

THE MARKET HARBOROUGH WORKHOUSE

By Steve Cockayne, MA



The Poor Law and the Development of the Workhouse

Anyone who passes through the main entrance doors of St Luke's Hospital in Market Harborough cannot fail to notice a large brass bell, bearing the date 1836, which hangs in a wooden cradle just inside the lobby. Anyone sufficiently curious will take the time to read the nearby notice, which explains that this was the bell from the Harborough workhouse, which stood on the Leicester Road site before the new hospital was built.

The workhouse as an institution is of great interest to the social historian of today because it represents a transitional stage in the development of the welfare benefits system which is now available to everyone. Before the advent of the workhouse, there was no formal, national system for the relief of the poor, and what was available was organised very much on a local level. Each manor or village looked after those within its boundaries who, through poverty, illness or other causes, were unable to fend for themselves. The funding for poor relief was usually provided by the church or the local gentry.

This somewhat haphazard system remained more or less stable from Saxon times until the early mediæval period, but at that point a number of important social changes were starting to occur, and these demanded a rather more systematic response to the problem of poverty. To begin with, the population was starting to increase significantly. Additionally, a major upheaval was taking place in the system of land ownership. Landowners were increasingly converting their arable land to more profitable grazing land for sheep and, as a result, there were increasing numbers of dispossessed agricultural workers. Poverty was becoming a national issue.

The national response to these changes came in the form of the Poor Law, a series of acts of parliament passed in 1563, 1572, 1576, 1597 and 1601. These acts, for the first time, recognised the significance of poverty as a national issue, and also established the distinction between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor – a distinction which is still discernible in the benefits system of today. As a result of this legislation, each parish was burdened with the responsibility of looking after its own poor. Local taxes were levied, officials appointed, and a series of residency tests put in place. The parish was to care for those who lived, worked or were apprenticed within its bounds, and this concept survives in today's homelessness legislation. Local poor relief took two main forms: around two thirds of the parish poor fund was typically taken up by out-relief, but for those unable to fend for themselves, the remaining third went into running the Workhouse.



THE WORKHOUSE BELL, DATED 1836, WHICH STILL HANGS AT THE ENTRANCE TO SAINT LUKE'S HOSPITAL. (PICTURE BY AUTHOR).

Harborough's First Workhouse

The arrival of workhouses in England was a piecemeal affair. The very first one was constructed in 1576. Others soon followed, and Harborough certainly had almshouses or poorhouses by 1609. Initially these were sited in a group of converted houses belonging to a local charity, and a contemporary account gives a vivid description of institutional life:

The house is a well-contrived building in form of a court four-square with several apartments for lodging and other conveniences. There is a hall or long room with tables and benches where they [the inmates] have their set meals and where afterwards they may spin; and in summer the young boys or girls may spin in the court. They have laid in a provision of several cheeses and of coals, for which they have convenient places.

Harborough's first purpose-built workhouse came into being shortly afterwards in 1728, and was initially sited at the corner of Adam and Eve Street and Sheep Market (more recently known as The Square). Well-known in the town, this site is now occupied by Steffan the jeweller and neighbouring businesses.



TRACE OF FOUNDATIONS AT THE REAR OF THE ADAM AND EVE STREET SITE. COULD THIS BE THE LAST REMNANT OF THE OLD WORKHOUSE? (PICTURE BY AUTHOR).



THE BUILDING CONSTRUCTED AT THE FOOT OF ADAM AND EVE STREET IN 1836. IT STANDS ON THE SITE OF HARBOROUGH'S FIRST WORKHOUSE. (PICTURE BY AUTHOR).

Although the workhouse is known to have been rebuilt in 1801, the building that now stands on this site dates from 1837, and was constructed by a builder named Kilbourne sometime after the workhouse

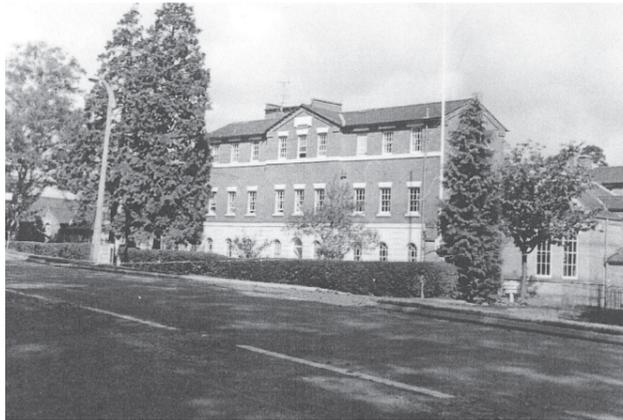
had moved elsewhere. An inspection of the land at the rear reveals a twentieth century extension, although some older foundations are still visible in one corner. These may constitute the last trace of the original workhouse building.

Harborough's institution, like most other parish workhouses, was quite small, probably accommodating no more than twenty inmates. By 1777, parish workhouses of comparable size were known to exist in Great Bowden, Foxton, Lubenham, Smeeton Westerby, Clipston, Great Oxendon, Wilbarston, Bosworth, Cranoe, Shangton and Mowsley. In 1793, Joseph Tilley was appointed Workhouse Master for Harborough, at which time the inmates' work consisted of spinning, weaving and, for the more able-bodied, breaking rocks for road-building. Tilley was also expected to teach reading and writing to the inmates' children, and to fund all this he was allocated a budget of four guineas a week from parish funds. This sum was intended to cover both his own salary and the costs of running the institution. It was soon increased to five guineas, but from 1800 a different arrangement was put in place. Perhaps unhappy with the way Tilley was managing his affairs, the board of overseers decided to pay the workhouse costs directly, while Tilley was placed on a fixed salary. The rebuilding carried out in 1801 was presumably paid for by municipal funds.

The Reform Act and After

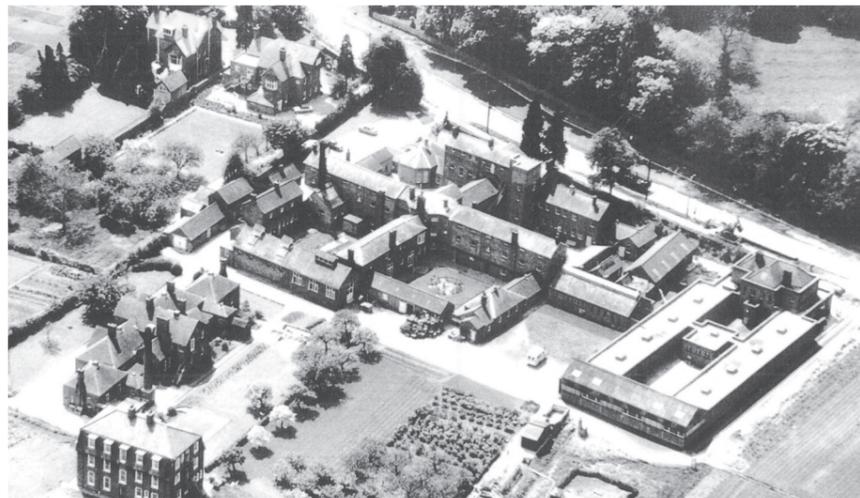
In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, there occurred an important change of emphasis in national life. Up to that point, the majority of the population had lived and worked in the countryside but, from this point onwards, there was to be a dramatic increase in the importance of towns. This was recognised in the 1834 Reform Act which led, among other things, to the growth of the town workhouse. Groups of parish poor funds were consolidated into poor law unions, and this included Harborough, the Bowdens, and the adjoining parishes. The Market Harborough Poor Law Union was formed in 1836. The old Workhouse premises were sold, and a substantial new Workhouse was built to the north of the town at 33 Leicester Road.

The project cost £5000, and the architect, Sampson Kempthorne, was well experienced at this type of design, having been responsible for a number of workhouse projects in other parts of the country.



THE FAÇADE OF THE LEICESTER ROAD WORKHOUSE. (PICTURE COURTESY OF HARBOROUGH MUSEUM).

The Harborough Workhouse was a much larger institution than any of those that it replaced. It offered accommodation for two to three hundred people from 44 separate parishes, although, in the years that followed, there do not seem ever to have been many more than 100 living there. But the public perception of the workhouse was changing too. Whereas it had previously been a very localised institution for the poor people of each parish, it was now becoming a big, intimidating, faceless organisation. It is easy to understand how people dreaded being taken away from their own parish to face the rigours of institutional life. This fear persisted as recently as the late twentieth century, when one elderly man known to the author refused to spend the last hours of his life in Saint Luke's Hospital, because he believed that it was still the workhouse!



WORKHOUSE BUILDINGS ARE AT THE CENTRE OF THE PICTURE, THE CASUAL WARD AT BOTTOM RIGHT, AND THE INFIRMARY BOTTOM LEFT. THE LEICESTER ROAD IS NEAR THE TOP OF THE PICTURE, LEICESTER TO THE RIGHT AND HARBOROUGH TO THE LEFT. (PICTURE AEROFILMS/HARBOROUGH MUSEUM).

The workhouse building was laid out in accordance with a standard design. The main block, facing onto the Leicester Road, housed the boardroom and other offices, while the four residential wings formed a crosslike layout at the rear. The inmates were segregated according to whether they were able-bodied or infirm, male or female, and no provision was made for married couples. The courtyards between the residential wings were used for exercise and, in mild weather, for outdoor work. An anecdote from 1863 gives an inkling of the flavour of workhouse life. The list of salaries for this period includes, among others, a baker named William Goodrich. This individual received his final pay packet on the 15th of October, when he resigned in order to marry the schoolmistress, Eliza Harding.

In 1881, the census records 102 paupers and five staff in residence at the Harborough workhouse. The staff comprised the Master, the Matron, the Schoolmistress, the Nurse and the Porter. These five were supplemented by a number of day staff - including, presumably, a baker - who would not have shown up in the census record. The 102 paupers were classified into three groups: the inmates, or long-term residents of the institution; the casuals, sometimes referred to as itinerants, whose accommodation was inelegantly referred to as the tramps' ward; and the scholars or schoolchildren. The inmates, included a further subgroup consisting of those suffering various forms of handicap. They were classified, in the somewhat politically-incorrect terminology of the time, as idiot, imbecile or dumb.

From the 1880s onwards, local planning records give a detailed picture of the various additions that were made to the building. These included a miscellany of small items, such as disinfecting closets in 1884, pig sties in 1888, a boys' WC in 1907 and labour cells for the tramps' ward in 1909. More significantly, plans for a new infirmary were approved in 1899, and plans for new casual wards in 1935. These last two buildings, incidentally, are the only parts of the Leicester Road Workhouse that still survive.



THE INFIRMARY BLOCK CONSTRUCTED IN 1899, NOW WARD THREE SAINT LUKE'S HOSPITAL. (PICTURE BY AUTHOR).



THE CASUAL WARD CONSTRUCTED IN 1936, NOW IN USE AS A HOSPITAL STOREROOM. (PICTURE BY AUTHOR).

The infirmary, now Ward Three of Saint Luke's Hospital, continues to fulfil its original function, while the casual wards, bearing the date 1936 and now appearing semi-derelict, are in fact still in use as hospital store rooms. By the mid 1930s the term "workhouse" had been officially dropped, and the site was referred to in planning documents as the Poor Law Institute or PLI.

In the early part of the twentieth century the management of the workhouse was affected by a number of administrative changes. In 1918 it became, briefly, part of a nationally-based system of poor relief under the Ministry of Health but, following the Local Government Act of 1930, workhouses fell once more under the control of the local authority. By the time of the Second World War, the Leicester Road building was no longer fully utilised. Parts of the building were commandeered by national government for the storage of important documents and records, including, it is rumoured, the Magna Carta!



INTERIOR VIEW OF THE CASUAL WARD SHOWING THE METAL-WALLED CUBICLES LEADING OFF THE MAIN CORRIDOR. (PICTURE BY AUTHOR).

After the war, with the formation of the National Health Service and the welfare state, workhouses as living institutions were phased out. New building continued on the Leicester Road site, but this now reflected the growing importance of St Luke's Hospital. A nurses' home had been added in 1939, although no trace of this remains today. By the time the ambulance station was added in 1950, the site was no longer referred to as the workhouse or PLI, but simply as 33 Leicester Road. The last births and deaths at the Harborough workhouse were recorded in 1959, although the casual ward remained in use until the 1970s – eye witnesses recall the building being used as accommodation for homeless families and for itinerant working men. Anyone who manages to find their way inside will be interested to see that the original metal-sided cubicles and iron beds remain in place.



EXCAVATIONS IN PROGRESS, APRIL 2010. THE BUILDING IN THE BACKGROUND IS THE CASUALWARD. (PICTURE BY AUTHOR).

1974 saw the opening of the new St Luke's Hospital. A new geriatric ward (now Ward One) was opened, and the modernised workhouse infirmary became the female ward. The main workhouse building was demolished the following year, and the bell now makes an impressive display piece in the entrance lobby of the hospital. However, development continues on the site. In 2008, the hospital held a summer fête, but this venture is unlikely to be repeated, because at the time of writing (May 2010), excavations are in progress for the foundations of a new endoscopy suite. It is reassuring to observe that the land continues to be dedicated to the public good - and it will be interesting to see whether the builders uncover anything of note!

Anon: *An Account of Several Workhouses for Employing and Maintaining the Poor*. London, 1725.

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Market Harborough Gazette, 28 Aug 1906. Information supplied to author by local historian Bob Hakewill.

Pugh, RB, Ed., *Victoria History of the Counties of England, Vol. V (Leicestershire)*, University of London Institute of Historical Research, 1964.

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Story told by Pauline Cockayne, the author's wife. The elderly man was her grandfather William Clark.

Market Harborough Union Minute Books. Story supplied by Bob Hakewill.

Leicestershire County Record Office, Wigston. Planning Applications, DE2284.

Burial records noted by local historian Rosalind Willatts.