

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 2016

Townlands - Henley's Workhouse

Wargrave Local History Society's May meeting was an illustrated talk by Valerie Alasia. "The poor have always been with us", Valerie commented, and the provision of ways to help them dated back to Elizabethan times, resulting in a Poor Law Act in 1601. This made it the responsibility of every parish to collect 'a competent sum' to assist the "lame, impotent, old, blind and those not able to work". Overseers of the Poor were appointed, who the poor could approach for dole, and the overseers were required to collect a 'poor rate' from those who owned land (based on the value of the property). The Act enabled the overseers to bind poor children as apprentices, to put the able bodied to work - those who were not willing to work could be "whipped on the bare back until bloody", although this was probably not done locally.

In 1652, the Henley Corporation bought 3 acres of arable land from Richard Bolt "for the use and benefit of the poor of Henley". At that time, the land was leased to local farmers, and the income used to help the poor. As the land belonged to the town, it came to be known as Townlands.

By 1727, many poor in the town could not manage to provide a roof over their heads, and so a poor house was set up in New Street. This lasted until 1790, when due to an increase in need to house the poor, a larger poor house was erected by local builder John Strange on the Townlands - the architect William Bradshaw also designed the old Henley Town Hall (now at Crazies Hill), the cost of £1200 being lent on mortgage by the owner of the Red Lion.

In charge of the new poor house was Thomas Windows - but as he seemed to be let the children out to friendly farmers, he was soon replaced by a Mr Whittaker - who in turn was dismissed for also taking advantage of his position.

The national censuses, which began in 1801, revealed an enormous growth in the country, with a consequential increase in the poor 'at the bottom of the pile'. A Royal Commission employed Edwin Chadwick to enquire into the working of the various Poor Laws, which he did with a questionnaire sent to every parish. The resultant recommendation was that workhouses be combined, and a strict regime imposed on how they should be administered - the able bodied poor were only to receive relief if they put in adequate work. The Poor Law Amendment Act was passed in 1834 to enable this to be put into effect, with rigid control by Chadwick from Somerset House, in London. The new law required parishes to merge into larger units - Henley had its own workhouse, and had to combine with other parishes from Caversham to Watlington, and Medmenham, and Remenham.(a bone of contention, being in a different county).

The purpose of the workhouse was to provide the poor with accommodation that was not as comfortable as if they were outside - ie those working on a farm would live in better conditions than those in the workhouse, providing for the indigent poor, nursing the sick and the mentally infirm (lunatic asylums not being provided until the 1860s), and acting as a "tramp house", where beggars and similar people 'on the road' who went from workhouse to workhouse and have one night's sleep. If someone became poor enough to need to be admitted to the workhouse, the whole family were taken in, and the males and females separated, and the children separated from the adults. A school was therefore set up, to train them for an occupation, such as laundry work or as a servant, so as not to be a drain on parish funds.

The workhouse was administered through a Board of Guardians, who met fortnightly in a Board Room at Townlands. Each parish provided one member, and the magistrates were also ex-officio members of the

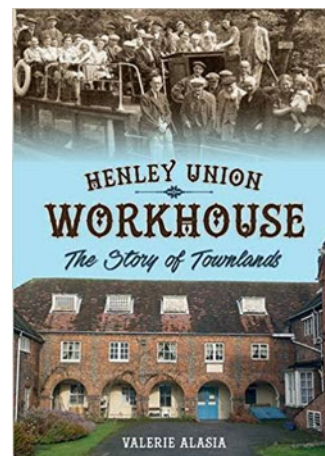
board, with Lord Camoys as the board chairman. A local solicitor acted as the clerk, and an assistant poor law commissioner attended each meeting, so ensure the business was conducted properly. Their first task was to appoint 2 relieving officers (in place of the overseers) and 2 medical officers - the Henley medical officer being required to be present at the workhouse and tend the sick, and attend to births (many being single mothers), for which he was paid 10/6d per birth. At the next meeting, attention turned to a detailed study of out relief - help given to the poor who were not within the workhouse. They might have broken a leg, got a lung infection, or in some other way become unable to support themselves and their family, or had a child needing medicine. Out relief might even ensure the provision of coffins to the poor. Edwin Chadwick had declared that such out relief should be discontinued, but that was impractical, and in Henley it never was withdrawn - many being allowed 6d a week, or a gallon of bread to 'keep them going'.

Each fortnightly meeting would also hear from the Master of the Workhouse on how he dealt with the 150 inmates - the number growing to 250 under the new law. He was responsible for housing, feeding and clothing the inmates, and had to keep accounts not only for running the house, but also for the work done by the inmates, who were given tasks such as breaking stone or picking oakum. The Master's wife would be the Matron (it being a joint appointment - when one Matron died, the Master married the assistant matron). The Matron had no formal training, and would involve the pauper women to assist her. The first Master at Henley was William Jackson, previously an overseer, and he was replaced in 1848 by Samuel Mortlock, who served until he died in 1884. The other staff were a school master and schoolmistress, and a 'house porter', whose task was ensure no unauthorised person came either in or out "keep them in but not let them in". One particular problem was dealing with vagrants - those who refused to do work in return for one night's lodging might be sent by magistrates for 7 days hard labour in Oxford jail.

Running the workhouse was not without its problems - such as nurses who were drunk on duty. The number of inmates grew to a maximum of 350 in 1851, although Samuel Mortlock's successor, John Martin, succeeded in reducing the number to 91.

The Master's accommodation had a bay-window overlooking the courtyard, so he could see what was happening, and alongside was the dining room - males and females ate separately, and were well fed. They were not allowed to communicate, except on Sundays. The separate male and female blocks had day rooms on the ground floor and dormitories above. A school was erected in 1870 for 100 pupils, although to use that capacity children were taken in from places such as Reading, Brentford and Uxbridge, at 6/6d each per week. There were also infirmaries for men and for women (although the former no longer exists. After the formation of the NHS in 1948 all workhouse infirmaries were taken over by the new organisation, that in Henley becoming Townlands Hospital. A new hospital has been recently built on part of the site - the surviving workhouse buildings are listed, and will become assisted care accommodation.

Valerie has written much more about the Henley Union Workhouse in a new book, published in late May.



The next meeting will be on Tuesday, June 14th David Williams, the Finds Liaison Officer for east Berkshire and Surrey, will tell us about some of the archaeological objects found in the area, and how these are recorded. In July, the Society will be having its visit to a place of local history interest – this year to Chawton, once Jane Austen's home.

Our meetings start at 8 pm in the meeting room at the Old Pavilion on the Recreation Ground, Wargrave. For more information, see the Society's website www.wargravehistory.org.uk/