

Mental!

There are certain places you just shouldn't visit alone - like Mick Hucknell's bedroom & Grimsby. And Cane Hill, Coulsdon's very own disused lunatic asylum. Meet Simon Cornwell, urban explorer and brave soul, who's done one out of three...

It started innocently enough. A group of urban explorers on an Internet message board were suggesting locations for the ultimate creep-out at Halloween. After various non-descript places were duly posted up and argued down, and the common consensus had settled on a dismal field in the middle of nowhere, I suggested the Chapel at Cane Hill.

My announcement was met with utter horror. I was called mad and the discussion stopped there. Obviously I'd overstepped the mark.

Perhaps their reaction wasn't so extreme. I know people who've been too scared to even go within sight of the buildings and others who can't bear to walk around the perimeter path in broad daylight.



Arched windows, square windows - all I need now is a round window, and it's Play School...

Cane Hill is a brooding monstrous place where superstition and fear still lurk, ten years after it closed its doors for the last time.

For those who don't know, Cane Hill has become Coulsdon's reluctant international land mark, the eye-sore on the hill as you drive

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down the A23 towards the M25, a group of dilapidated, derelict buildings that most of the towns residents would like to see demolished. It was a Victorian lunatic asylum.

It's those last words which strike the most terror. The Victorians didn't mince their words building the snappily named "Third Surrey County Council Pauper Lunatic Asylum" on the southern flank of Coulsdon in 1882. It catered for 2000 patients and upon completion was the largest asylum in Britain.

words & pic: Simon Cornwell



Designed at the height of the Victorian Gothic revival, the buildings are marvellously spooky, the archetypal blueprint of a lunatic asylum. With its huge three storey radiating pavilion wards, majestic administration block, large chapel, turrets, water tower and tunnel system, it's the Addam's Family house on steroids.

The architect, CH Howell, then at the pinnacle of his career, designed Cane Hill as the last, and most successful, radiating ward mental hospital. (Subsequent asylums were built using the echelon plan). Working on the relatively small peninsula at the top of Cane Hill, and hemmed in by Portnalls Road to the west, he crammed everything in as best he



One of the 'lovely' pink wards, with the cells at the back. Nice.