

Barrow Union Workhouse Talk

The speaker at November's local history group meeting was Quorn's local historian, Sue Templeman, talking about the Barrow Union Workhouse and the lives of some of its inmates in the 19th century.

We heard that Barrow Union workhouse covered an area that represented 30 parishes, the majority in what we know these days as Charnwood. Sue reminded us that workhouses were built soon after the spread of the industrialisation, at a time when the population was growing and poverty becoming a real problem in every community. This was a time long before any unemployment support, pensions or other benefits we take for granted as part of the welfare system. Going back through the centuries the only provision for the poor came through religious institutions like monasteries and others run by *hospitallers* who saw it their Christian duty to show hospitality and provide succour for those less fortunate than themselves. With Henry VIII bringing about the dissolution of the monastic system the poor were forced back into fending for themselves- begging for food and shelter.



Vagrancy had been declared unlawful when Elizabeth I came to the throne. Then successive Poor Law Acts were passed in 1597 and 1601 to absolve the state from any responsibility for the problem and make parishes make provision for the local poor. In some villages alms houses were built for the lucky few. Some were supported by benefactors or charitable bodies alternatively funding would derive from a poor law rate levied on the local community. Distinctions were made between the *deserving poor* and *vagrants* who often ended up being incarcerated in prison-like cells. Provision remained patchy as overseers in some

parishes were often “partial“, i.e. looking favourably on some families and not on others.

As the population grew throughout the 18th century, the situation became critical. Mobility was discouraged as many parishes would only make provision for settled residents. Some parishes made only minimal effort as parish support was often seen as a ‘soft’ option, encouraging idolatry.

In 1832, under the Whig politician, Lord Melbourne, a Royal Commission established Poor Law Unions. Parishes were amalgamated to form Boards of Guardians and workhouses were built to serve each union. There were 11 unions in the Leicestershire region; 30 parishes were linked for the Barrow (on Soar) Union with 7 more added a few years later.

In 1837 Barrow Union workhouse was built at a cost of £6400. Despite its name it wasn’t located in Barrow village but on the border between the parishes of Mountsorrel and Rothley, off Union lane (now called Linkfield Rd). Built, as was common practice, on the edge of the village so as to be kept out of sight of the village gentry. The remains of the entrance porch and frontage of this vast complex of buildings (designed by architect, William Flint) is all that survives today.

One of the first appointed Masters was John Derry, his wife was the matron. Their residential apartments sat in a central position of the workhouse, overlooking separate exercise yards for young men, old men, young women, older women and children. Accommodation blocks for men and women were also kept separate. There was also a cell block providing basic accommodation for tramps/vagrants. The upper floors in each block had some provision for the elderly and infirm. Only the elderly at Mountsorrel were allowed tea. The rest lived on a diet of broth, gruel and porridge. Beds were cramped together (as many as 20 in a room) with straw mattresses. At one point chairs had no backs and it was not until Lady Lanesborough at Swithland Hall heard about this and intervened, making chairs with backs available for the elderly.

Each day a strict work regime would be arranged. This included gardening, sewing, cooking and rock breaking. Vagrants were made to carry out this in their cells having to feed the crushed rock back through iron grids across the windows. Other laborious tasks included picking Oakum (untangling matted marine ropes to produce fibres which could be used for calking ship timbers).

The regime was deliberately harsh. Residents were forced to wear degrading uniforms. Misdemeanours were severely punished with repeat offenders being sent out to Leicester’s House of Correction for more hard labour. At the Barrow Workhouse we know the Poor law commission forced the resignation of the

master (Derry) in 1846, after the death of a 75 year old inmate who died after being compelled to pump water for the workhouse.

During the late 19th and early twentieth centuries some improvements were implemented. From the 1830s workhouses had become the responsibility of county councils not local parishes. Pensions were introduced in 1909. By 1948 Barrow Poorhouse had been transferred to the health service and hospitals like Glenfrith started taking a more prominent role.

Apart from the fragment of the workhouse that survives, off Linkfield Rd, one of the few reminders of these difficult times is the Pauper's Grave erected just a few years ago in Rothley cemetery.

Mark Temple