

Local History 3 - Church Stretton Workhouse

Steve Burrows - March 2023

Introduction

- I found out by accident that Church Stretton had had a workhouse, built in 1838 which operated as a workhouse and other uses until its closure and demolition in 1959 (a small part remains and is now part of the sports centre attached to the secondary school),
- The size of the workhouse, with about 100 beds, appears disproportionately very large bearing in mind how big Church Stretton would have been in 1834,
- The story of Church Stretton Workhouse is very typical of workhouses across the country.

Poor Law Pre 1834 (Old Poor Law - Outdoor relief)

- The origins of the workhouse can be traced back the the Poor Laws and the changes that were made in 1834 - the Poor Law Amendment Act,
- Before then, the Poor law had existed since the early 1600's shortly after the death of Elizabeth I, based on the 'Elizabethan' poor laws of 1597 and 1601.
- It was administered locally at parish level in each of the 15,500 parishes across England and Wales,
- Local taxes would be raised from property and land owners and distributed to the local poor,
- The local nature of the poor law was good in that those administering it knew who the 'genuinely' local poor were, but suffered from wide inconsistencies between areas and the quality of their management.

Poor Law Reform Act 1834 (New poor law - Indoor relief)

- In 1834, the Government passed the Poor Law Reform Act, which marked a significant change in emphasis in how the poor were to be helped. The act was widely supported and was passed with little dissent,
- It followed a parliamentary inquiry in 1832, following widespread concerns about the old poor law,
- Giving money to the poor, which was regarded as inefficient, wasteful and not always effective, as it encouraged idleness and encouraged employers to pay low wages,
- These concerns were exacerbated by the population shift to the towns, the economic depression at the end of the Napoleonic wars and the rapidly increasing costs of the poor law,
- In the future the poor were to be provided with shelter, food and work - ie the workhouse,
- There had been workhouses before 1834, such as Shrewsbury school. There had also been a very small one in Church Stretton on the High Street, in an existing building. There had also been two other small ones in nearby villages in Hatton and Wistanstow,
- However, after 1834 all areas had to provide a workhouse, with universal coverage across the whole country. This led to a major period of workhouse building across the country. About 500 new workhouses were built,

- There were discussions about having 'themed' workhouses ie for children, the elderly or the disabled, but this was dismissed as too expensive. In the end, single workhouses were built accepting 'all comers',
- The workhouses were designed and operated to keep these groups separate as far as was possible.

Rural Areas like Church Stretton

- Although larger towns were big enough to support their own workhouse, rural areas generally were too small. (eg in the CS union area one parish had just 63 people),
- To deal with this problem, the Act introduced 'Poor Law Unions'. These were amalgamations of parishes to create big enough areas to support a workhouse. Before the Act these were sometimes known as incorporations. Across the country 600 unions were formed. In Shropshire, 274 parishes combined into 16 unions ie about 17 parishes per union. Church Stretton union was incorporated in July 1836, included 14 parishes, covering a wide geographical area and a population of 5700,
- Each union was intended to cover a large area, but no more than a radius of about 10 miles,
- The unions were managed by a group of guardians elected by local ratepayers, who then elected a chair (each parish nominated one guardian, with a chair making 15 in total),
- Nationally the Act set up the Poor Law Commission to oversee the implementation of the Act, who in turn appointed assistant commissioners for each area. William Day was appointed for Shropshire. A very serious, conscientious but totally humourless man.

Church Stretton Workhouse

- In Church Stretton, a group of guardians were elected, who in turn elected William Pinches as their Chair. William Day the Commissioner didn't rate him and wrote to the Poor Law Commission in London saying he doubted the ability of Church Stretton to actually get their workhouse built,
- In the end he turned out to be quite wrong as the Church Stretton workhouse was built and opened in 1839,
- The guardians did consider remodelling the existing older workhouse in the town but this was felt to be too small. Moreover, in 1837 the guardians received a petition from the towns residents who were embarrassed at having the poor in the town and wanting the new workhouse to be built some way of the town,
- This was accepted and a new site was bought about a quarter of a mile outside the town where the primary school stands today,
- Two architects, Edward Blakeway Smith and Thomas Duppa Lloyd were appointed to design the building and a local builder called Poultney Smith was commissioned to build it. His tender was £1500 !,
- To fund it the guardians borrowed £1800 (at 5% interest) from the local doctor Charles Mott and Abraham Bowyer,
- It opened to the poor in 1839.

The Workhouse Population

- The 1881 census tells us a lot about the population of the workhouse,

- It was practically full with 86 residents (two thirds men and one third women),
- About 21 were over 60 (about a quarter). Later studies nationally would show about a third of the workhouse population were elderly,
- They were mostly local people, although 12 were classed as vagrants, or temporary residents probably travelling through,
- There were 33 children, of which 19 appear to be with a parent and 14 appear to be orphans, (three appear to be brothers and sisters),
- Most were not their long term. However a few were. A return in 1861 showed that there were 5 residents who had been in the workhouse for more than five years, (5,6,17,20 and 22 years) but all were suffering from a mental or physical handicaps,
- There were a mix of former occupations but many were classed as labourers. 19 were classed as agricultural labourers, reflecting the seasonal nature of the work,
- There were 3 staff, a governor, a matron and a school mistress.

Life in the workhouse

- Access and leaving; on arrival they would be interviewed to ensure they met the relevant criteria, and inmates could leave with permission, especially the men looking for work. Inmates could leave at any time,
- Daily routine; eating , working and sleeping six days a week, not on Sundays,
- Clothing; some given uniforms but some just looked the same as their clothes were all made at the workhouse,
- Sleeping; segregated dormitories,
- Food; very basic and boring, bread, gruel and potatoes, some meat a few days a week,
- Health; medical services were required by the Act, usually a visiting doctor. In CS one of the financiers was a doctor.
- Work; women doing the running of the workhouse, cleaning, cooking ,sewing while men would do picking oakum, breaking rocks or crushing bones for fertiliser,
- Schooling; again required by the Act, but often ineffective, large classes, mixed ages, disabled or disturbed children, and inexperienced teachers,
- Discipline; strict discipline for even minor offences, often involving withdrawal of food,
- Overall condition; very strict, almost prison like and very boring

Changing Attitudes

- The attitude of the late Victorians towards poverty changed significantly with the work of social researchers like Charles Booth in London and Seebohm Rowntree in York. Their work demonstrated that poverty was caused by circumstances and not behaviours ie old age, disability, unemployment, low wages or abandonment, rather than idleness, fecklessness or moral weakness.
- In 1906, a new Liberal Government was elected and introduced the first real social security system, old age pensions, unemployment benefit and health insurance. Although low, they were a start and improved later. Over time they started to enable poor people to survive outside the workhouse

Decline of the workhouse

- A Poor Law Commission of 1905 to 1911 recommended the ending of the poor law,

- Poor Law unions and Boards of Guardians were abolished in 1929,
- Their powers and buildings were transferred to Local Authorities , the CS workhouse was transferred to Shropshire Council in 1930.
- It declined in use and was demolished in 1959.

Sources

- Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society 2007
- Northwich workhouse museum