



James Barr was born in Paisley, Scotland, in the first year of this century, and having received a fair education, was apprenticed to the trade of dyeing, in Bartholomew's Dye Works in Glasgow, where he remained for several years, afterwards removing to Carlisle, where he was engaged in a responsible position in the same business, for a considerable time. Like many of his countrymen he was restless in disposition and resolved with his wife and family to emigrate to Otago, which presented at the time great attractions.

Arriving by the *Sir Edward Paget*, in August 1856, he found that neither bleaching nor dyeing were in vogue, so he took what first offered itself and strange to say that was the appointment of himself as keeper and his wife as matron of the hospital and lunatic asylum for the province.

The wooden buildings of the asylum were erected on the site where now stands the magnificent municipal buildings wherein the wisdom of the city is centred and where sometimes too a large amount of the element of its previous occupants is developed.

The Provincial Council at the time took a strong line with the mentally afflicted – it deported them back whence they came. Later they were accommodated at the small general hospital in the Octagon or were placed in restraint in the Dunedin Gaol.

Mr and Mrs Barr constituted almost the sole custodians and attendants at the combined hospital/mental institution and they did so for the magnificent sum for their united labours of 90 pounds a year with rations, (the Provincial Surgeon, Dr Hume received 100 pounds for his services without the keep ) and this was not for a sprinkling of patients for often there was contained a " guid big han' fu' " of fellows who filled the air with their shouts and shrieks and who needed sometimes more strength than the couple possessed to keep them in order.

The position of keeper he retained until the asylum was built [in Arthur Street on what was set aside as a cemetery reserve] on the position where the High School for boys is now located [which opened in 1863].

The greater crowd created by the greater population of both lunatics and hospital patients required separate and larger buildings so the Provincial Council erected independent residences for each. Mr Barr's services were transferred to the asylum and he remained there as an assistant until age rendered him unfit for service and he retired without pension.

As the number of inmates increased, the institution was enlarged until it covered a considerable area of the 14 acres of land. The buildings consisted of mainly long one-storeyed buildings constructed of wood enclosing rectangular exercise yards. Doctor Hulme attributed the ever-increasing roll of mental patients to the number of undesirable immigrants. "The habitual drunkard becomes imbecile and ultimately insane, and when admitted to the asylum, suffering from delirium tremens, requires most careful attention

By 1877 almost 300 patients were in residence and pressure was mounting to find an alternative site. Around 1875 work began on a large site at Seacliff and the inmates were progressively transferred there.

The Keeper's Log of 1863 records:

"All hot water has to be carried, which is very inconvenient, and nine patients are bathed in the same water, which is very objectionable and cannot be pleasant for the ninth."

"Martha M. admitted with delusions. Was ordered to have a glass full of brandy daily."

On 4 March 1872 his wife Janet died, and since that time James lived with his daughter at Riverton, occasionally coming up to Dunedin. If one of our old residents deserves notice for service rendered in former times James Barr is the man. His family now alive consists of two sons and a daughter.

James Barr died on 8 March 1891 and is buried in Dunedin's Southern Cemetery in the family plot.

Prepared by the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand from information supplied by John Barr, Dunedin, PapersPast an Obituary in the Otago Witness of March 12, 1891, and "Seacliff – a history of the district by Frank Tod".

