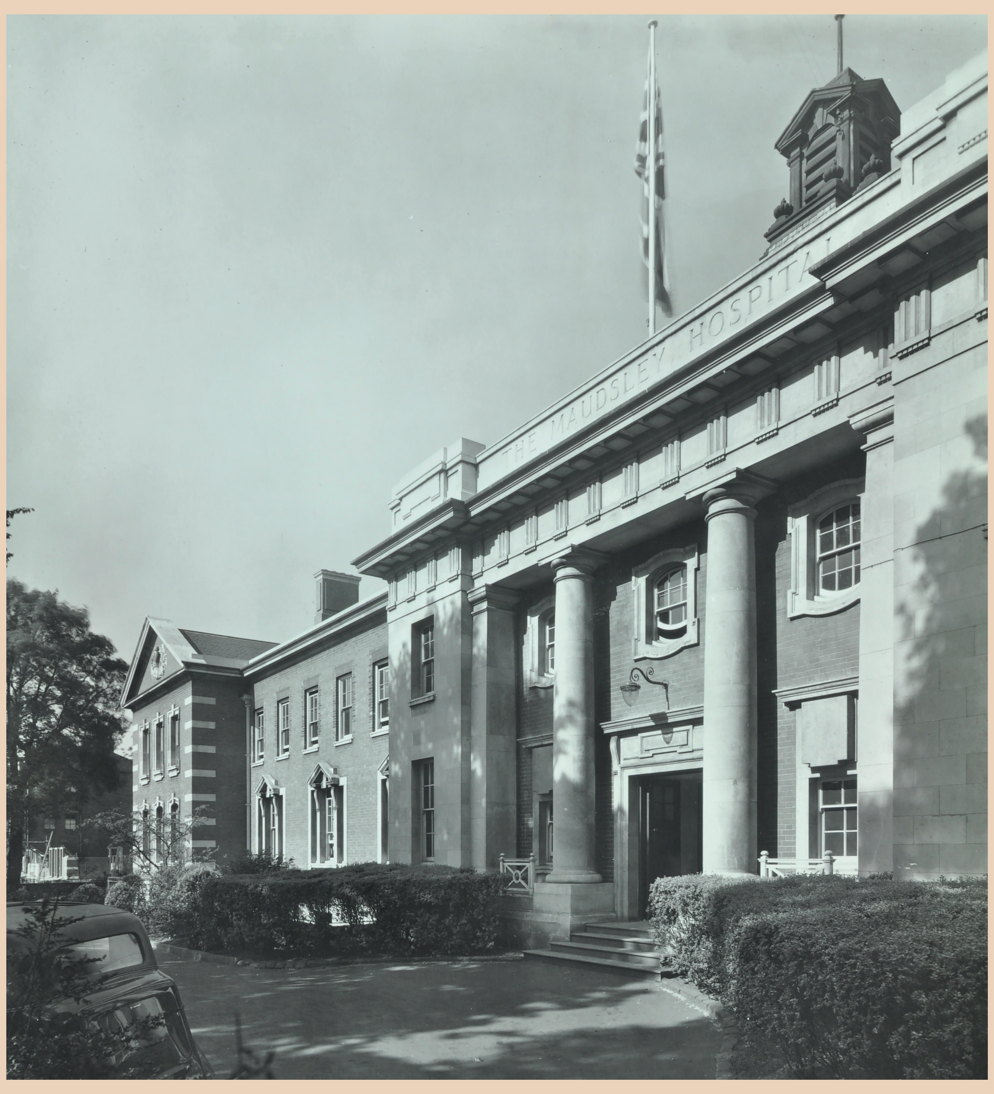
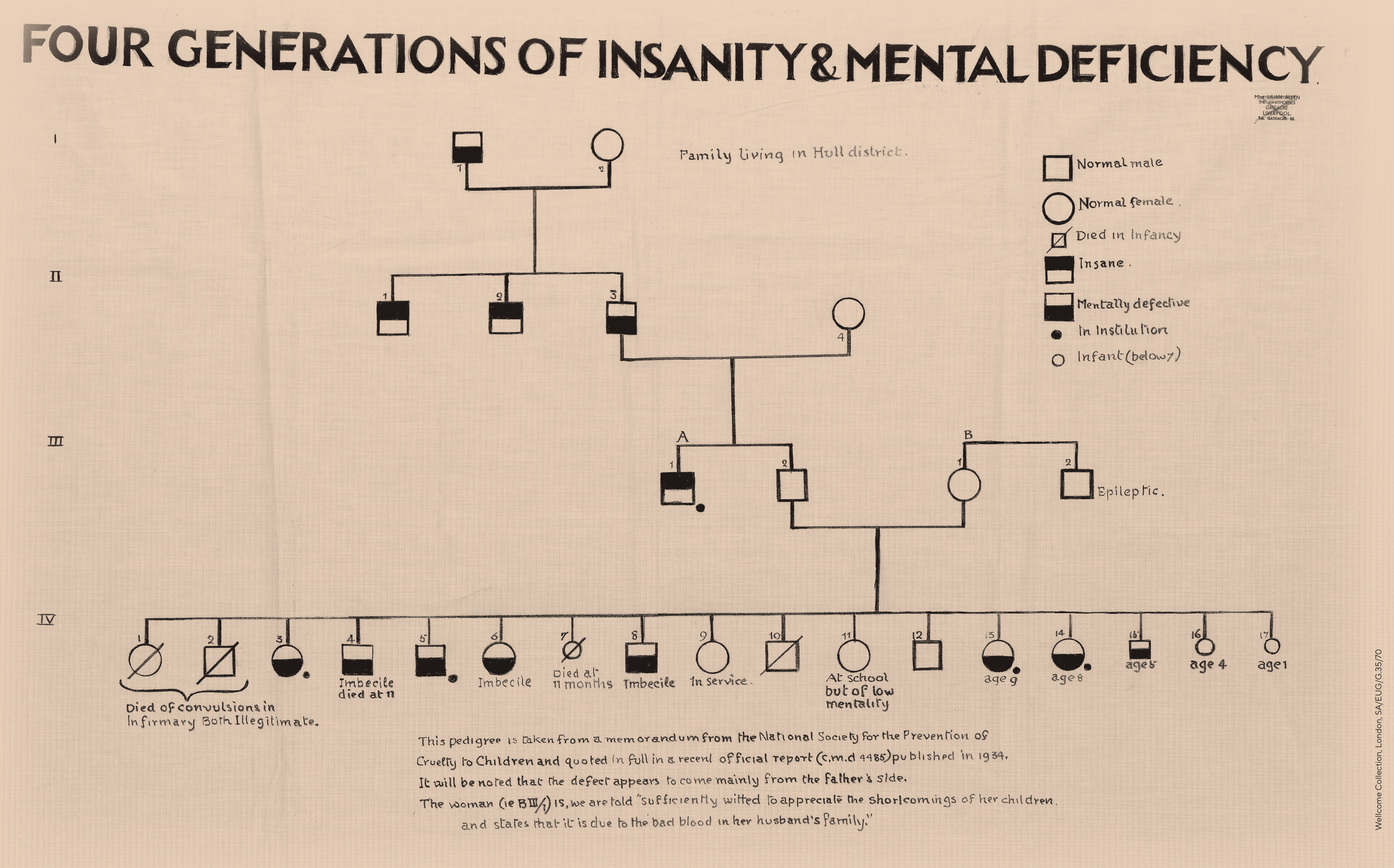
Left: **Robert Armstrong-Jones**

Sir Robert Armstrong-Jones (1857–1943) was Claybury Asylum's first superintendent (appointed in 1893). Previously, he worked at Colney Hatch Asylum and the Royal Earlswood Institution. He also lectured at St Bartholomew's Hospital and served as consulting physician in mental diseases to the military forces at London and Aldershot. In 1921 he became the Lord Chancellor's Visitor in Lunacy and Gresham Professor of Physic (Medicine). He was also a member of the Council of the Eugenics Society.

Below: **'Four generations of insanity & mental deficiency', ca. 1930**



London Metropolitan Archives



Wellcome Collection, London, SA/EUG/G.35/70