



THE BATTLE UNION WORKHOUSE

1840-1930



Battle Union Workhouse in the early 1900's, by kind permission of East Sussex County Council. ESRO Ref C/A5/1-2 3

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the history of the Battle Union Workhouse – “The Stone House” as it was called locally - in North Trade Road 1840- 1930.

This is a story of tough social conditions and rigid moral attitudes in Victorian England. There were episodes of turbulence, for example about the “dietary”; corporal punishment; and medical care.

But the local Board of Guardians tried to run the workhouse carefully within a massive central bureaucracy for the Poor Law. They did well in integrating education, employment and welfare services for individuals in poor families. The management was done by a married couple known as the Master and Matron- the workhouse had its fair share of what today would be called “employment issues”!

By the 1880's many of the workhouses were developing into care homes for the ill and elderly, which is what they largely became after the 1914-18 War. By 1911 the focus towards personal care had shifted markedly in line with national trends and the increasing proportion among inmates of elderly and infirm, long stay residents. So by 1930, when this workhouse, along with all others, was transferred to the local authority and became a public assistance institution, the transition to the Battle workhouse becoming a geriatric hospital (formalized in the creation of the NHS in 1948) had in effect already happened. The hospital

closed in 1998 despite local protest and the building became residential in 2000. We have left to others the recording of these last two chapters in the life of Frederick Thatcher Place.

Many aspects of the workhouse's history are unsolved or unclear. For example the detailed plans of 1840 are lost. We have possibly controversial suspicions about the start of the new workhouse.

WORKHOUSES AND THE CAUSES OF POVERTY

The story of how to deal with the poor in East Sussex goes back to the fourteenth century which saw the first legislation aimed at discouraging the able bodied poor from begging. The Dissolution of the monasteries in 1538, badly disrupted one of the main ways of caring for the poor: the role of religious houses and orders in giving alms and accommodation. The closing of monasteries and expulsion of nursing orders and confiscation of their lands and wealth resulted in closing of hospitals, old people's homes, wayfarers' lodgings and reduced the scale of distribution of alms to the poor. But there were many social developments from the time of the Dissolution which directly or indirectly contributed to rural poverty in East Sussex. Enclosure of many parts for pasture resulted in the destruction of homes and depopulation. Then it has to be remembered that the coastal areas of East Sussex were in great distress in 16th century. The once busy ship yards of Rye, Hastings and Winchelsea were idle; plague, storms, flux and re-flux of sea played their part. Other factors were the French raids; sometimes there were too many continental refugees. Embargoes on former exports of wool, chalk, timber, were damaging. In the 18th Century, the steady decline of the iron industry and related trades turned prosperous mid Sussex into a poor land, and through the 19th century agricultural workers in Sussex suffered in the general depression. Even increasing literacy created anew divisive class barrier

As a response to these developments, poorhouses and a new system of dealing with the poor, came into being from the sixteenth century. The first workhouses were in Abingdon (1631) and Bristol (1695). The elderly had to work until they died unless they could afford to support themselves by other means or had a family to do so. Failing that they went into the local workhouse. Everything rested on the local parish dealing with its poor. This system was enshrined in 1601 legislation (which does not mention workhouses but envisages arrangements for the poor to do useful work) and then was adjusted from time to time but essentially lasted until the 1830's. In 1723 the Test Act ("Knatchbull") offered parishes the option of denying relief to the poor and enforcing the workhouse on claimants: ten years later some 700 workhouses were in operation. 1795 saw another important development with the introduction of the Speenhamland system (invented at the Pelican Inn, Speenhamland, Berks). This system, brought in, among other reasons, due to high grain prices, supplemented low agricultural wages through means testing but the rate payers resented subsidising farmers - who tended to set wages low in expectation of the supplement. This prompted the parishes to minimise costs through growth of workhouses.

The immediate background to the Battle Union workhouse is a Royal Commission which was set up in 1832 to investigate the longstanding problems of how to deal with the poor. Arising from the Royal Commission, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 took poor relief from the parish and put it in the hands of salaried officers employed by new "Unions" of multiple parishes. To some extent this recognised changes in the economy with increased industrialisation and urbanisation. Increasing population was another factor, making it hard for localised poor arrangements to cope. But there were also moral overtones. The new Act was designed to combat the evils of rural destitution by encouraging, if necessary in a brutal way, migration away from areas where employment did not offer a living minimal wage for a family. To do away with what was seen as tax-supported irresponsible breeding, Parliament in 1834 decreed the limitation of outdoor relief to those who were unable to work because of age or infirmity and directed that, in general, able-bodied paupers and their families be sent to workhouses. The workhouses were conducted on the assumption, widespread among the middle class, that poverty was the result of laziness alone, and we shall see that the Battle Union workhouse was no exception. Broadly the idea was to make the workhouse so unattractive that the poor would be forced to find work outside rather than submit to the semi-starvation and indignities.

The main milestones in implementation of the 1834 Act were:

1834 Poor Law Commission created to set up the new system. The centrally created rules and procedures were vast, covering the minutest details of how the workhouses were to be run. Almost from the start there is the sense of the Battle Union Guardians struggling against this central micro-management.

1847 Poor Law Board created for overall supervision of 636 workhouses.

1871 Local Government Board created as successor body. Soon after workhouses were called "institutions"

1909 Royal Commission on the Poor Law recommends transfer of responsibility from the Unions to Borough and County authorities.

1929 These proposals eventually adopted. By this stage it was realised that poverty had to be dealt with on a national as well as local level.

1948 Establishment of the NHS

1990 National Health Service and Community Care Act separated care for health reasons from care for social reasons, a dual role at the centre of the Poor Law concept since 1834.

THE OLD WORKHOUSE AND START OF THE NEW ONE

The old Battle poorhouse and workhouse had two sites in Battle. In 1718 Langton House (now the Memorial Hall?) became the Battle poorhouse for a few years; and was the workhouse in the period 1805-29. During the eighteenth century many poorhouses became workhouses as the idea caught on that this could save money off the poor rate. It appears

that either concurrently or consecutively with Langton House, the workhouse was sited in the Lower Lake area of Battle, near what is now the Senlac Hotel (formerly Railway Hotel) and on that side of the road . It may have adjoined a property called St Mary's Cross. The old workhouse was opposite the old tannery, now Tesco's Express and petrol station. At that time the elderly were sent to Catsfield workhouse and the children to Bexhill: lucky for them because the tannery smell and effluent were odious. The Cresy Report - on public health in the town - showed in 1850 that that part of Battle was insanitary and infested with typhus.

The idea of the new Union – created on Friday 12 June 1835 - was to bring all the accommodation for the poor in the area together. The Battle Union comprised: Ashburnham, Bexhill, Brightling, Catsfield, Crowhurst, Dallington, Ewhurst, Hollington, Mountfield, Penhurst, Sedlescombe, Westfield and Whatlington. The old workhouse was sold off and converted into tenements.

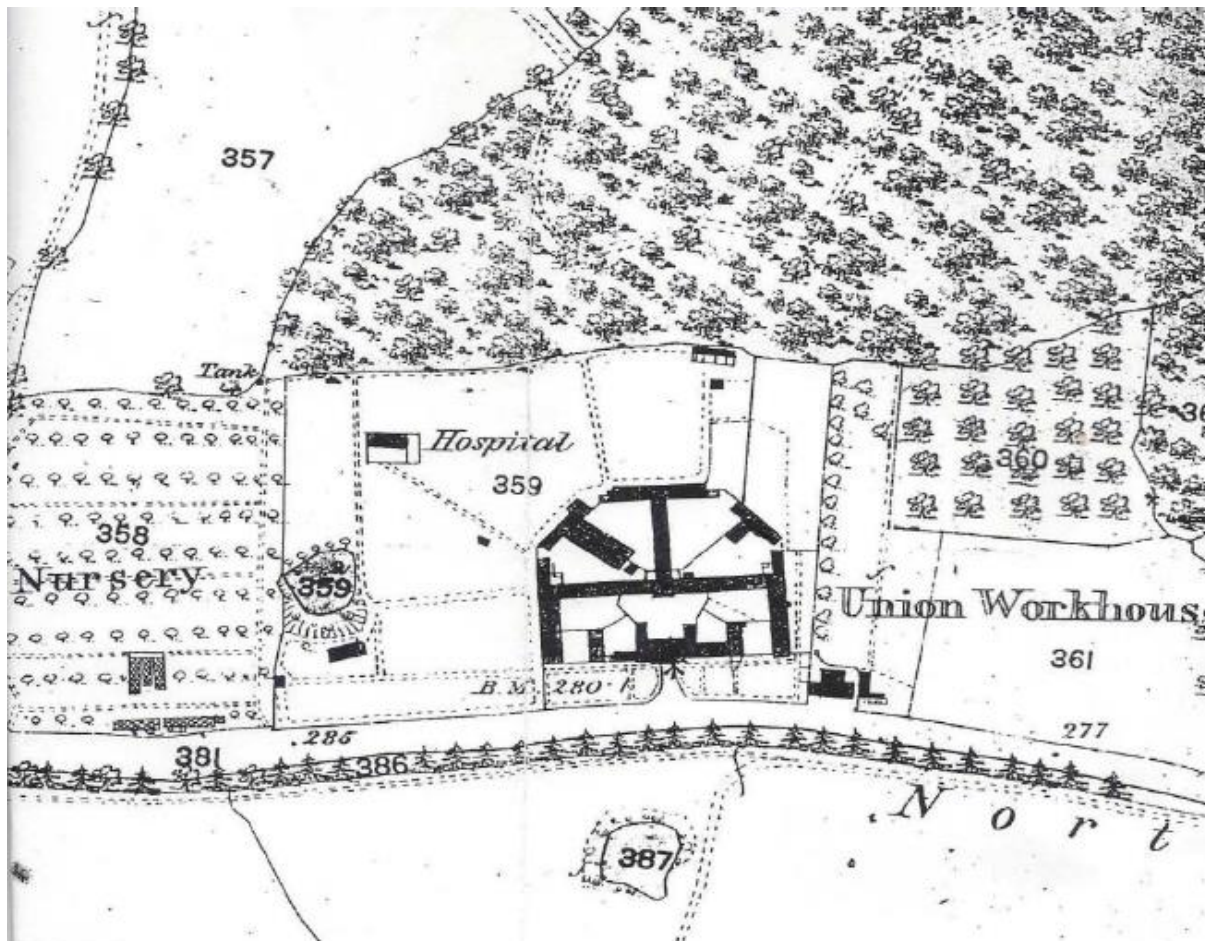
Start of the “new” workhouse

In 1840 the Guardians decided to build a new workhouse on North Trade Road. They did so on the basis of a report from Thomas Ticehurst, their Clerk, about the costs of repairing the 4 buildings which they then owned. In essence the costs of repair would be the equivalent of, or exceed, the cost of building a new workhouse. Agreeing this turned out to be the easy bit: finding a suitable site for the new building proved altogether more difficult.

Controversy accompanied the choice of site: there was a choice between the land offered by a Mr Knight (which is where the workhouse was in due course built) and that offered by the local doctors, the Watts family. Mr Knight's land was chosen despite opposition from the neighbouring Lady Webster, who was at one stage told by the Board of Guardians to stop interfering in their affairs. She may have been motivated by a “ not in my back yard” anxiety ; but the investigation which Lord Ashburnham's land agent did for her suggested that one of the Guardians may have had an undeclared financial interest in Mr Knight's land. In the papers at East Sussex Record Office is an indenture which suggests the proceeds of the land sale enabled Mr Knight to pay off a debt owed to Mr Grace, who was on the Board of Guardians, but there is no record of this in the minutes. We found a receipt signed by Mr Grace on a grubby piece of brown paper, in a dossier compiled by Lord Ashburnham land agent, Ellman. Did the other Guardians know this? It has not been possible to find out the precise location of the Watts site: there were at least 27 parcels of land in Battle owned by the family, so we do not know which of the two sites was the better. A further factor was that the Fuller family was for some reason, strongly in favour of the workhouse being on the Knight land.

Once they had chosen their land, the Guardians moved quickly. Work began in 5 weeks and built with remarkable speed: the building was opened on 13 November 1840. The cost is not transparent in the Guardian minutes of the time: tenders were let on the assumption that the cost would be £6350 ; the tenders ranged from £7152 to £9500. The buildings were built to accommodate 440 inmates but the numbers seldom reached anything like this, peaking

at around 300 - 350 in 1851 and declining to around 135 by 1881. . As shown below, in his design Frederick Thatcher the architect unusually combined the square and hexagonal models recommended by the Poor Law Commission in 1835, adopting the minimalist Tudor gothic style popular at the time. There was a T shaped accommodation block in the centre, with an octagonal supervisory hub in the centre, visible to the right hand side of the cover photo. From this vantage point it was said, the Master of the workhouse could see the inmates if they tried to escape. The Battle workhouse is one of the few examples of Frederick Thatcher’s work in Britain – he left in 1843 to spend most of his life in New Zealand.



By kind permission of East Sussex Record Office

WHAT IT WAS LIKE IN THE WORKHOUSE

Let us imagine that you are a time-traveller visiting the Battle Union Workhouse in the 1870’s – until 1842 it’s unlikely you could have visited an inmate at all.

Walking along North Trade Road from Battle towards the workhouse (or “spike” as you may have heard it called), you see some people hiding things in the bushes : they are about to register as inmates and do not want the authorities to take their valuables towards the cost of their keep. Running past, you might see a couple of inmates trying to get away,

conspicuous in their brown and grey clothes. If caught they'll be sentenced to a couple of months' hard labour at Lewes Gaol. If you're early enough in the morning you'll see the workhouse children, with their short haircuts, walking in formation down the road to the Langton School'



By kind permission of Ken Jolly

As you get nearer there's the workhouse's pleasant market garden on the right with apple trees, where the Sunnyside development now is. This is used to supplement the restricted diet of the inmates and the surplus is sold locally.

As you reach the gatehouse, you'll be struck by the smell, the smoke and the noise. There's a large piggery at the back, to start with – in 1878 six hogs were sold to Ben Christmas, a Battle butcher, and that seems to have been the number in most years. The "Dickens" chimneys characteristic of this workhouse would have been belching smoke: around 200 – 250 tons of coal a year was brought up in wagons from Battle railway station for the workhouse. The thumping you hear is from the machines used by the inmates – particularly the vagrants – for grinding stones into bits small enough to be put on the roads. Half a ton a day is your target if you want to be fed. That's what the piles of local stone are for, that you can see in the first courtyard. A noise you probably cannot hear is the rustling of the female inmates picking oakham – tarred rope which has become frayed and unusable unless someone pulls it apart so it can be reused to caulk ships. Two pounds a day is the target there. This should not be a problem- you've been up since 5.45 am and will work until you finish. You'll also probably see the steam from the laundry and doubtless smell it. Another delightful smell will be from the earth closets used until the early twentieth century, when standards of bathing and sanitary provision began to be taken seriously. Waste until then drained down the slope into Kelk Wood with, of course, "proper filtration" as the Guardian

minutes put it. But in the context of the time Battle was pretty filthy as identified by the 1850 Cresy Report.

As you near the gatehouse, take care to step over the corpse – the workhouse has a mortuary (now part of No 1) but will only take in a body if it's an inmate, as illustrated in 1892 when the Guardians confirmed that the Master acted correctly in leaving a body in the road. At the gatehouse door – there are no remains or photographs of it today but the iron door supports remain– you'll be asked by the Porter what your business is. If you look as though you're sick, you'll be turned away. If you're looking for the Master or the Matron, you'll probably find them on the ground floor of the 3 storied section in front of the gatehouse, now No 8. You may have to wait a little as the Master spends a lot of time on the top floor of this block, keeping an eye on what's going on, especially for inmates who decide to make a break for it.

You may have been expecting a very crowded workhouse but this building, although built for 440, had little more than 100 inmates for most of its life, in stark contrast to some of the larger workhouses, such as the grim Liverpool workhouse which had 4000. Even so Ken Jolly's photograph shows how grim the Battle buildings would have looked. Inside the conditions are tough as well. As an innovation the internal walls were whitewashed in the 1870's. Meals were taken in silence; men and women were segregated at all times; and walks outside appear to have been prohibited or severely restricted, at least until 1908. Visits to the town were not allowed. Those with learning difficulties and those who were mad were put together and had a separate ward. The impression of the inmates would have been mainly of young people in the 1840's and 50's, then increasingly towards 1900 the inmates were elderly people : when the workhouse system ended in 1930 , the Battle workhouse was re-designated as an old people's hospital but it had in effect become that several decades before.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 which set up the workhouses was accompanied by a large range of detailed regulations about how these institutions were to be run. This applied to the food as well: a large manual from the Poor Law Commission – it would be called a quango today- specified what food was to be provided, when , what quantity, and how. The Oliver Twist story of a boy being refused when asking for more food, illustrates not just the harshness of the workhouse system as Dickens intended (there were some cases of maltreatment, shocking even in those days) , but also its inflexibility: the Master may have thought the Poor Law dietary prevented him allocating an extra portion. . Local discretion about portions for an individual inmate was dependent on the authority of the Medical Officer. Diet was minimal as part of the punishment for needing poor law help and to discourage admission to the workhouse by those capable of working. .

Your visit, by the way, is sadly too early to sample a fish dinner – that was not substituted for the bread and cheese dinner on Thursdays until 1884, and even then only by direction of the Local Government Board which by then had taken over the function of the Poor Law Commission. In 1886 the meals in Battle Union Workhouse consisted of: 6 oz bread and 1

1/2 pints of porridge for breakfast; meat or meat pudding with vegetables for dinner; and 2 oz bread and cheese for supper. Meat or meat pudding was not served every day, with bread and cheese or bread and soup on roughly three days of the week. The pea soup seems thin- a gallon contained 1 ½ pints of split peas; and 6oz mixed vegetables plus the skins from legs of beef. The tea sounds thin as well: 2 oz tea to the gallon. The detail of the Poor Law dietary is illustrated below.

The diet was particularly harsh for “casual male paupers”, the cost of whose stay was hard to get a parish to pay for. Even as late as 1905 the Guardians instructed the Master to reduce the breakfast serving for this group. Instead of 8 oz bread there was to be 6; the allowance of gruel or broth remained at one pint.

The diet at the Battle workhouse was minimal for many years and designed to make the point: “you shouldn’t be here”. On 22 December 1837, showing true Christmas spirit, the Guardians decided that “ no holidays should be granted this Christmas to any of the inmates of Battle workhouse and that such of them as have signed a paper complaining of their food, shall on Christmas Day have the usual dinner specified for Mondays in the Bill of Fare”. In 1868 the Guardians voted to continue the ban on small gifts such as tea and cake, to the inmates. In 1886 the Medical Officer, Mr Davison, came in for heavy criticism for allowing those in the sick ward too much eggs and milk. An inspection committee of 1895 including local philanthropist Mrs Egerton, recommended improvements, such as each inmate having their own tea and sugar and a clean plate at each meal. Perhaps the substitution of currant bread for cake in 1907 came from a concern about fruit intake! But by 1922 attitudes to the workhouse dietary had certainly softened: in that year an extra evening meal was introduced, of 4 oz cake or bread, 1 oz cheese and ½ pint of Oxo!

543
25 December 1893
Table No 5
Dietaries for the Able-bodied

	Breakfast			Dinner							
	Bread	Tea	Sugar	Meat	Vegetables	Broth	Cheese	Butter	Soup	Gravy	Wine
	oz	oz	oz	oz	oz	oz	oz	oz	oz	oz	oz
Men	6	1	1 1/2 pt	5	1/2						
Women	5	1	1 1/2 pt	5	1/2						
Men	6	1	1 1/2 pt			6	2				
Women	5	1	1 1/2 pt			6	1 1/2				
Men	6	1	1 1/2 pt		1/2				1/2		
Women	5	1	1 1/2 pt		1/2				1/2		
Men	6 1/2	1	1 1/2 pt			4				1/2	
Women	5 1/2	1	1 1/2 pt			4				1/2	

any or more in lieu of Butter and Cheese and Eggs at discretion of Medical Officer

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However drinks – or “stimulants” as successive Medical Officers called them - seemed to have been liberally supplied, at least as far as the Guardians were concerned. Frequent

orders for amounts such as 30 gallons of gin , a quarter of a cask of brandy, and a hogshead of port, caused particularly adverse comment from the Guardians, who were not however above spending in 1861 £106 on 240 bottles of decent wine for themselves. The Guardians opposed the licence of a beer shop near the workhouse. From 1892 one ounce of tobacco a week was permitted for men aged over 60 in the workhouse, and snuff for the women of similar age. In that year, a beer allowance was given to inmates involved in cleaning the piggery, the earth closets and the drains. It seems that successive Medical Officers applied the principle summarised by one of them in 1902 about supply of alcohol to inmates:” they found those people drooping for want of it but when allowed they perked up and got better.”

At the end of the day as an inmate you would have gone to bed in an iron bedstead : at Battle workhouse the Guardians preferred these to the “trusses” recommended by the Poor Law Board – wooden coffin shaped structures which could be wedged together to save space.

Were your stay at the workhouse long enough you might have gone to the occasional entertainment laid on by one of the leading families in Battle, usually the Egertons and their relatives the Brasseys . These are seldom mentioned in the early minutes of the Guardians, but by 1880 we find that Mrs Brassey provides Christmas dinner for the workhouse- we are not told whether she came in person. In 1898 Mr Lamborn provided a photographic exhibition for the inmates and his wife loaned a piano forte for a concert. In 1902 , visits out were becoming common, for example in the form of the inmates going to Battle Flower Show in Battle Abbey at the invitation of the Show Committee. For the Coronation in 1811, child inmates were invited to tea and sports in Battle. An extra allowance of tea was provided for the female inmates and extra tobacco for the men. In 1912 we find Lady Webster organising cars to take to attend a play at the Church Hall in Battle. In 1925 there was a visit, organised by Mrs Hecks of Kingsland North Trade Road, and by Countess Brassey, to the Towers Hotel.

THE STORY OF THE WORKHOUSE 1840- 1930

Over some 95 years the Guardians worked conscientiously to implement the Poor Law Amendment Act locally. They rapidly established procedures and policies. Toughness about not encouraging idleness among the poor and segregating the sexes in the workhouse, was balanced by care in integrating social, income and educational support for poor families.

Role and philosophy of the Board

Right at the outset the Guardians set out their philosophy for running the workhouse, very much in line with the thinking behind the Poor Law Amendment Act and, one might think, post-Thatcher Britain: “administering relief to the poor by any scale or rule regulated by the number of their children is wrong in principlesuch mode of administering relief does away with one of the strongest inducements to exertion on the part of the parents.” The Guardians also decide against creating “parish work...for surplus hands” as that would

discourage people from looking for work. The priority, they remind themselves, is funding for the aged and infirm, not the idle or profligate. Claimants presenting themselves at the workhouse door or seeking outdoor relief must provide a “statement of their earnings and income from any source.”

Judging from their minutes, the role of the BUW Board of Guardians appears to have been:

- ☐ Reviewing the financial results – of the workhouse, and of the proceeds from the poor rate , taking action where necessary to retrieve costs from parishes held responsible for an inmate
- ☐ Dealing with managerial issues as they cropped up, such as complaints, conveyancing and legal matters
- ☐ Approving admission of inmates
- ☐ Approving arrangements for tendering : relative to a small town like Battle the workhouse had huge requirements for fuel and food, with major contracts at stake.
- ☐ References to the magistrates , most commonly when seeking reimbursement for stolen workhouse clothes; and when retrieving from the alleged father the cost of illegitimate children born to inmates of the workhouse
- ☐ Ensuring adequate arrangements for orphans , including checking possible schools, possible employers, and identifying the best apprenticeships.

Poor Law response and development

Throughout their work the Battle Guardians always bore in mind the pressure of the poor rate on the taxpayers, even before the new workhouse was established. On 24 July 1835 the Board of Guardians at their regular meeting were besieged by a large number of protesting labourers. A petition was presented. Even tougher protest action had been taken against Mr T Barham, an unpopular Overseer (of poor relief and poor law requirements) at Ewhurst, who had been chased out of the village. The Poor Law Amendment Act – which through the workhouse the Battle Guardians were implementing - was deeply divisive at the time. The Act forced many paupers into workhouses away from their own villages where poor relief had previously been administered locally ; and then, when they got to the workhouse, the Act forced husbands and wives to live apart as all the accommodation was segregated. The petition sought reversal of these policies although in truth the workhouse system was so tightly regulated through th Act, that this was impossible. The Board was not impressed with the protest – outside the George Hotel where they held their meetings - and decided that they “would not in future hold any communications with persons who are assembled illegally.”

The need to encourage employment of paupers was uppermost in the Guardians’ minds, as for example in 1880 when they wrote to the Privy Council arguing that the Elementary Education Acts 1870 -76 had badly damaged local employment prospects:

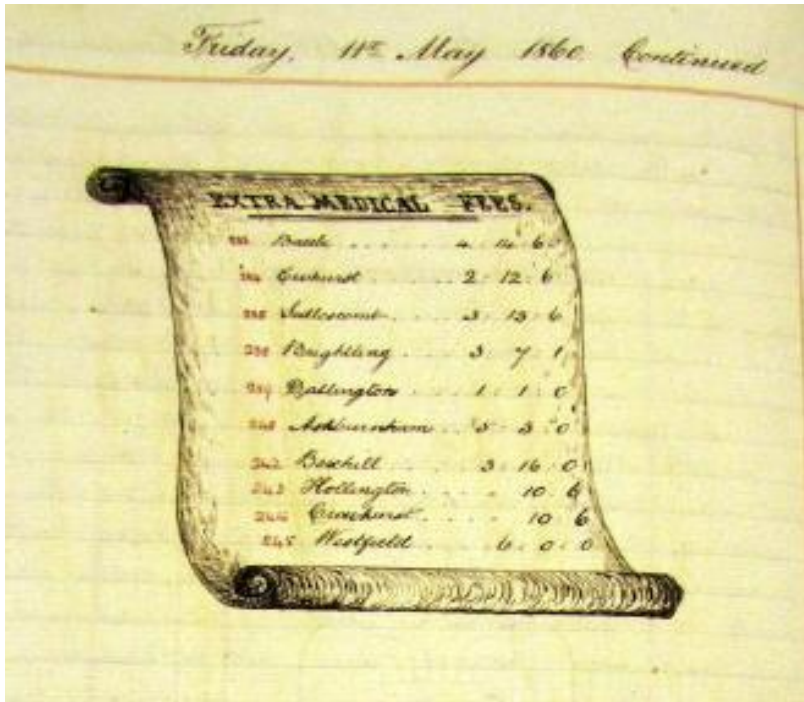
“ it is all but an impossibility (notwithstanding the rise that had taken place of late years in the rate of wages) for a labouring man, especially an agricultural labourer with children, to provide a bare subsistence for his family by his own wages alone, and to such a man it appears nothing less than an injustice that he should be deprived of the wages which his children between the ages of 12 and 14 would be able to earn if allowed to work; a deprivation which your Memorialists believe can be seldom compensated for by any increased knowledge (generally useless in after life to persons in this position) which such children having attended school from 5 years of age are likely to acquire, especially when it is borne in mind that medical opinion strongly inclines to the belief that irreparable injury is frequently occasioned to delicate children of this age from continued mental application when they are ...insufficiently provided with bodily nourishment.” The Guardians go on to say that much of the job of keeping land in order can “ be done better by children than by adults and in consequence of the operation of the said Acts much necessary work has to be left undone , especially the eradication of pernicious weedsThe foul condition of land throughout the country during the last two or three years must make evident even to the most casual observer, the great loss which the Agricultural Interest has already sustained from the impossibility of obtaining sufficient juvenile labour”.

Even as late as 1893 they urged on the government of the day the need to remove from local ratepayers the burden of paying for the destitute poor in rural areas , and transfer the burden to general taxation. The Guardians returned to the same theme in 1907, passing the resolution:

“That the present system of the provision of Vagrant Wards at Union Workhouses and the feeding and care of vagrants therein by Boards of Guardians be abolished. That, with the view to uniformity, the entire control and care of such persons be placed in the hands of the Police Authorities with the further suggestion that Institutions be provided in each County or other convenient area, such Institutions to be maintained by the County with grants from the imperial exchequer and that powers be given to justices at Petty Sessions to order the removal thereto and detention therein for limited periods of those who prove themselves to be habitual vagrants”

Medical care

The Guardians did their best to tackle the many medical problems, not the least of which were the fees (illustration). The main concerns were insanitary conditions, especially in washing facilities and the laundry. In 1867 the Poor Law Board inspector condemned the workhouse arrangements for the care of the sick, and the Board asked that steps the Guardians intended to take “to remedy the evil mentioned by the Inspector”.



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Estimates were called for and presumably the work was done because there is no further mention of it in the Guardian minutes for that period. In 1888 an inmate, Jane Hilder, died from carbon monoxide poisoning in the laundry: the subsequent coroner's inquiry blamed a stove flue venting into the laundry. The stove was replaced by a fireplace; the Guardians seemed lucky to escape prosecution. Stoves in the workhouse were not it seems, reintroduced until the winter of 1911 when old people were "suffering dreadfully" from the cold. Even as late as 1904 the health and safety arrangements for the vagrant wards were condemned. The new Medical Officer in 1906, Dr Brough, was recorded as "strongly condemning the sanitary arrangements" in the male and female infirmaries; the following year the Guardians implemented recommended alterations to the bathing and sanitary arrangements. . In the same year there was an outbreak of "sickness" in the workhouse, either from infected milk, or dirty cloths or churns.

Sadly for the individuals concerned, madness, learning difficulties and psychological disturbance were regarded as much the same thing. Even as late as 1892 the report of an external investigation was focussed mainly on installing escape doors for nurses in the lunatics' wing.

Getting and keeping nurses was also a perennial problem, bearing in mind the long hours – (7am to 9pm day shift, 8pm to 9am night shift), nightworking one month in three, and the monotonous but difficult work. The rules for nurses in the Battle workhouse – not introduced until 1902 - seem exhaustive and doubtless exhausting. Even though the workhouse used an agency towards the end of the nineteenth century, and revised the conditions of work for nurses, recruitment remained difficult and cases of neglect, while not frequent, kept coming up. Sometimes the attitude of the Master was a problem: in 1903 the

Master, Mr Martin, was asked to show more “tact and consideration” in treatment of the nurses. Midwives it seems were not used before 1910 as the Guardians were lobbying around then for permission to employ one.

On the positive side, the Guardians saw it as their role to hold the Medical Officers of the Union to account. Usually the problem was insufficient activity in visiting patients in receipt of outdoor relief, or failure to use the prescribed procedures- involving signing off on treatments in a Medical Relief Book supervised by the Master - for recording medical problems. In March 1898 Mr E Clarke of Warbleton was fired as MO for the 4th district and this was by no means unusual. The following year and again in 1903 Dr Brodie was reprimanded for not using the Medical Relief Book properly. One of the difficulties for a Medical Officer was that vagrants would come in to the workhouse, get treated, then leave and get ill again. This in essence was what was found by a Guardians’ inquiry happened in the case of Henry Barker in 1907, when on return after a previous stay, he suddenly died in the workhouse.

The medical procedures were very inflexible. Dr Kendall – later to become a locally famous and much-loved Battle GP – makes an appearance in 1902 as Medical Officer for the 6th district. He got into trouble for visiting a sick child without first waiting for authority from the Relieving Officer. Visits cost the Guardians and the payers of the poor rate, money of course.

Vaccination

The Guardians were responsible for the local implementation of the 1898 Vaccination Act and instructed their Medical Officers accordingly. But there were unexpected difficulties. Stephen Thomas, Vaccination Officer of the Bexhill district, complained that he was getting an influx into his area from Eastbourne where the authorities were resisting the vaccination programme. The Guardians seemed reluctant to intervene in a dispute like this and simply report to the Local Government Board that Mr Thomas seems to be coping- answering a question that was not asked! The Guardians were anxious about the mounting costs and about how their Medical Officers should deal with the Conscience Clause in the Act. The usual bureaucratic issues surfaced as well, resulting in a dispute with Dr Brodie, who insisted on annotating his returns in red.

Children

In the education of children at the Battle workhouse the early 1880’s seems to have been a turning point. A report in 1883 from Her Majesty’s Inspector on education of the girls in the workhouse was so bad that even the Guardians concluded the situation was “indefensible”. The girls’ education was lacking to the extent that they did not even have skipping ropes for recreation. There was only one classroom for all ages and recreation time was spent sewing, mending, and scrubbing the floors. So the schoolmistress of the workhouse was sacked and the girls sent to the Battle and Langton schools. The Porter’s wife and a pauper inmate were put in charge of the girls and authorised to alter the sleeping and sanitary arrangements for

the girls. It seems a similar decision had been made about the boys in the recent past but that decision does not feature in the Guardian minutes.

On individual cases the Guardians seemed enlightened for the time, taking care in selection of schools then apprenticeships for orphans, to the extent of checking that companies who would take their children on as apprentices, had a good reputation and treat the apprentices properly. Children going into service had their uniforms bought for them by the Guardians, as for example, in the case of Elizabeth French who went into service in 1854 aged 12. A cynic of course would say that helping such a person get a job was a way of getting her off the poor rate! Many orphan girls from the Battle workhouse were placed with the Shirley Schools in the early twentieth century, reports of which from visits by the Guardians, indicate a very enlightened approach with the residential accommodation split up into small houses campus style so the children would get an experience of living in a building resembling a home.

Survey of Battle parish

In 1856 the Guardians decided to invite tenders to “map and measure the parish of Battle”. This was presumably to help them refine the collection of poor rate and also better to adjudicate poor rate disputes. But the project was ill fated. On 27 November 1857 Mr James Cole, Surveyor of Battle, reported on the survey and map of the parish of Battle. There were some disputes over boundaries but no details are given in the minutes. Mr Austin’s (the map-maker) second request for an extension of time was refused. Legal advice was present at another meeting with Cole – it’s now October 1858- to get a date for the delivery of the map. He said that month and it was delivered. But there must have been inaccuracies in the map because the next we hear, the Poor Law Board call for an on the ground test of the map urgently. It turns out that there are inaccuracies in depiction of the dimension of the railway. Presumably the Board, in the light of this defect, refuse to pay Mr Cole because on 9 December 1859 there is talk of a Bill in Chancery against the Board. On 11 May 1860, four years after the project began, the Board receive the promised alphabetical book of reference for the Battle map and refer it to the Poor Law Board for verification. The Board agreed without prejudice to approve £100 for extra expenses over and above the original contract price less their legal expenses, to settle the whole thing, Mr Kell solicitor is asked to act for the Board. Even then the story is not over as the Guardians in 1860 have to borrow £400 from James Watts to settle the costs of the Survey of Battle Parish, facing as they were, a law suit from a Mr Kisch. The minutes go quiet about what happened next, presumably an out of court settlement. The loan at 5% is not paid off to Mr Watts until 1867.

Development of facilities at the workhouse

Throughout the life of the workhouse and even as late as 1925, the Guardians were authorising improvements to the buildings, usually playing catch up as social expectations and conditions improved. The laundry was the single most troublesome area in terms of

size, machinery, ventilation and waste water; closely followed by works to the water tanks and the boiler, for which sufficient water supply always seemed to be a problem. But in 1917, although recognising the laundry room was no longer fit for purpose, and with a recommendation to rebuild before them, the Guardians took no action. In 1922 they were still kicking the can down the road on this topic. The Guardians usually left matters to the Master and the Clerk, but when in 1887 the Board Room – where the Guardians held their meetings- was to be renovated they had a committee consisting of all the Guardians!

In 1849 the field opposite the workhouse on the same side of the road was leased and later used as a nursery. In 1890 there was a fruit tree committee to decide what trees should be planted! In 1924 the woodland at the back of the workhouse and the adjoining garden were purchased.

In 1909 a contract was let for the lime-whiting, distempering and painting of the infirmaries- it's unclear if this is a redecoration or was being done for the first time. A separate tender was put out for the hammocks.

The nursery block (now No 3) had to be renovated in 1914 due to an outbreak of scarlet fever, the context in the minutes suggesting this was not the only outbreak.

1919 was significant in that it saw the Guardians take the first steps to install mains electricity at the workhouse in place of the previous generator arrangement; and in that year they also agreed plans to supply hot water at the workhouse including new boilers.

Despite all these efforts there was a growing list of building problems when the Visiting Committee reported in 1921. The chimneys were in a poor state, with the one furthest east leaning dangerously. The shed (now the No 3 annex) , the windows, the infirmary, the kitchen, the men's day room , and the walls in the men's infirmary lavatory, all needed repair, with plaster falling off in places. On a more positive note in that year, the wall between the male and female infirmary wards was removed to improve light. Not long after this in 1925 plans were made and implemented to renovate the whole workhouse ready for its future role as an old people's home under local authority supervision from 1930.

Water

Sufficiency of water supply was a longstanding problem. Until 1906/7 the water came from a well onsite. Perhaps lack of pressure was one of the reasons for the endless problems with the supply to the laundry and boiler. Replacement of the pumps in the well, as for example in 1904, was commonplace.

In 1887 came the first attempt to remedy the water supply problem. The Clerk produced an agreement from the Duke of Cleveland "for the conditions of the water supply" to which the Seal was fixed but no further explanation is given. Three months later the Guardians agree to establish a committee to oversee a project by local surveyor James Catt with H J Simmons and Jesse Oliver in direct charge, for bringing water from the spring in Savages Field (other minutes suggest this is Savages Hill Field at Great Park Farm) into the workhouse. There is

subsequent discussion about piping and a water tank. The project runs into a little local difficulty. A bullock belonging to the Duke of Cleveland is killed by falling into the inspection trench and compensation is agreed from the contractor and the Guardians, moderated to reflect the fact that the bailiff fed the carcase to the Duke's kennel dogs. In December 1887 a committee is formed to oversee the relaying of "certain" drains for the workhouse and the replacement of the system of cesspools, in accordance with the plans of the Medical Officer Dr Davison. Work was completed in April 1888: the comfort and health of the inmates much more safely secured. The Committee thought it might also be a good idea to mix some disinfectant with the ashes used in some of the closets eg infirmary and closets used by the officers. No plan to be made of the new drainage it seems, as it would have been too expensive – that created a problem for the residents over 130 years later!

Ten years later in 1897 there was discussion of an attempt to obtain an improved water supply by drilling a 200 foot well at the workhouse. We assume that the project was deferred as the minutes go quiet and a few months later the Guardians are discussing means by which the Savages Hill Field supply be supplemented by improved collection of rainwater at the workhouse. But by 1902 discussions were in hand with the Urban Council of Battle about them granting a mains water supply to the workhouse. The Guardians suggested that the Council undertake and pay for the installation of the main, charging the Guardians an annual percentage on the cost of the same until the water consumed recompensed them for the cost. It looked like a deal but then in 1904 we find the Guardians have gone back to the well idea.

In September 1904 the Guardians asked a sub-committee to look into the insufficient water supply; and considered reports on discussions with Battle Urban Council about a supply from the police station at the cost of the Guardians, with supply metered at 1/6- per 1000 gallons . The sub-committee do not like the cost of this so they recommend instead deepening the well by means of a six inch Artesian Bored Tube Well on the basis of a report from Messrs Isler of Southwark. The Guardians adopt this approach. In November 1904 the Guardians take a temporary supply from the Battle Urban Council while boring takes place But the Guardians literally hit a problem though, in that they discover greater depth will be needed than expected to reach water. The Water Committee is empowered to act! It transpires that to reach water it would be necessary to go 150 feet deeper so the Guardians decide to go back to the BUC mains water option considered two years before. In February 1905 the Guardians agree to get the sanction of the Local Government Board for a loan of £800. Meanwhile, the borehole was plugged. In July 1905 the Water Committee report, they sound as though much is happening but in reality they're going over old ground. Meanwhile from time to time throughout this period, there are leaky water tanks. As of 25 May 1906 there is a report from the Water Committee that they are negotiating the £840 loan needed with the Public Works Loan Board. A year later and the job seems to have been done, after some ten years: in March 1907 the Guardians discuss paying back to the Public Works Loan Board £181 left over : a building project coming in well under budget! Sixteen guineas are

paid to Mr Blackman the engineer – presumably as a bonus because Mr Sheppard the solicitor gets £24 12 - .

By 1908 the Guardians noted with satisfaction the improvements from a regular supply of water. Inmates had hitherto been bathed only once a month and sometimes two or three had had to share the same water. This was now a thing of the past. So now a great reform: there should, the minutes say proudly, now be at least one bathroom with hot and cold water and a waste pipe!

Religion

The Guardians appointed a Chaplain from 1840: they were very particular that there should be Christian worship for C of E inmates while alive, in the little workhouse chapel (the inside is illustrated below); and proper burial arrangements for them when dead . This proved difficult because it seems that on most occasions, local vicars were doing the workhouse Chaplain job more or less as a favour to the Guardians. So securing compliance, for example about regularity of services, was not always straightforward.



By kind assistance of Diane Braybrooke

So it was that in 1882, for example, the Guardians had to compromise with the Rev Partington when he refused the Chaplaincy if it involved Sunday worship. In 1902 the Guardians wrote to the Rev Parker complaining about lack of regularity in his visits to the workhouse; he resigned. In 1913 the Guardians voted 10-9 to advertise for a Chaplain, rather than continue to rely on the free but unpredictable services of the Dean of Battle. In 1920 the Guardians took up the cudgels with the Rev A W Upcott, Rector of Brightling, about his refusal to bury an inmate Elizabeth Wilkes, and arranged her burial in Battle

cemetery- as the Master put it, “the body could not be kept”. It would appear that it was not until 1921 that weekly services were held for the nonconformist inmates, in the form of the Rev Stanley, of the Battle Baptist Christian Endeavour Society.

Emigration

In common with many workhouse Unions, Battle encouraged emigration of the jobless poor to Australia, America, Canada and New Zealand. In Battle’s case, New South Wales was the favoured destination. The aim was to provide them with new clothes and money for their passage, and thereby get their cost off the poor rate. Notices like the one below were posted in public places to encourage people.



From the Battle Museum of Local History Archive (grey file)

Dealing with the Masters

It was for the Guardians to appoint the Master and Matron – always a married couple. This was seldom straightforward as the following list of Battle Union Masters shows

Start date	Name of Master	Points of interest
1835	Henry Laman	“Old” workhouse
1840	Mr Tutt	Resigns within a few weeks of the workhouse opening
1840	Mr Frost	

1845	Mr Scott	Frosts resigns amid accusations of deliberate under-provisioning and fraud, to be replaced by Mr Scott
1854	William Scott jnr(acting) Ebenezer Rouse(acting)	Mr Scott is taken ill with some kind of nervous indisposition so his son William takes over on an acting basis and also becomes ill. Then Rouse stands in until the father recovers, then the son dies
1856	Mr William Brown	William Scott resigns due to ill health, and is replaced by William Brown
1857	Charles Hills	William Brown resigns and is replaced by Charles Hills. A terrible year for the Union as a failed bank loses them money
1886	Mr Jesse Chance	Hills resigns due to his failing eyesight and his wife's ill health
1893	Mr and Mrs Parry	Mr and Mrs Chance resigns on promotion to the Hull workhouse
1896	Mr and Mrs Martin	The Parrys resign amid appraisals criticising their work rate and an accusation of sexual misconduct. Mr Martin had a controversial time as Master. In 1906 he was reprimanded for putting an inmate Bridget Hyde in solitary confinement; and in the same year he was reprimanded for being drunk on duty. In 1907 he had to explain away an unexpected death in the workhouse; and in the same year became notorious nationally for stripping naked a 10 year old boy, Brunton, whom he suspected of "indecent", and flogging him.
1910	Mr Thomas Keene	Replaces Mr Martin, who was not allowed to continue after his wife the Matron died.
1930	Mr Keene is still in post when the former Battle Union workhouse becomes an institution within East Sussex County Council.	

We are putting this article on the web in the spirit of encouraging contributions about the history of the workhouse, which may be sent to foxted.house@yahoo.co.uk

We are indebted to the East Sussex Record Office and to the Battle Museum of Local History for access to important records.

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