

The Wheathampstead workhouse: a speculative history

Bankside Chambers (built in 1936 and comprising numbers 14 to 22 on the High Street) was built on the site of what was locally known as 'workhouse yard'. However the history of the Wheathampstead workhouse is not well known.



Photographs of 'Workhouse Yard' before it was demolished in 1935 show a series of buildings that dominated the middle of the High Street. Workhouse Yard appears to be made up of four small linked cottages with a larger three-storey building at the north end. Although local tradition suggest that all five buildings properties made up 'Workhouse Yard' it is likely that only the three-storey

corner building was the workhouse. The appearance of the buildings suggests that they are all wood-framed and may date back to the 18th Century or earlier.

The 24 inch series Ordnance Survey map of 1878 shows that the larger three-storey building extended back to form an 'L' shaped configuration around a yard with outbuildings. While there are still people in the village that can remember its pre-1936 name others have doubted if the workhouse was any more than local folklore. Thomas Sparrow who had once been the Chairman of Overseers of the Poor said in an interview in 1956 "Workhouse Chambers and Workhouse Yard were where the Bank is; there's no record to my knowledge of it being a real Workhouse."¹



Thomas Sparrow's scepticism may be forgiven. When he was a local overseer for the poor (by then a largely political post) the workhouse was a centralized institution operating at district level from a base in St. Albans. His version of the 'workhouse' dated back to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Small parish workhouses belonged to the earlier era of the old Poor Law. The

¹ Talking to the old inhabitants of Wheathampstead in 1956 – Daphne Grierson – 1956 – available on Wheathampstead.net

Wheathampstead workhouse had closed down nearly 100 years before the building was demolished in the mid 1930s.

The old poor law

To understand the development of the workhouse system we need to look back to the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601. This made individual parishes responsible for collecting the poor rate and providing parish relief. It was a locally based system that differed dramatically across the country. This system came under increasing pressure during the eighteenth century. "In simple cash terms poor relief expenditure rose over ten fold during the eighteenth century..."² The poor rate was raised by each individual parish. "In general about one quarter of all households paid rates and the cost to the average rate payer was ten shillings per rate, multiplied by the number of rates made in the course of the year."³ In other words when the poor rate money ran out another rate payment was declared. It is easy to see why local ratepayers were vexed by the 'burden' of the poor

Knatchbull's Act of 1723 was a response to these increasing pressures and allowed parishes to provide poor relief through workhouses. This was called 'indoor relief' as opposed to the previous system of 'outdoor relief' based on the distribution of money, food, clothing and other practical aid.

In order to receive indoor relief the pauper had to enter the workhouse and to undertake work. If they refused to enter the workhouse they were ineligible for any other relief. The new workhouse system had two advantages for the overseers of the poor. Firstly it promised to reduce costs. Secondly it addressed rising concerns that the feckless poor preferred to apply for parish relief rather than to work. The so-called 'workhouse test' meant that only those in real need would enter the workhouse because the conditions inside were harsh and the work was hard and unrewarding.

Charles Dickens summed this up in 'Oliver Twist'. His narrator said of his fictional Board of Guardians "...they established the rule, that all poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they), of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it."⁴

There was a rapid take-up of the new workhouses. "Between 1723 and 1750 600 parish workhouses were built in England and Wales as a direct result of Knatchull's Act."⁵

² Population, economy and family structure in 1851: St Albans and its region – Nigel Goose – University of Hertfordshire - 2000

³ Robert Dimsdale – 'The old poor law and medicine in and around Hertford, 1700-1834' – in "Social welfare in Hertfordshire from 1600' – ed. Steven King and Gillian Gear – University of Hertfordshire Press - 2013

⁴ Oliver Twist – Charles Dickens - 1846

⁵ Peter Higgingbotham - The workhouse – the story of an institution — 22 September 2013 - workhouses.org.uk/

These first workhouses were different from the later Union Workhouses of the mid 19th century. “.....parish workhouses were generally small establishments, and often in rented existing buildings rather than specially built premises. The running of workhouses was often handed over to a contractor who would, for an agreed price, feed and house the poor. He would also provide the inmates with work and benefit from any income generated. This system was known as 'farming' the poor.”⁶

Local developments

We do not know when the Wheathampstead workhouse opened but other parishes in the area were early adopters. The first workhouse in St. Albans district was set up in the Abbey parish shortly after the 1723 Knatchbull's Act. Soon afterwards a workhouse in the parish of St. Stephen's opened. “The workhouse in Harpenden is first mentioned in the vestry minutes of 1752.”⁷ In Sandridge a “workhouse was built to the south-west of the church in the 1770s”⁸ The Redbourn workhouse was rebuilt in 1790 according to a sign on the building that was later converted to cottages. We do not have a date for the earlier workhouse. We also know that a workhouse existed in St. Michael's parish in 1820.

Wheathampstead poor-house

We do not know when the Wheathampstead workhouse opened. Unfortunately the vestry records for Wheathampstead in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century are not available. The vestry was the lay committee of the parish. Their minutes are the most likely source of information about the workhouse because they appointed the overseers of the poor. The earliest records we have of a workhouse in Wheathampstead are a series of contracts for the running of the poor house in 1804, 1808 and 1809.⁹

Although ‘workhouse’ and ‘poor house’ are sometimes used as interchangeable titles there may have been a reason for the distinction. The use of the term ‘poor house’ came about as a result of the 1782 Gilbert Act. Under this act it was proposed that only the sick, elderly and infirm would enter the workhouse. The able-bodied poor would receive outdoor relief in their own homes. A list of the inhabitants of the Wheathampstead poor house entitled “Names of the poor”¹⁰ (tentatively dated to 1821) confirms this. Of the

⁶ Peter Higgingbotham - The workhouse – the story of an institution — 22 September 2013 - workhouses.org.uk/

⁷ Wheathamptead and Harpenden Book 4 – WEA - The History Publishing Society - 1978

⁸ *Heartswood forest, Sandridge, Herts – archaeological desk based assessment*

⁹ Held in the Hertfordshire Archive and Library Services (HALS)

¹⁰ Held in the Hertfordshire Archive and Library Services (HALS)

28 inhabitants 11 were over 60 and 10 were 15 and under. Two were in their fifties, two in their forties and there was a thirty year old and a twenty year old.

Although the three surviving contracts for the poor house are chronologically close together there are significant differences between them. The 1804 contract began on the 14th of January and Joseph Green was the contractor who was paid three shilling and sixpence per week “and the benefit of their employment” for each pauper. Additionally Joseph Green was paid £2 for any person who lived in the workhouse for the period of the contract.

By 1808 the contractor was Thomas Brown and the contract period had changed to a commencement date of the 6th of June. Why had the dates changed? Had there been problems with renewing the contract? Significantly the method of payment had also changed. The contractor was now given a fixed fee of £432 rather than a capitation fee based on the numbers of paupers. Perhaps the original capitation payments were too open-ended or expensive. Other significant changes include more guidance about taking the inventory of property at the beginning of the contract period. Significantly there was a clause that allows the overseers “free admittance into any part of the poor house to examine, and to enquire into the state and condition of the poor in the said house.” A final clause allows the overseers to stop payments if “Thomas Brown shall neglect refuse or not comply with any article or clause in this agreement.”

In 1809 the contract with Thomas Brown was renewed but the annual payment for running the workhouse had gone up to £504, an increase of £72. The start of the contract period has been delayed almost a month to the 3rd of July. Thomas Brown now had responsibility for providing outdoor relief and this may explain the increase. Perhaps the delay in implementing the new contract may be because negotiations had taken place over the changes? An additional clause requires of the contractor “that the poor be brought in decent apparel to the parish church every Sabbath day”.

The workhouse contracts changed over a comparatively short period, presumably as a result of experiences gained during the operation of the poor house. Does this suggest that the poor house was a new development in Wheathampstead and that it dates to the early nineteenth century? Perhaps the poor house opened in 1804? We cannot confirm this because there are no earlier documents available. However we do know that prior to the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act the arrangements for discharging the poor law at the parish level often saw changing local solutions. Parishes closed down workhouses and relied more on outdoor relief and vice versa. Therefore it would be unsafe to conclude that the 1804 contract suggests a start date for the establishment of the Wheathampstead poor house. The three surviving contracts may mark a time when the poor house was being re-organised and the contract revised.

Rules of the workhouse

In addition to the three contracts a 'bill poster' document also exists entitled the 'Rules for the internal government of the poor-house in the parish of Wheathampstead'. This document, dated the 3rd of November 1824, was probably intended to be openly displayed in the poor house.¹¹ It included both the rules and the "weekly bill of fare" for adults. Many of the rules relate to cleanliness, household chores, no swearing or "improper language" and a ban on bringing ale or liquor into the poor-house. It also makes clear the working hours of the inmates. "That all persons in the House able to work be called up by the ring of bell, and set to work from 6 O'Clock in the morning, till 6 in the evening, from Lady Day to Michaelmas and from daylight in the morning till such hour as the Committee may order from Michaelmas to Lady-Day."

The weekly menu varied slightly during the week but the Monday offering is representative of the other days of the week. Breakfast consisted of "1 pint and a half of milk porridge and 4oz of bread. Dinner consisted of "6oz of beef made in soup thickened with rice potatoes and 2oz of bread". Supper was "9oz of bread, 2oz of cheese and half a pint of beer, to working and deserving persons". Children under ten years were allowed two thirds of the adult ration. Interestingly inmates received meat on four days of the week and these rations may have compared well with that enjoyed by a poor person outside the workhouse.

Correspondence

The majority of documents that survive about the poor house are correspondence both to and from the overseers of the poor. While they tell us little about the day-to-day working of the poor house they do tell us a great deal about the working of the poor law and the eligibility of claimants to poor relief. Poor relief was only paid to people who were born in the parish or had lived there long enough to secure 'settlement'. For example if a farm labourer who had been born in another parish had an industrial accident and was unable to work the overseer of the poor would ask his opposite number to either arrange for the transportation of the labourer back to his original parish or to refund the cost of relief. The overseers would also contact 'absent' fathers and demand recompense if the mother and child were in the workhouse. The threat of court action is frequently mentioned in the correspondence.

Poor Law Amendment Act 1834

By the middle of the nineteenth century the rising cost of parish relief coupled

¹¹ Hertfordshire Archive and Library Service (HALS)

to the continued pre-occupation with the undeserving poor prompted calls for change. The 1832 Royal Commission and the subsequent 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act created a national system that was far harsher than its predecessor. Parishes had to join together into Poor Law Unions who were responsible for building big new workhouses that had the advantage of economies of scale. Under the new law any form of relief other than that provided by the local Poor Law Union via the workhouse was illegal. With a few exceptions the poor would have to move into the workhouse in order to receive relief. Outdoor relief was discontinued.

“Parish workhouses before 1834 usually lacked the forbidding aspects of their poor law successors. They were often constructed on a domestic scale...”¹² By contrast the conditions in the new Union workhouses were purposefully designed to be worse than the living conditions of a labourer of the lowest class. This ensured that only those in desperate need would apply. Families were split up in the workhouse. Onerous regulations were imposed on ‘inmates’ who wore uniforms and had to do hard labour. A contemporary critic Richard Oastler called the new workhouses ‘prisons for the poor’.¹³

The minutes of the new Guardian of the St. Albans Union still exist and they document the closing down of the parish workhouses including the one at Wheathampstead.¹⁴ The first meeting of the Guardians took place on the 26th May 1835. The Wheathampstead representatives were John Dorrington and John House. At their meeting on the 30th of June the Guardians assessed the number of people in the district who were receiving poor relief.

	Indoor	Outdoor
Men	100	79
Women	76	255
Children	73	70
	249	404

In June 1835 half of the people getting parish relief under the old system were receiving outdoor relief in their own homes. By imposing the ‘workhouse test’ and only providing indoor relief the Guardians were confident that the provisions of the new Poor Law Act would dramatically reduce the number of claimants.

In the short-term the Guardians decided to keep running the existing workhouses in Sandridge, St.Stephen’s and Redbourn while they investigated the building of a new purpose built workhouse.

On the 1st of August the Guardians resolved to inform the Poor Law commissioners that the workhouses of Wheathampstead, St. Peter’s,

¹² ‘The Victorian workhouse’ – Trevor May - 1998

¹³ Quoted in www.nationalarchives.gov.uk › Education › Lessons – 1834 Poor Law – 22nd February 2013

¹⁴ Hertfordshire Archive and Library Service (HALS)

Harpenden and the Abbey were “quite insufficient and useless as workhouses for the Union and to request their instruction as to the disposal of them.” The minutes of the 3rd of October confirms the decision of the Poor Law commissioners to close down the workhouses. At their meeting on the 28th November the Guardians decided to write a letter to the relevant churchwardens and overseers of all the workhouses confirming the closure and sale of premises and property. On the 5th of February 1836 the Guardians agree to build a new centralised workhouse on the existing St. Stephen’s site (later built in Oysterfields).

On the 9th of April 1836 the Guardians agree to a request from the Wheathampstead vestry “that Mr Rumball should be employed as auctioneer to sell their property.” There is no record of a precise date for the closure of the workhouse or the removal of inmates to the interim workhouses. The auction for the sale of furniture and effects at Wheathampstead workhouse took place on Wednesday the 15th June 1836. The sale raised £14.4s according to an annotated copy of the auction notice.¹⁵ The ‘property’ sold by the vestry consisted of furniture and effects and there is no mention of the premises. This strongly suggests that the workhouse building was rented and not owned. Where workhouse premises were sold (as in the case of Abbey, Redbourn and Harpenden) the sale was noted in the guardian’s minutes and this adds to the argument that the Wheathampstead workhouse was rented.

The geography of the poor house

While we do not know what the inside of the workhouse looked like the auction notice coupled with the 1808 inventory does provide clues. Both documents list the rooms and what was in them. The first ground floor room was the parlour or Governors room that contained an oak table and six chairs. Perhaps it was used for meetings. To the rear of the Governor’s room were a kitchen, pantry and small storeroom. Also there was a bedroom looking out onto the yard. On the first floor at the front of the building was the governor’s bedroom. This contained a four poster bed, a square serving table and a “pantheon’ stove. It is likely the ‘long room’ or ‘work room’ took up most of the rest of the first floor. The inventory notes that it contained a warping machine and six frames and spinning wheels. The inventory identifies 5 other bedrooms. Most of the bedrooms must have been on the second floor but there may have been a small bedroom on the first floor at the back of the building.

Significantly the auction notice and the 1808 inventory make no mention of the four adjoining cottages. This suggests that the poor house consisted of only the three-storey building and not the four cottages that have been associated with it. These four small cottages have been described by local folklore as almshouses but there is no evidence to support this.

¹⁵ Annotated auction notice in the Hertfordshire Archive and Library Service (HALS)

What happened to Workhouse Yard?

Thirteen years after the workhouse had closed down the 1851 census lists eight households and 24 people as living in 'workhouse yard'.¹⁶

Name	Relation	Married?	Age	Occupation
John Poulter	Head	Widower	35	Agricultural labourer
Caroline Poulter	Daughter		6	At home
Lucy Poulter	Daughter		5	
James Poulter	Father	Married	71	Tailor
Jane Poulter	Mother	Married	73	
William Stredder	Head	Widower	54	Agricultural labourer
William Morgan	Head	Married	53	Agricultural labourer
Margaret Morgan	Wife	Married	49	
William Pixley	Lodger	Widower	42	Agricultural labourer
Sarah Pixley	Lodger's daughter		12	Scholar
William Pixley	Lodger's son		11	Scholar
George Pixley	Lodger's son		8	Scholar
Henry Smith	Head	Married	48	Agricultural labourer
Sarah Smith	Wife	Married	49	
Mary Smith	Daughter	Unmarried	18	Straw plaiter
George Smith	Son	Unmarried	15	Agricultural labourer
Charlotte Smith	Lodger		2	
James Johnson	Head	Unmarried	37	Boot & shoemaker employing 2 workers
Thomas Seabrook	Apprentice	Unmarried	16	Apprentice
Edmund Lee	Lodger	Unmarried	27	Journeyman shoemaker
Thomas Pearman	Head	Married	59	Agricultural labourer
Sarah Pearman	Wife	Married	52	
Elizabeth Mowbray	Head	Unmarried	46	Dressmaker
Mary Edmonds	Head	Unmarried	77	Annuitant

The workhouse appears to have been converted into separate units. The occupants are clearly not 'paupers'. For example James Johnson the boot and shoemaker employs two workers.

Although it is possible that eight households were crammed into the old workhouse another explanation could be that the census enumerator included the workhouse and the adjoining four cottages into the address 'workhouse yard'. This is what may have created the local tradition that the workhouse was made up of the three-storey building and the adjoining four cottages.

After the 1851 census the address of 'workhouse yard' disappears. In later census the buildings that made up 'workhouse yard' are presumably included in the High Street.

¹⁶ Population, economy and family structure in 1851: St Albans and its region – Nigel Goose – University of Hertfordshire - 2000

What happened to the inmates of the parish workhouse who were moved to the new Union workhouse in the late 1830s? We do not know. The 1881 census does however give us some idea of the number of people from Wheathampstead who were in the St.Albans workhouse.¹⁷

Name	Age	Married?	Occupation/ condition
William Crawley	68	Unmarried	Agricultural labourer
Harriet Edmonds	37	Unmarried	Imbecile
Sarah Edmonds	50	Unmarried	Imbecile
William Edmonds	63	Unmarried	Agricultural labourer
William George	46	Unmarried	Agricultural labourer
Joseph Halsley	61	Unmarried	Agricultural labourer
William Hollingsworth	71	Widower	Agricultural labourer
Arthus Nichols	15	Unmarried	Agricultural labourer
Sarah Stone	11	Unmarried	Scholar
Emma Wheel	43	Unmarried	

There were 10 people from Wheathampstead in the St. Albans Union workhouse out of a total number of inmates of 185. Considering that the population of Wheathampstead at this time was around 2000 the low number of inmates clearly demonstrates how effective the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act had been in reducing the number of people who could claim relief. It is salutary to reflect that when the new Guardians of the Poor took over in the middle of 1835 the number of paupers in the district who were receiving either indoor or outdoor relief was 653. By 1881, despite considerable population increase, this had been reduced to 185 inmates in the Union workhouse in St.Albans.

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¹⁷ www.workhouses.org.uk/StAlbans – 22nd February 2013