PROVISION FOR THE POOR

Throughout history there have always been the poor – people who cannot work because they unable to find jobs, they are old, chronically ill or infirmed in some way. A benefits system of support was not introduced until the 20th century.

From medieval times the destitute were the legal responsibility of the Manor but actually relied on charity to ease their suffering. The clergy and laity had a sense of responsibility for those less fortunate. Charity was provided in the form of *hospitals*, unlike today these were ecclesiastic or social, not medical institutions. The care of people was more important than curing them the aim being to strengthen the soul, as the body decayed, for its life in the next world. There were 750 charitable hospitals across the country including St John's in Buckingham. In smaller towns and villages 'Poor Houses' existed.

In time the church struggled to allocate sufficient funds to deal with the great problem of the poor. Beggars began roaming the country to such an extent they endangered public order. A succession of monarchs passed a series of acts to deal with the issue but they weren't particularly successful until Elizabeth 1 who passed the *Poor Law Act* in 1601. An important part of the Act required every parish to nominate churchwardens plus two or three householders as *Overseers of the Poor* each year. They were responsible for maintaining and setting to work the poor of the parish. Funds were provided through a *poor rate* or tax levied on every householder.

Winslow was relatively poor; there would not have been enough householders to support a charitable hospital. A description in *England Illustrated 1764* noted Winslow '*has neither building nor manufacture worth notice'* (sic). However there is evidence of charitable help for the town's poor. As far back as the 13th & 14th centuries the poor received alms, it was recorded in 1315 '*alms of meat and drink withheld from the poor'* at a time of great suffering in Winslow due to famine; a scarcity of corn, cattle plague and a rise in cost of wheat.

Charitable giving: In 1644 Joan Forde (nee Lowndes) left lands from which £1 was distributed to 10 poor widows and 10 poor unmarried women plus money to purchase coal to sell at reduced price to the poor. Sarah Egerton, who died in 1722, also left land for the benefit of 10 aged widows and 10 old maids. Both these charities still existed in 1839. Another charity was the *Rogers Free School*, the first known school in Winslow. When Joseph Roger died in 1722 he left £600 to purchase land, the rents and profits from which were to be used for the education of '*…number of poor people's children in Winslow'*. In 1775 there were twelve boys and by 1807 there were 20 aged five to ten years; they were the sons of poor labourers in receipt of parish relief. In the 1800s there were at least two charities which provided bread to be distributed to the poor two or three times a year. An earlier charity (1696) paid for the distribution of Bibles, the beneficiaries had to memorise seven psalms before receiving their gift; more comfort for the soul than for an empty belly! Even after the Workhouse was built in 1835 charitable giving continued when Bridget Yeates conveyed a tenement on the south side of the church yard to be used as a school for poor infant children in 1843. In 1846 she funded the supply of coal for distribution to the poor. In the 1870s Elizabeth Miles left a legacy for blankets and coal to be given to the deserving poor at Christmas.

Work & Relief: In 1795 sixteen paupers were *farmed* by a contractor. The parish paid him 3/- and the wages for each one. Sir Frederick Morton Eden wrote in 1797 on the state of the poor and *The Roundsman System of Relief* at Winslow *'there is a great want of employment, most of the labourers are on the round'* i.e. they go to work from one house to another around the parish. They were paid wholly by the parish. In winter there were up to 40 people working in this way. Children aged 10 were put on the *rounds*. *Outdoor relief* was given to those with jobs who didn't earn enough to keep their family; the amount given was based on the cost of bread and the number in the family. In time it became difficult to obtain labour as men found it paid them better to do little work and receive a large amount of relief!

Workhouses: The Workhouse Directory of 1725 lists a Workhouse in Winslow; it was sited in High Street (near the Co-op) which at that time would have been near the edge of town. In 1777 it had room for 20 paupers. By 1787 the building had been replaced and an advert sought *a sober person….to see that the poor are properly employed*. In 1821 the *parish overseers* bought the former George Inn (at the back of The Bell) as a replacement Workhouse. These larger premises provided work through straw plaiting and a hand mill for grinding corn.
There were three *pest houses* which provided a refuge for those with diseases and also possibly vagrants. They were built in Saxon times (demolished c.1850) at the end of The Walk on the outskirts of town. There was also an isolated room at the side of The Boot Inn in Tinkers Lane where tramps could doss down for the night.

Across the country the cost of poor relief escalated from £2 million in 1784 to £7 million in 1832. What had worked reasonably well for two hundred years was falling apart exacerbated by the Napoleonic War, Inclosure Act, Corn Law and the Industrial Revolution (e.g. lace making was a typical cottage industry where a whole family worked together to eke out a living; with the arrival of machinery the work transferred to towns leaving these country folk without jobs). Many were unable to support themselves, especially with the increased cost of bread in 1815 and, as the poaching of rabbits and pigeons was a punishable offence, there was little they could do to help themselves.

THE NEW POOR LAW 1834

The Government had to act. It set up a Commission of Inquiry on the reappraisal of the Poor Law. The two year investigation was headed by Edwin Chadwick however *The New Poor Law 1834*, based on the Gilbert Act of 1782, was hurriedly introduced before all the evidence was in. The outcome was that instead of individual parishes (15,000 in England & Wales) making their own arrangements groups of parishes were formed into Unions; within four years 13,000 parishes were incorporated into 573 Unions.

Each Union had a purpose building called the *Poor Law Union Workhouse* for paupers. It was a last resort; those who were merely poor were expected to fend for themselves with the help of charity (from church, chapel or individual). It was not a soft option but an uneasy combination of care and deterrence for the destitute which was intended to be harsh. It aimed to make life as unpleasant as possible working on the theory that *human action is motivated by the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of pain*. The elderly and sick would be looked after but work would be provided for others. Workhouses were designed as self-sufficient communities. Within three years the poor rate was cut by a third. In the 1860s it was calculated that charitable giving in London alone was about the same as the cost of the Poor Law throughout England & Wales. Overseers still had some autonomy. They had the power to levy the local poor rate so it was important for them to keep costs as low as possible. Emigration to the new world was encouraged for families and unaccompanied children. A hundred thousand children were sent to Canada to serve as cheap farm and domestic labour. It was intended that *Out Relief* should cease though in reality in many places this didn't happen.

WINSLOW UNION OF WORKHOUSES

The Winslow Union consisted of 17 parishes: *Drayton Parslow, Dunton, East Claydon, Grandborough, Great Horwood, Hogston, Hogshaw-cum-Fulbrook, Little Horwood, Mursley with Saldin, Nash, North Marston, Shenley Brook End, Stewkley, Swanbourne, Tattenhoe, Whaddon, Winslow-cum-Shipton* (sic) a total population of 7847 in 1831. In Winslow there were 1,100 people at the beginning of 19thC rising to 1,890 in 1861 due, no doubt in part, to the railway being built. Each parish provided a *Guardian* except Winslow which provided two. The Board of Guardians, a committee made up of local clergy, business and tradesmen, was responsible for overseeing the Workhouse. Some thought that those on the Board were rate savers, *guardians of the rates rather than the poor*. The Relieving Officer decided who could have a place.

On the 11th June 1835 the Guardians met with Sampson Kempthorne to seek his advice on extending the existing Workhouse in High Street. He suggested a 200 place facility. The Guardians agreed on a new Workhouse for 250 inmates; Kempthorne and Gilbert-Scott were asked to draw up plans and estimates.

Built on North Field, on the then edge of town, the site stretched from Avenue Road to Station Road. It is thought Winslow had the first of this particular design of George Gilbert-Scott's workhouses. The cost was £5250. To defray expenses there was a sale of 42 parish-owned cottages and the old Workhouse (described elsewhere) at The Bell on 30th March 1837.

The workhouse was built on a square with a cross through the centre; the four spaces provided exercise yards. Inmates were separated for living, working and exercising. Most of the building was three storeys. The fine façade of the front section had canted bay windows (flat front and angled sides) and faced the town. Part of it is still visible on a private property between Swan House and Shaftsbury Court. This section was would have contained the committee room for the Board of Guardians and the Master's accommodation. The south arm possibly accommodated the school room and children's wards (dormitories). The east and west arms of the cross separated inmates; one side for males and the other for females with their day (dining) rooms on the ground floor and wards (dormitories) for the infirmed on the first floor and the able-bodied on the second and third floors. The single storey buildings at the rear accommodated the bakery, laundry, wash and bath houses, a room for the dead and punishment room. The infirmary was possibly in the short north arm. Upstairs the ceilings were lower; the rooms were painted in a dreary mud-colour and the lower panes of window glass were white-washed to prevent the inmates looking on the yards. The stairs would have been of metal or stone. The centre of the cross with windows at the corners provided vantage points where the Master could see what was going on. Toilets were earth closets. Locally the Workhouse was known as 'the spike' due to the tall spiked railing around its perimeter. A six-cubicle casual ward was added to the front of the building. The garden extended forward to Avenue Road producing enough to feed its community, it included a piggery. Also on site were stables, a carpenter's shop and a blacksmith's.

The overly large Winslow building was designed anticipating paupers from London would fill the vacancies but census records show it was never fully used. In 1841 just 55 staff and inmates including children were listed; 1851 there were 79 inmates,1861 there were 48 paupers, 1871there were 66 paupers, 1881 there were 5 staff and 57 inmates aged 2 months to 86 years and 1891 just 28 paupers including 5 listed as imbeciles or blind. However the numbers rose at the turn of the century as the 1901 census records 91 inmates. A sad fact is that a quarter of all inmates were illegitimate and apparently abandoned.

STAFF: On the 1851 census William and Mary Minter from Southwark were the Master and Matron, posts they held for 44 years. The Master was responsible for the day to day running of the establishment. His wife (and later his daughter) was responsible for the care and supervision of the women and children and also for nursing duties before nursing qualifications existed. Frederick Meads aged 17 from Hertford was employed as the teacher. John Hill was the porter; it was his job to admit the paupers. A clerk, often an aspiring solicitor, attended committee meetings and kept the records. Each census records a different teacher and porter. The 1901 census also shows an assistant matron and a Nurse were employed.

INMATES: the reasons that many hated or feared the workhouse was that families were separated, they wore uniforms, and Paupers were divided into groups:

1. Old and infirm men; 2. Able-bodied men; 3. Boys 7 – 12 (14 in some workhouses)
4. Old and infirm women; 5. Able-bodied women; 6. Girls 7 – 12 (14); 7. Children under 7

The Old & Infirm, also known as the *deserving poor*, included the elderly, those who were ill, disabled or suffered from mental health – lunatics as they were then called. If they were unable to work there was nothing to occupy them. The Able-bodied, the *undeserving poor*, were those who were fit enough but unable to find work. In rural areas many turned up at workhouses in winter when there was no work on the land. Unmarried mothers were seen as loose women and shunned by others; for many years they were forced to wear yellow bands and were badly treated. Separate were vagrants or casuals for

whom the workhouse was a vital refuge. They would only be admitted after 5pm and often long queues formed. Once admitted they would have to do 4 hours work before receiving bed and board. Some did the work in the morning before being let out. Children stayed with their mothers in the casual wards.

ROUTINE: there was a tedious regime controlled by the bell which clanged at:
6.00 - half an hour to get ready before Matron's inspection, followed by prayers and half an hour for breakfast
7.00 - time for work
Noon -lunch break
1.00 - back to work
6.00 - dinner followed by prayers
8.00 - bed
The day was governed by daylight hours, in winter 7.00 was rising time. In winter the inmates were pleased to go to bed as there was little coal to warm the day room, the aim was not to waste the ratepayers' money.

WORK: Able-bodied women undertook the tasks necessary to run the workhouse – cooking, laundry, cleaning, scrubbing floors etc. They also worked in the infirmary and helped with the old and infirm. The *deserving* women sewed new uniforms, patched and darned old ones. Some edged handkerchiefs with lace. In Winslow the lace was sold and they were paid 3/- (15p). Able-bodied men broke stone for roads, chopped wood for kindling, worked in the bakery etc. The *deserving* men tended the vegetable garden. One of the most hated jobs was oakum, (the unpicking of old rope). When tarred rope used to seal wooden ships was no longer efficient the inmates had to remove the tar by hammering it with wooden mallets or iron hooks. It was hard work and often caused hands to bleed; they were expected to get through 3.5 lbs. Punishment could be to go without food for two days or be put in the darkened punishment room. Inmates didn't work on Sundays but were expected to attend church in the morning and afternoon when they were separated as in the Workhouse. Christmas Day & Good Friday were work-free.

FOOD: There were six model menu plans the Master could choose from. The amount of food provided was carefully recorded by the Clerk or Master in ledgers. Each week inmates were given between 137 and 182 ounces dependant on age and gender. Interestingly in prisons they were allowed 292 ounces! It was however more than a labourer. The meals were monotonous, intended to fill stomachs and sustain life. In some workhouses bread made up the bulk of the weight, not nice bakery loaves but dense black ones made of rye. Breakfast was gruel, a thin watery porridge and a mug of tea, with sometimes a piece of bread. For lunch the inmates were allowed 5oz meat or bacon twice a week, cod or haddock on Fridays, suet pudding on two days and broth on the other two days. Dinner was bread, cheese and water.

CHILDREN & EDUCATION: Before compulsory schooling under the Education Act of 1870 workhouse children were often better off as they were taught the 3Rs and Religious Education for three hours a day. Children were equipped to become useful citizens. Lessons were often hindered in winter by the lack of light. The older children were prepared for employment for example leaning the trade of a tailor, farrier or gardener for boys and sewing or household tasks for girls. For the teacher the workhouse was a live-in job. He was responsible for seeing that the boys washed at 6am, supervised their meal-times, exercise and bedtime routines and checked they carried out their daily chores. He supervised their conduct and appearance for outside visits. The teacher worked Saturdays and Sundays but had two nights off each week! After 1870 some children attended the local elementary school, they were recognised by their shaved hair and uniforms. Girls about to leave the workhouse to go into service were allowed to grow their hair.

Winslow workhouse records give further insight into the regime –
1835 All infectiously diseased inmates to be accommodated in one second storey room with windows open and the room heated by coal fire night and day
1836 Women allowed 1pint beer a day reduced to ½ pint in August
1837 Windows on the north side were secured to prevent inmates from escaping
1838 Quantity of stone purchased to afford employment
1839 Bibles were provided
1841 The Master was refused a salary increase. Advertisements for a Porter and Schoolteacher show both were paid £20 pa
1844 The Union offered to pay people to go to Australia – man & wife 30/- (£1.50); child 5/- (25p); single person 20/- (£1)
1845 Rev George Hinde requested 12 girls age 14+ for a paper manufacturer in Kent for a wage of 2/6 plus board and lodgings. The Guardians refused the application but any girl desirous to go could with the Board providing necessities and clothes
1857 At Christmas the 38 inmates were treated to an unlimited supply of roast beef and plum pudding. The men were given tobacco, the women snuff and children oranges and nuts. A similar record appears in 1866

Sometimes it all got too much for the inmates - James Price aged 15 was driven to despair and set the linen store alight. Thomas Kelly burnt his clothes so that he didn't have to work. The punishment was harsh, James got fourteen days in prison and 12 lashes of the birch and Thomas got 21 days in Aylesbury gaol.

INFIRMARY: it is likely there was an Infirmary to cater for the needs of the inmates and the town's poor. Although there were two doctors in Horn Street (by 1991there was a GP at Norden House) without the means to pay it would have been necessary for the poor to use the Infirmary. About a third of the patients would **not** have been inmates; they took in their own bed linen, cutlery, towel, comb and fare to return home. Generally workhouse infirmaries were supervised by the District Medical Officer. He worked under contract supplying all drugs, bandages etc. and performed operations, vaccinations and midwifery. At the start almost all the nursing care was done by inmates so poor hygiene was not unusual. Pauper nurses often worked for rations of gin! Scabies and lice were common amongst those living in close proximity; also conjunctivitis was often rife among the children, which if left untreated could cause blindness. Dysentery, typhus and

tuberculosis were common. Of course these were conditions of the time and applied equally to those in overcrowded accommodation. Winslow, with its low numbers, was probably a lot healthier than most workhouses. Nationally improvements came about from1860 with the training of nurses and the influence of Florence Nightingale, Louise Twining (of the tea family) and others. More nurses were employed; the Nurse was expected to be on duty day and night, indeed her bed was on the ward, all for £30 a year. Isolation/ fever wards were built to limit the spread of infectious diseases. By 1897 things had greatly improved for nurses, now literate, they would carry out the instructions of the Medical Officer including the administration of drugs. As more trained nurses were appointed to work on surgical, medical and midwifery wards; standards rose.

THE DEMISE OF THE WORKHOUSE

At the turn of the 20th century reforms began which would see the end of workhouses. In 1905 a Royal Commission was set up to investigate what changes could be made to the Poor Law. State pensions began in in 1908 for those over 70. From 1911 the term workhouse was replaced by *Poor Law Institution* and by 1930 *Public Assistance Institution*. In 1919 following the First World War the Government promised homes *fit for heroes*; a programme of council house building began. By 1930 County Councils had taken over from the Guardians. In 1948 the Poor Law system was finally abolished with the introduction of the modern welfare state and the passing of the National Assistance Act.

WINSLOW - FROM WORKHOSE TO HOSPITAL

In 1914 Winslow Workhouse was used as a prison for WW1 deserters. By the late 1920s a few new ideas had been implemented with the addition of a little extra money but the character of the place changed little, there were up to 140 people mostly those unable to live independently. Then due to its proximity to an airfield it was decided to modify the building as an emergency wartime hospital, renovations were carried out which included the installation of electricity, the formation of four wards with kitchens, sluices, central heating etc.
In 1946 Dr Peter Rudd arrived; as well as being GP he took on medical care at the hospital. Soon there was a six bed maternity ward plus dentistry, physiotherapy, chiropody and speech therapy services for out-patients and an Almoner's office. Four wards accommodated 46 beds with appropriate facilities and staff. One of Dr Rudd's projects was to improve the lives of the remaining sixty four patients with mental health problems who were living in two wings. Although adequately cared for nevertheless they wore uniforms, carried out menial tasks and were locked in dormitories at night. Facilities were improved including the removal of barred windows; essentially it became a Geriatric Unit. Over thirty years those with additional needs were integrated into the community or placed in specialist units in Aylesbury. In January 1978 Winslow Hospital closed and services transferred to Aylesbury. The Health Centre was built in The Avenue. In 1983 Swan House a Social Services provision for the elderly was opened alongside Shaftsbury Court a home for those in need of supported accommodation.

Researched by Glenys Warlow

Barwell, J. *The Victorian Workhouse*, 1994 Wayland Ltd
Chrisp, P. *On the Trail of the Victorians of Britain*, 1999 Franklin Watts Ltd
Clear, A. *A Thousand Years of Winslow Life*, 1894 French Publishers Winslow
Elliott, D. *Buckingham* 1975
May, T. *The Victorian Workhouse*, 2008 Shire Publications Ltd
Rudd, P. *Winslow Hospital*, 1984
Saving, NA. *Glimpses of Past Day Being a Historical Survey on the Town and Parish of Winslow cum Shipton*, 1973, Hillier Buckingham
Wigley, A. *A Window on Winslow*, 1981, Hazell, Watson & Viney Ltd, Aylesbury
Smith, S. *The Workhouse Southwell* – 2009 National Trust
Websites: Jenny Peel transcript of Winslow Workhouse Records Buckingham FHS; Winslow History Project; British History on line A history of the County of Buckinghamshire Vol 3 1925