

The Alverstoke Workhouse

By Lesley Burton

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In the year 1799, the parish of Alverstoke was a small rural community engaged principally in farming and agriculture. To the north east of its boundaries the bustling harbour town of Gosport flourished, its population fast increasing in prosperity and numbers in direct relation to the expansion of the Navy.

In one of the crowded alleys off South Street stood the old Gosport poorhouse. The building had occupied the same site for almost half a century and was now inadequate for its task of accommodating the increasing number of parish paupers. The wars with France were taking their toll in increased bread prices and hardship fell upon the labouring classes. Bread riots were common and Gosport had its share.

On Saturday, the 9th of November, 1799, the Rector, Churchwardens, Overseers of the Poor and principal citizens of Gosport met at the Crown Inn, North Street. Under the chairmanship of the Reverend David Sturgess the august assembly sat down to "consider the propriety of removing the present workhouse of the said Parish to a more convenient situation and to find proper employment for the poor".

In the event, the "convenient situation" was Ewer Common, handy for Alver Creek giving access to cargo boats destined for Portsmouth Harbour. The building land amounted to 10 acres given by the Bishop of Winchester and little more than three years later and at a cost of £10,000 the workhouse opened to receive the first of what was to become an almost unvarying complement of 200 or so men, women and children.

Workhouses did not, of course, simply appear at the whim of local worthies. Since Tudor times the law had provided by some means or other for dealing with the poor of the parish. Under the Elizabethan Poor Laws, anyone applying for relief outside his native parish was returned to it, or, if this was unknown, to the last place where he had lived for over a year. Nearly a century later, the Act of Settlement gave newcomers to the parish the rights of settlement and the right to receive poor relief. Settlement was conferred by birth, by serving an apprenticeship or by renting property of £10 p.a. or more. In 1775, a philanthropically minded M.P. called Thomas Gilbert proposed the setting up of workhouses. He wrote: "It has been my study in forming this Bill to see the poor well-accommodated and treated with great humanity, but kept under strict conformity to the rules of the house to encourage good behaviour, sobriety and industry by proper rewards".

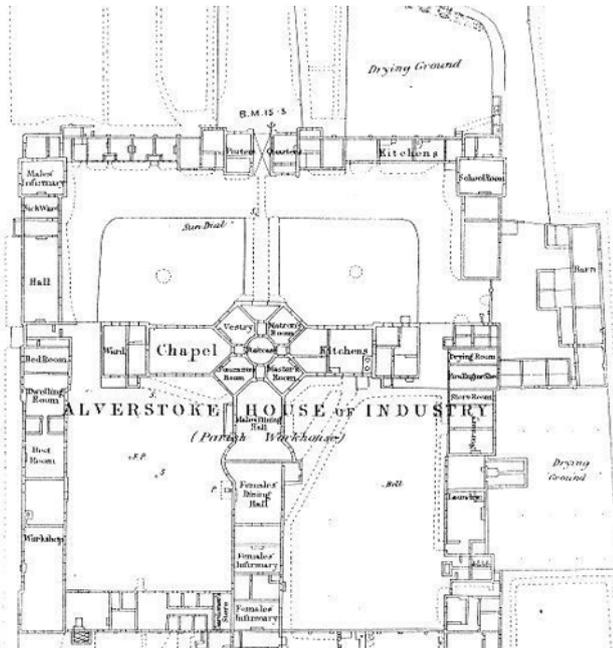
Until the passing of Gilbert's Act in 1781, setting up combinations of parishes or Unions for the joint administration of the poor, the practical effect of the poor laws had been to produce widely disparate standards of provision throughout the country. Some Unions were models of humanity and reform: others were places of degradation and squalor. The social history books abound with horrifying examples of man's inhumanity to man in the name of so-called social reform.



The new Alverstoke workhouse on the shores of Alver Creek was in many respects the realization of the philosophy expounded by Gilbert. He prescribed the separation of the poor into different categories, the sick, the infirm, the lunatics and the children on the one hand and the able-bodied poor on the other.

Within the commodious interior of the workhouse, there were ample rooms set aside for these various subsections of disabled poor. Infirm and incontinent men had their own room, as did the blind, the crippled and the lunatic insane, who were, whenever deemed necessary, restrained by the strait-waistcoat. A room was set aside as a kind of creche for the very youngest children leaving their mothers free to help in the work of the house. An interesting feature of the Alverstoke workhouse was the part of the building known as the Roundabout. In the words of the Guardian's Report, this was "part of the building appropriated to such females as are of a better class and character and of an age not altogether suited to the noise and hurry of a large society". To these fortunates went special allowances of tea and sugar, as they did also to the crippled and blind.

But for the able-bodied poor, life in the workhouse was more realistic. The full title of the Alverstoke workhouse was the House of Industry, a description both explicit and euphemistic at the same time. Work was the reason for the able-bodied paupers presence in the workhouse. Outdoor relief for poor families was still given, although it was economically more expedient to admit them into



the House of Industry, first removing from them their clothes and small possessions, then putting them to work for their own keep and for the profits of their masters.

There are facts and figures aplenty on the production output from the House of Industry. The Overseers and Guardian's Day Books, Annual Reports and Committee Minutes have recorded for posterity the daily round of the Alverstone pauper. Ewer Common's extensive 10 acre site provided plenty of scope for the development of a manufactory staffed mainly by female paupers. Records reveal that in 1808, for example, this manufactory had four looms, fourteen wool spinners, two carders, eleven flax spinners and three twisters. Altogether forty people worked in the manufactory including inspectors and attendants. In the same year the workers produced 1026 yards of stuff for womens gowns and petticoats, cloaks and dresses for boys, 3061/2 yards of linen, 90 yards of coarse wrapper for aprons, 55 yards of blanketing and rugs and 143 lbs. of yarn for stockings. Straw plaiting was suspended during the year due to an abundance of straw hats on the market and the picking of oakum also abandoned except for punishment.

In another part of the buildings beer was brewed while in the garden flax was cultivated together with a plentiful supply of root vegetables. These activities were the province of the male paupers, who also tended the pigs and cattle which were later slaughtered to provide meat for the inmates and a surplus for sale on the outside market.

Education featured large in the daily regime of the workhouse. Both men and women as well as children attended the workhouse school, which was organised according to the National School system. Many of the adult paupers were taught to read and write and they learnt skills such as weaving, spinning and dressmaking

which were to their advantage when they were released. A token wage was paid to the paupers ranging from 2/- a week to boys aged from 12 to 15 years, to a maximum of 9/- a week for a man, woman and more than one child.

The daily routine of the workhouse was of monotonous regularity and efficiency. All paupers messed in the main messing hall in groups of 14 or so. At 7.45 a.m. a bell was rung to summon all inmates to their breakfast meal at the long wooden tables. Here the invariable ration of gruel was doled out with its accompanying bread and water. This dismal meal was consumed in silence till another bell at half past eight gave the signal for the mess attendants to clear away and paupers to go about their various tasks. Precisely at a quarter to 12, the dinner bell warned the inmates to down tools and make for the messing hall where a meal of oxheads, pork, canned beef or salt fish and accompanying vegetables awaited them, washed down with water or beer. At 12.30 it was time to go back to their various duties until supper, the last meal of the day served at seven o'clock in summer, five o'clock in winter. Until lights out at 9, paupers were free to talk (quietly), read, sew or knit, and men could smoke in their airing grounds.

Occasionally, bold spirits rebelled against what must seem to us in hindsight to have been an unnecessary and indeed intolerable tyranny.

The Guardians' reports give isolated incidents of riotous behaviour in the women's section, one in particular in 1822 started by girls feeling insulted by the Matron. The three young women concerned Bolt, Lee and Lambert were sentenced to have their hair cut and to be put on a diet of bread and whey for one month. Additionally they were deprived of the Saturday free pass to the outside world. On another occasion, the paupers petitioned for a more plentiful supply of food. Here is the substance of their petition, dated Nov. 2nd 1822:

"We humbly beg that you would . . . be so good as to allow us more than 1/2 lb. of Bullock's Heads per man for one week . . . that served out at two different days in the week, and that is the whole of our allowance of the Meat and Fish that we receive in one week. Gentlemen, if you will have the goodness to take it into consideration and allow us more meat instead of the two Pounds of Potatoes per day and then we have two days in the week for Dinner with a Small Portion of Salt. Gentlemen, if you will allow us 1/2 lb. of flour on Monday for Dinner per Man instead of 1/2 lb. Dough it will make us a proportion equal as we had before you will Gentlemen have the goodness to take it into consideration for your humble petitioners."

It was put before the special committee and rejected.

Interesting anomalies occurred in the distribution of food and clothing. Adult paupers received 4 ozs. of meat to

the children's 2 ozs. Special allowances of tea and sugar went to "those females who render success to the Institution by their needlework or their knitting or to those who from age or other infirmities will not be able to eat the usual provisions of the house and have consented to surrender a portion of them in order to be placed on the tea and sugar allowance".

Each inmate was given a complete change of linen and boy and girl paupers had a special suit of clothes reserved for a more decent appearance on the Sabbath. Pauper children were also given a personal knife and fork set and instructed in their use, and when they left the workhouse to take up an apprenticeship they were given a Bible.

Probably the hardest fact of workhouse life was the segregation of the sexes. All who crossed the threshold of the Alverstoke House of Industry necessarily surrendered their independence of identity thought and action along with their own clothes in exchange for a bleak and puritanical life-style. As soon as paupers had donned the workhouse uniform — drab browns and greys relieved by white collars and cuffs — they became faceless automatons in an inflexible closed society. Fraternisation between male and female paupers was forbidden and if caught the offenders were suitably punished.

An incident of men and women talking over the fresh water pumps in the female airing grounds sparked off an outburst of moralistic fervour from the Guardian: "If your Sub-Committee has appeared to dwell too much on the positive necessity for taking every method to prevent a communication between the Men and Women springs from a conviction that unless an endeavour is made to improve the morals little or no grounds can be obtained in other points and it is a duty owing to society to do all in our power that the individuals admitted to the poor house should not when they quit it be worse as to character when they entered it".

Indeed, it must be recorded in Alverstoke's favour that compared to countless other similar institutions up and down the country, the treatment of its paupers was both careful and relatively humane. In a report of 1805, the Guardian thoughtfully observed: "Of course they live better than the generality of the labouring poor—perhaps this may not be altogether proper. It is however, erring on the side of humanity". Compare this with infamous and degraded workhouses like those at Chatham, said to have been immortalized by Dickens in *Oliver Twist*, and that of Andover where the wretched inmates were beaten, starved, the women indecently assaulted and all and sundry locked away in pitch-black rat-infested cellars for punishment.

Alverstoke was indirectly responsible for one single death, and that of a child pauper. In 1822 Valentine Gray

a ten year old chimney sweep was murdered by his master Benjamin Davies. The tragic death of this little boy deserves to be more widely known than it is, since it was the undoubted catalyst for many of the later mid-nineteenth century reforms involving children at work, and is the possible inspiration for Kingsley's masterpiece *The Water Babies*. Valentine was an orphaned baby brought to the workhouse at Alverstoke. At the age of eight, he asked the Guardian and Overseers if he might leave the institution and be apprenticed to a sweep. The man in whose care he was placed was Benjamin Davies, who plied his trade at Newport, in the Isle of Wight. Davies was a cruel drunkard and continually ill-treated his little charge, who was eventually found dead at his masters' house on the 5th January 1822. At the inquest, the Coroner heard that the boy died from inflammation of the brain following a violent blow or blows to the head. Overwhelming evidence pointed to Davies' ill-treatment, and he was found guilty of manslaughter, serving a year in Winchester Jail.

To their credit the Guardian and Overseers were appalled by this tragedy. They reacted swiftly "Altho' a considerable expense necessarily was occasioned . . . in the production of witnesses, retaining counsel etc., yet the Visitors and Guardians could have no hesitation as to their line when to the Vindication of Innocence against oppression and to step forward in support of the character of the Parish . . . Altho' on examining this subject the Visitors and Guardians have nothing whereof they can accuse themselves in the way of negligence . . . they are the first in strongly recommending to their successors that the measure of apprenticing boys from the Poor house to persons exercising the trade of Chimney Sweeper, should be abandoned — abandoned as well from the difficulty of watching over their conduct and the expense of punishing them when acting contrary to the Law, as from a feeling towards the Boys themselves who it should seem to enter on that line of life solely with a view of being liberated from the restraints of the Poor house unconscious of the many inconveniences and hardships that await them if they fall into the hands of unfeeling Masters".

The tragedy of Valentine Gray perhaps symbolises the corroding effects of a social system embodied by the workhouses of eighteenth and nineteenth century England. The poor and their families through no fault of their own were the victim of the prevalent social theories for dealing with poverty. England's workhouse system continued through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, their role and scope gradually diminishing with the instigation of National Assistance programmes. By the outbreak of the Second World War they contained only the elderly infirm.

Today the House of Industry is no more — yet the old

workhouse's stark red brick buildings still loom threateningly over Alver Creek as a perpetual reminder of the defunct social philosophies of a less forgiving age.

Sources

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