

THE ELHAM UNION WORKHOUSE AND THE POOR LAW

Nearly every village and town owned some kind of building where poor, aged infirm or invalid people worked or lived. Indeed, the Elizabethan Poor Law demanded that some habitation and work be provided by the Vestry or its equivalent authority in every place. Many villages rented or built a poor-house and not a few erected hovels on the common for the use of pauper families.

The Elizabethan Poor Law of 1597 - 1601 was designed for a rural population of some 4 million but needed to be adapted by 1834 for the 9 - 14 million population of that time which might have call on poor relief. With the 2000 Acts of enclosure at the time of the Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, the loss of common rights increased the hardship of the expanding rural population. The Elizabethan or Old Poor Law had divided the poverty stricken into three categories: the 'able bodied' poor who could not find employment and who were to have work provided for them; the rouges, vagabonds and sturdy beggars who were to be whipped or otherwise punished for their disinclination to work; and the 'impotent' poor (the old, sick or handicapped) who were to be relieved in almshouses. This complex administrative task was entrusted to some 15,000 parishes, each of which appointed overseers as administrators and levied a poor rate to finance relief.

In 1723, Knatchbull's General Workhouse Act was passed which enabled single parishes to erect a workhouse so that they could enforce labour on the able bodied poor in return for relief. Of the 2000 erected, typically each held only 20 to 50 inmates. Because of the high cost of administration of these workhouses and the social pressure for more sympathetic treatment of the poor, Gilberts Act of 1782 enabled parishes to combine into unions. This provided for the unemployed able-bodied first to be given outdoor relief and then with employment, while indoor relief in poor houses was confined to caring for the old, sick, infirm and their dependent children.

Sir Charles Igglesden in his Saunters through Kent of 1901 described a a low one-storeyed building bearing a tablet on which was inscribed the date " A. D. 1830 " near 'Bedingfield' in the High Street which was the old workhouse and by which it was still known. The workhouse was built through the liberality of a lady, who intended it to be not a workhouse but a home for the aged poor. The persons in charge of of the 'poorhouse' were a man and his wife who, in return for looking after the inmates, lived in the place rent free. The building was lost with the flying bomb in 1944.

Hasted in 1799 described an "almshouse consisting of two dwellings, the donor of it to the parish unknown". The property known locally as 'Lollipop' in Canterbury Road for its 'L' & 'P' over the door on its tie beams is believed to have been this almshouse for it was described as such in the 1812 tithe award. The L P was then in the occupation of the Rector, Ralph Price, which further suggests its parish connections.

Hasted also says that "the poor constantly maintained are about fifty, casually 30 ",

Many bequests and local benefactors left money or land yielding an income for the benefit of the poor. Timothy Bedingfield in his will of 1691 left land for the maintenance of poor children in the parishes of Lyminge, Smeeth and Dymchurch and also for two women of each parish annually.

David Spycer in a will of 1558 devised a sum annually for the poor. Often land was bequeathed for 'the specific purpose of providing relief. A plot of land off the The Street (now the High Street) was known as 'Shoe Land' where no doubt the income was used to provide shoes and other things for the poor.

A Royal Commission on the Poor Laws criticised the rating system as being

"in the highest degree uncertain and capricious" (things don't change I) and condemned the unfair use of the Old rating system and of rating exemptions.

This resulted in the passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834*

In 1836 the new Elham Workhouse opened at Each End Hill (Etchinghill)

where the paupers of the 20 parishes which comprised the Elham Union were to find their new home. They were leaving their friends and relations their villages and towns and cosy little poorhouses for the bare brick walls and stone floors and long corridors of the new establishment. Sums of money except on a purely temporary basis were no longer to be distributed.

Instead "every member of a family claiming relief must enter the workhouse and give up their goods and chattels of every description to the officers of the Union". And to prevent this being the soft option "the parish must be their last instead of their first resource: it must be a hard taskmaster and worst paymaster in the district". Husbands were separated from their wives, save for half an hour on Sunday, and mothers from their children. Every able bodied pauper in the land was to rise at the same time and be fed on one of the six suggested dietaries. The gathering of paupers at Etchinghill comprise 64 men, 28 women, 38 children and 7 lunatics.

Two acres of land had been bought for £120 and the house with room for 300 inmates costing £4500 was built and occupied. The old small poorhouses were sold off.

The governors of the workhouse were the elected Board of Guardians who met weekly at the old Coach and Horses public house in Lyminge. These were mostly the county magistrates and country gentlemen from parishes comprising the Union which were;

Acrise	Newington
Cheriton	Paddlesworth
Elham	Postling
Elmstead	Saltwood
Folkestone	Sellinge
Hawkinge	Standford
Hythe	Stelling
Lyminge	Stowting
Lympne	Swingfield
Monks Horton	Sandgate

In 1841 a building was erected for the reception of vagrants. They were few in numbers at first and could be put to picking Oakum or breaking stone. The clerk faithfully compiled the minute book and letter book. Occasionally an item of human interest appears. Mr Tyson (the medical man) examined Sophia Clapstone who was pregnant. The Master, Mr Chubb tendered his resignation as it appeared his son was the father. He was persuaded to stay on and 6 months later " Sophia Clapstone had a child, deceased. To funeral expenses 14/3d ".

But times changed and in the twentieth century "the poor" ceased to be regarded as a race apart from the rest of society. The children were freed from their uniform of corduroy and pearl buttons and the old ladies from their black coal scuttle bonnets. The children were housed in cottage homes and went to ordinary schools. Old age pensions meant that only the infirm need enter the workhouse to end their days. Finally in 1930 all duties formally appertaining to the workhouse authorities were transferred to the County Councils. The old workhouse building is no longer the bleak building it used to be and now forms the basis of St Marys Hospital, a pleasant home for the elderly.