

Heritage Open Days - September 1996

Two of the Independent Living Centre's Trustees organised the two Open Days of the Workhouse under the Heritage Open Days Scheme. An amazing 900 visitors were given guided tours – it was the only workhouse in the country with a virtually unchanged interior.

This condensed history was compiled by Jeannette Greer, the Chief Executive of the ILC, with contributions from Semington resident Gay Firmager, who undertook the Semington History Project 2000. All references to the Melksham Union Workhouse can be found in the Minutes of the Board of Guardians held in the Wiltshire Records.

St George's - An Early Victorian Workhouse

"For ye have the poor with you always and whenever ye will ye may do them good".
(Mark 14:7)

The medieval, Tudor and early Elizabethan poor relied on voluntary contributions. The craft guilds (the early trade unions) looked after their members in adversity and their widows and children and the monasteries gave alms, food and shelter, and medical help to their local needy and migrants in search of work. The dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII deprived the poor of this support and displaced unruly vagrants and beggars began to threaten law and order. The Elizabethan Poor Law Act of 1601 made the parishes responsible for providing work for the able-bodied unemployed, apprenticing poor children and maintaining the sick, infirm and aged incapable of work. The cost was to be borne by the ratepayers of the parish - hence "parish relief".

Not surprisingly, the parishes were prepared to look after their own, but not other parishes responsibilities. Before 1744 children could claim settlement where they were born and this resulted in unmarried mothers in advanced state of labour being harassed to return to their own parishes.

Stocks of materials were bought to set the poor to work, but there was little space in overcrowded cottages, and in 1696 Parliament agreed to the building of a work house in Bristol. This was followed by other "poor houses" or "Houses of Industry" all over the country and references are made in the Minutes of the Melksham Board of Guardians, founded 3 November 1835, to their own modest workhouse in Melksham. They appointed two relieving officers and met every week in the Wagon and Horses at Semington to approve the names on the lists for varying amounts of outdoor relief (our Care in the Community!) They also went out to tender for the supply of basic goods such as bread, meat and shoes for the workhouse.

In March 1836 the Master of the Melksham Poor House reported 45 inmates - only 2 of the 23 adults were able-bodied, 3 girls were able to work and 4 boys were spinning hemp. The 12 sleeping rooms could accommodate 100 persons and at the end of 1837 there were 87 inmates (28 needing medical care). This was indicative of the problems arising throughout the country. A combination of a rising population (from 8 ½ million in 1784 to 12 ¾ million in 1824), the decreasing death rate, the American War post-war depression, the Revolution in France which caused price rises, all contributed to the escalating poor relief.

The Melksham Union

The Government decided to act and produced the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834 which stipulated that combined parishes or 'unions' construct workhouses to house able-bodied unemployed paupers from within their district. Under this Act, the practice of caring for the poor in their own homes was to be discontinued, and they were to be offered the one institution, the Victorian workhouse. From the outset it was decided that conditions should be

so harsh that even scraping a living on low pay would be preferred to accepting the "offer of the House". If the House was declined, then there would be no relief. Sick and infirm people could be maintained at home under the old parish system but most workhouses provided sick wards for inmates who fell ill and this was extended to the sick and elderly in the community.

In 1836 the combined population of the Melksham Union (comprising Melksham, Semington, Hilperton, Seend, Trowbridge and Waddington) was 18,252.

The Melksham Union Board of Guardians had plans for a new, grandiose workhouse drawn up in January 1837. A Mr. Cooper, member of the Building Committee, took the plans to London to have them checked by Messrs. Cubitt, a firm in London. Lewis Cubitt's father-in-law Henry Kendall (1776-1875), a founding member of the Institute of British Architects, thought the plans unsatisfactory and offered his own.

Kendall had previously worked for the Barracks Department of the War Office, so it is not surprising that St George's is a handsome institutional building designed to impress (and intimidate?) the poor. His plan is very similar to the Square Plan of a Workhouse (cruciform plan) prepared by Sampson Kempstone (1809-1873). The 2-storey height of part of the St George's building indicates that it was designed for less than 500, and it opened with 100 beds.

The key to the plans was separation. The Master was to look down on the yards for men, women, boys and girls, and ensure that no one tried to cross over. The greatest deterrent to the impoverished elderly was the separation of husband and wife. Kempstone had included a few rooms for married couples but this was seldom adopted.

On 7th February 1837, Mr Kendall was informed by the Guardians that "separate rooms for married paupers should not be provided, but that it would be desirable to have 2 or 3 small detached rooms in case of sickness, where a pauper might be allowed to have his wife attend upon him."

In April 1837 the tender of David Aust, Builder of Bath, for £4,953 was accepted. Messrs Hadens of Trowbridge provided the heating for £212. The Guardians raised a loan of £6,000 at 5% interest repayable in 15 years, from the North Wilts Bank, and apportioned out to the 6 parishes their share of the loan.

The building was completed at the beginning of June 1838. A Master was appointed at £85 per annum, a Medical Officer at £21 per annum, and a Chaplain at £50 per annum. The tender of John James of Melksham for porter, at a salary of £12 per annum, and his wife for schoolmistress to the workhouse children, at a salary of £8 per annum, was accepted. On June 26th 1838 the Board of Guardians met in the new workhouse.

Life in the Melksham Workhouse

On entry to the workhouse, the inmate was washed in the receiving ward; clothes were taken away, de-loused, and labelled for return when the inmate was ready to leave. Workhouse clothing tended to be of coarse material and gave the appearance of a uniform. In one workhouse, unmarried mothers were given yellow dresses to show their shame, but this practice was eventually humanely discontinued. It was not usual to supply any underwear.

A Phoebe Smith, who left the workhouse to go into service (a common fate for girls), was generously provided with 2 petticoats, a pair of stockings and a frock. A William Cox "escaped" from the workhouse with his workhouse clothes. If caught, he was to be committed to Sessions for stealing. The term "escape" used in the Minutes of 1837, changed to the milder "absconded" a year later, but the threat still remained of prison for theft.

In "Oliver Twist", despite the "less eligible" fare to be offered to inmates, Oliver is so hungry he actually asks for more gruel. It is worth taking a look at the food which was to be provided by order of the Poor Law Commission sitting in London. Whilst of a very starchy nature - bread, potatoes, flour, beer, and no green vegetables - it possibly compared reasonably with the diet of the poor in their own homes. However, whatever the Poor Law Commission laid down, much depended on the attitude of the Guardians and the honesty of the Master. There is a report of two neighbouring workhouses in Lincolnshire where the inmates of one workhouse complained that their dumplings were inferior to those served in the other. The Guardians visited, found the dumplings much superior, and took the recipe back to their own cook!

At the other extreme, the country was scandalised to hear of a workhouse in Andover where the men were so hungry because their bread ration was reduced, that they were scraping off decaying meat from animal bones they were breaking up for fertiliser. This particular work was prohibited in 1846.

In the minutes of the Melksham Board of Guardians some decisions appear not only harsh but illogical. Rhoda Hibberd, wife of George Hibberd, having a family of 4 children (the eldest a boy of 14 years old) in the receipt of 1/6d and 4 loaves per week; applied for additional relief on account of ministering to the wants and necessities of her sister Ann Axford, who resides with her and is suffering from cancer of the womb. Application refused. The Woman, Hibberd, then said she would no longer nurse her sister, whereupon the Board ordered the Relieving Officer to stop her usual relief and to remove with all care and under the superintendence of the medical officer the afflicted woman to the workhouse. So much for standing up for one's rights!

Then there was the sad case of Hannah Hayward. A Mrs Hendy of Frome offered the girl a home if the Guardians would allow her to leave in her workhouse clothes, and give Mrs Hendy 6 pence a week for her keep. The Guardians (wealthy farmers, clergymen and magistrates) agreed to the clothes but not the 6 pence, so Hannah lost her chance of a foster home.

However, we must remember that life outside the house was grim for the poor - and in some ways it was better in the house. In the workhouse, children aged 3-14 were to spend 3 hours a day learning reading, writing, arithmetic and scripture - it was 25 years before the Education Act 1870 provided education for all. In August 1871, the workhouse children were allowed to join the children of Semington School at their Annual School Treat. More humane workhouse Masters allowed the elderly to walk in the gardens once a week, and to make weekend visits to relatives. In the workhouse the poor had the services of a doctor, and St George's later added separate hospital wards.

A dishonest Master was dismissed as he had not allowed 6 women in the Sick Ward one egg a day as directed by the Medical Officer. (He also had not ensured that the male inmates attended church on Sundays so his fate was sealed).

In January 1872, the schoolmaster was brought before the Board for disobeying their order to postpone his projected holiday until after Christmas. He declared that he was looking for another situation as the Workhouse was "a Hell upon earth". After resigning, he accused the Master of drunkenness and the porter and cook of improper behaviour. The porter and the cook were dismissed, but although reprimanded, the Master stayed.

Vagrants were to be treated even less favourably than the local inmates and they paid for a night's lodging by working in the stone breaking yard. Their ward was next to the dead house and the refractory ward, which was used for solitary confinement of inmates.

At the latter end of the 19th Century, a new building of stone and concrete block truculent containing eight cubicles was provided for vagrants. These remain unchanged. Each cell has hooks on the walls where a hammock was slung and a small work area under a high window in the wall. On the slab is a metal plate on which stones were broken and a grill through which the

crushed stone was dropped down a chute. The chutes were emptied each morning by opening trap-doors on the outside face of the wall. Incredibly, these cubicles were still in use until 1947, presumably without the requirement for stone breaking! Vagrants were still calling at the mental hospital until 1953 in the hope of board and lodging for the night.

A study of the ages of the inmates of the Workhouse from the Census Returns (1851 to 1891) shows that there was a dramatic increase in the number of men and women aged 60 and over by 1891. There could be a number of reasons for this, one of which may have been the "Chamberlain Circular" of 1886, which authorised local municipal schemes of public works to relieve unemployment for the able-bodied. There can also be perceived a softening of attitudes, particularly towards the aged and infirm, over the years from 1838 to 1891. So by the turn of the century the Workhouse seemed to be functioning mainly as kind of old people's home, or long-term residential hospital, which indeed, it eventually became.

St George's Hospital

The Local Government Act 1929 swept away the Boards of Guardians and the major services transferred to County Councils. They became responsible for the workhouses and were instructed to set up Public Assistance offices. St George's continued as a workhouse and the clientele became elderly persons and those with some form of mental handicap. In 1948, the workhouse transferred to the NHS and became a hospital, the former workhouse residents staying on. It was found that some women had been resident for over 40 years, possibly placed there by their families with their illegitimate children.

St George's was never used as a general hospital. It continued to provide for the elderly infirm and those with a mental handicap.

Hospital records show that it became a very happy place run by devoted staff.

The Final Phase

The policy of "Care in the Community" led to the closure of St George's in 1988. The site remained empty until 1990, when the turn of the century building which had housed the geriatric wards, was leased to the Independent Living Centre by the Bath & District Health Authority. The former nurse's home became a day centre for people with learning difficulties.

In 1997 the government ordered the NHS to sell off all vacated hospital sites. Before St George's was put on the open market, the Independent Living Centre was given the opportunity to buy the building if £160,000 could be raised by 1 April 1999. With much local support (and no Lottery help) this was achieved.

A Developer purchased the rest of the site and buildings, and his plans for up-market, low density housing, and conversion of the workhouse into luxury flats, were welcomed by the Independent Living Centre and Semington village residents.

The Workhouse, a listed Grade II building, has been cleaned of many years of accumulated dirt and is now back to its original golden stone. The aluminium window frames have been replaced and the original door with its grill has been retained. Internally it has been converted into "luxury flats" and the stone breaking yard has been landscaped with lawn and container plants. The vagrant cells, also listed Grade II, remain.

Now renamed "St George's Court" there is a certain irony in the fact that a building erected to house the poorest in society, has become homes for society's affluent!

Appendix

The following tenders were accepted for supplying and equipping the new workhouse in January 1838:

100 iron bedsteads 12/- each
Coffins 9/- each
Children's coffins 6/- each
Cotton shirting 6d a yard
Sheeting 6 1/2d a yard
Coal £11 per ton
Mops 12d each
Scrubbing brushes 13d each
Blankets 7/- per pair
Sheets 2/3d per pair
Rugs 3/3d each
Fustian 7 3/4d per yard
Serge 9d per yard
Flannel 10d per yard
Men's shoes 6/2d per pair
Women's shoes 3/3d per pair
Children's shoes 2/- per pair
Men's stockings 14d
Women's stockings 11d
Boys stockings 10d
Handkerchiefs 6d each
Candles 6d per lb
Soap 6 3/4d per lb
200 tin plates at 7/- per dozen

Meat 5d per lb (Newmans of Melksham)
Butter 9d per lb
Tea 3/3d per lb
Cheese 5d per lb
Oatmeal 2 1/4d per lb
Bacon scraps 6d per lb
Sugar 6 1/2d per lb
Rice 2 1/4d per lb

Coffins as basic equipment reflect the Victorian obsession with death, and the probability that the destitute poor, particularly the children, died young.