In 1908, Robert Jones described how the type of nurse he wished to attract to his institution might fill her leisure hours: gardening, reading aloud to patients, listening to music, developing an interest in painting and pictures that could be shared with patients, as well as seeking consolation in religion were all considered worthy pastimes.\(^1\) These words resonated with a scene depicted in a photograph, Figure 3.1, taken at Claybury during its first year of operation in 1893. The composition provides a tantalising impression of off-duty asylum life, showing nurses, impeccably turned out in hospital uniforms, posing in a late Victorian ‘recreation room’ surrounded by plants and William Morris-style wallpaper, the light refracted through a large stained-glass window. There is an air of conviviality to the scene as the women relax during their off-duty hours: one slumps into an armchair, another sits before a grand piano, a third folds her arms across a writing desk, whilst a fourth gazes at a lectern. No one appears to be actually doing anything. Indeed, the lack of activity reinforces the message that these are respectable women in full control of themselves, quietly enjoying their leisure time. Why, they might even have been general nurses.

This photograph was almost certainly created as part of a recruitment drive to attract female nurses to Claybury. It was composed to appeal to working-class women who wished to take a step up the social ladder from domestic service and was part of a wider effort by asylums to engage reliable, better educated men and women from the respectable working classes. This, at least, was the aspiration.\(^2\)

Nursing in its many forms had been providing women from the lower and middle classes with new working opportunities from mid-century.\(^3\) Yet it was during the latter decades that debates around the class and personal attributes of the ideal asylum nurse began to gather momentum,
stirred by the wider ideological shift from asylum to mental hospital. This was brought about by a number of factors, including: the adoption of more scientific and clinical methods, the influence of general hospital nursing practices and the employment of general nurses in asylums, especially in senior positions; employing female nurses on male infirmary wards; the formalisation of nursing training; and the establishment of professional bodies including unions. These changes were replete with issues that were sparked by shifting class and gendered behaviour, triggering hostile and heated exchanges between superintendents, general nurses, asylum nurses, attendants and unions. The changes that took place in hospital and asylum nursing, including the impact on men as well as women, is one area in which important work has been done by historians. Many asylum histories, including Digby’s *Madness, Morality and Medicine*, Dwyer’s *Homes for the Mad* and Wright’s *Earlswood Asylum* include a chapter on nurses and attendants. Mick Carpenter was among the first to focus on asylum nursing from the perspective of the history of labour by examining the impact of nursing reforms, including training and professionalisation, on unionisation.4 David Wright, John