

by

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"... some worn out relative or friend who had been charitably clutched off to a great blank barren Union house as far from the old home as the County Jail and in its dietary, and in its lodging, and in its tending of the sick, a much more penal punishment." Dickens, "Our Mutual Friend", 1865.

More than twenty years after his savage attack on the Poor Law system in "Oliver Twist" Dickens remained an obdurate critic of public charity. Here he stresses not only the low standard of care for the poor, but the additional hardship of their separation from familiar places and people.

A previous article (1) describes how in the Chailey Union the paupers were distributed among three workhouses, the old at Ditchling, the able-bodied at Chailey and the children at Ringmer. Unfortunately there is a gap between 1841 and 1858 in the guardians' minutes that are housed in the East Sussex Record Office; our study then resumes seven years before Dickens, in "Our Mutual Friend", told the story of old Betty Higden, who preferred death on the road rather than in the workhouse.

Poor Law Bureaucracy

On scanning these later minutes (2) one is aware of a change. They are more formal and statistical than the previous ones. They consist, at any rate up to 1867, largely of tables of figures and routine formulated statements. One feels Mr. Gradgrind has breathed on them. Thus we have no more detailed account of the school at Ringmer than is contained in the Inspector's regular reports, the fullest of which reads "Examined the schools which as before are in good order and fairly instructed in all the common subjects and industrially trained".

While questions put to the guardians by the Poor Law Commissioners are minuted, the answers are not, which can be frustrating to the researcher. The questions do, however, tell us something of the concerns of the authorities. Information was required as to the results of the education given to the children in the workhouse schools; the number of children under 16 in the workhouses; "the number of young persons in the workhouse schools for a period of not less than two consecutive years ended 31st December 1860, and who left the workhouse for service and industrial occupation shewing also the number of such young people

who have returned to the workhouse by reason of their own misconduct and the number who have returned for reasons not involving their misconduct". The number of bastard children born in the workhouse in 1860, 1861 and 1862 was also required. In 1872 the Local Government Board, which under an Act of 1871 replaced the Poor Law Board, asked about the education of outdoor pauper children, and in the next year required the age of the youngest boy and the youngest girl in each workhouse, and the number of boys corporally punished. Returns were required of the religious denominations of the inmates. The Poor Law Commissioners were anxious that the religious education of orphan children should be secured; in 1859 all such children in the Chailey Union were recorded as Church of England.

The Workhouse Children

The number of children in the Ringmer school is given regularly. Starting at 36 in May 1858, numbers drop to 17 in July of the next year, and then climb to 50 in the February of 1863. During all that year they remain above 40, and only begin to decline appreciably in 1865. By 1868 they are down to 17 and thereafter fluctuate between 8 and 28, remaining on the whole below 20. No doubt the size of the families sinking into pauperism caused some of these variations, but a marked decline in numbers between 1863 and 1873 is evident. The Sussex Post Office directory of 1855 (3) gives the names of the schoolmaster and schoolmistress at Ringmer Workhouse School as Mr.Griffin and Mrs.Martha Griffin. They must have been succeeded in the same year by Frederick Joseph Jones and his wife, as he is on record as having held the post since 1855. We have it on the authority of the medical officer that the health of the workhouse children was good; but his testimony is not disinterested - he used this as an argument against a reduction in his salary when they were removed from his care in 1873.

The only child mentioned by name in the minutes is James Briggs, an enterprising lad who at the age of fifteen expressed a wish to go to sea. The Marine Society agreed to accept him for the sum of three guineas. In 1873 vacancies at the Goliath Training Ship, Grays, Essex were notified to the governors, and Mile End Middlesex wanted children at 7s.Od. per head to educate at their industrial schools. Probably most of the children left the school to become domestic or farm servants; these the guardians were told must be visited by the relieving officer.

Since the school had been sited at Ringmer there had been several attempts to move the children elsewhere. In 1866 there was a proposal that they should go to Chailey, but the house at Chailey was inadequate without extensive and

expensive alterations. When, however, next year the guardians were requested to give their opinion on the formation of a district school for Lewes, Chailey, Newhaven and Uckfield Unions they considered this unacceptable because the present school was entirely distinct and separate from the other workhouses. As we shall see, from 1867 onwards they were interested in preserving the status quo.

Diet and Health

Food and health remained important considerations for the guardians. Tenders for 1859 mention flour (best seconds), beef, shins, mutton, suet, cheese, butter, tea, sugar, soap, candles, rice and salt. In 1865 beef is quoted at 7d. a lb., mutton at 8d., but meat for the officers at 9d. Butter was 1s.0d., tea 2s.0d. a lb. Mr. Jones, master at Ringmer asked that his weekly allowance of 4½ lbs of meat be increased to 7 lbs, being the same quantity as was allowed to the master and mistress at Chailey. This was agreed.

A doctor complained in 1867 that meat was given to the able-bodied at Chailey but once a week. The previous year the guardians had laid down that able-bodied male paupers might work at stone-breaking. The diet paupers were given in the poverty-stricken thirties was better than this. In 1873 it was decided to use Australian frozen meat. One of the last entries in the minute book before the workhouses closed concerns butter, which a local government inspector found to be of inferior quality. The supplier was ordered to keep to his contract which specified sweet new third Cork butter. The food allowance for officers of the new workhouse was given in detail : per week : 7 lbs bread, 2 lbs flour, 1 lb cheese, ½ lb butter, 12 ozs sugar, 2 ozs tea; per day : 1 quart table ale, 1 lb potatoes with other vegetables should there be any. In addition 3s.6d. was allowed weekly in lieu of meat.

A Poor Law query in May 1865 concerned expensive medicines such as codliver oil and quinine, but no change was made in the existing arrangements. These did not satisfy Mr. Gravely, M.O., who in September requested "to be supplied with codliver oil and other expensive medicines as he thought they might in a great many cases be substituted for mutton". Mr. George Hother M.O. was found guilty in February 1864 of negligence in the case of the late Mrs. Cosham of Ringmer. He was requested to be careful in the performance of his duties. The next month, however, he was allowed £5 overtime as there were severe cases of fever in the district. One death from typhoid was reported at Chailey workhouse in 1870, the guardians adding that "happily (as we have no means of isolating cases) this is the only infectious case we have had during the winter". Happily, indeed. In February 1873 Ringmer was reported to be "now free of fever".

Perhaps the most serious challenge faced by the M.Os was a threatened cholera epidemic in 1866. In August a special meeting was called and a committee was set up in each parish to deal with the emergency should it arise. In October cholera broke out at Lewes workhouse for the able-bodied. Chailey guardians were asked to receive the children from St. Anne's workhouse but they refused. Evidently this epidemic was widespread as in January 1867 the Diseases Prevention Act was renewed for six months by the Lords of the Privy Council. There does not seem to have been any cholera in the Chailey area. Vaccination was a continuing concern of the M.Os. Early in 1871 there were cases of smallpox at Ditchling and a letter from the medical department of the Privy Council urged that vaccination registers be completed. "Guardians would incur grave responsibility if children die in the Union from smallpox".

Vagrants

Vagrants were a problem. It was enacted in March 1861 that no relief be granted to them except in cases of illness or sudden necessity. Four years later, however, the work to be required of them was set out in the minutes. For males, 2 hours at the pumps, or 2 hours wheeling manure etc. in the garden; for females picking $\frac{1}{2}$ lb of oakum or assisting in cleaning the vagrant wards. No one was to be detained for more than four hours on the day after admission. These tasks were increased in 1870 and 1872.

The Shock Report Condemning the Workhouses

Apart from the occasional epidemic, the guardians' task ran in a smooth routine until in May 1867 their peace of mind was shattered. A disturbing report was inserted in the visitors' book at Chailey by the Inspector, Dr. Edward Smith, who declared that there were three old, inconvenient and ill-adapted workhouses in this Union, that three sets of officers caused unnecessary expense, and that visitation was nominal. At Chailey, he reported, inmates washed in dirty water in a trough, some combs were wanting, meat was given only once a week, and there was "an offensive case in the room with the other sick". His only complaints at Ringmer were that a deaf and dumb girl should be transferred to a special school, and that "there seemed to be a great economy in the use of rugs and wooden spoons". But his main attack was directed at Ditchling, which he had visited in April. The house was, he wrote, altogether inadequate. There was no proper sick ward. The attendance was defective - an old man's clothes caught fire at the grate and he was burned to death. Two old men were sleeping by day in a ward without fire or fireplace. A paid nurse did the cooking and ironing and other work apart from her duties as nurse. The matron was advanced in life and superintended the whole. The vagrant ward for men

was quite unsuitable and the master often gave an applicant 4d to provide him with a bed outside rather than place him in the ward. There were no water closets, baths or waterbeds or macintosh sheeting, scarcely any furniture, what there was old and broken, and no cupboards in which to put things away. The inmates wore their own clothes till they were worn out, and provided their own teapots, cups and saucers, and cutlery. They washed in buckets. Tin plates and pannikins had long had the tin worn off them, and were disgraceful in appearance. The workhouse should be closed.

The Guardians on the Defensive

Not surprisingly, after this broadside the Poor Law Board asked the guardians to consider the erection of a new workhouse for all the indoor poor in the Union. One can imagine their dismay at the prospect of having to find the money for such a project. By July they had prepared their defence. In their opinion, they stated, the present workhouses were suitable for the wants of the Union. The House at Ringmer was well adapted for children and they were entirely kept apart from the other classes. The same number of officers would be required in one workhouse as in three, with the addition of a chaplain, "whereas now from the nearness of the respective Houses to the Parish Churches the inmates are able to attend church which is looked on as boon particularly by the aged and the workhouses are visited by the respective clergymen". Here the guardians did have a strong case. They contended, too, that the visitation criticised as inadequate was normal - not all visits had been recorded. The numbers admitted were below standard, and each House had more space than was required.

As to the detailed criticisms: night stools were provided for those unable to go to the privies in the yards; a large bath was used whenever required; there was macintosh sheeting; the guardians had always acceded to requests for supply of or repair to furniture and had received no complaints from the master. The inmates wore their own clothes from choice, and were allowed to bring their own teapot, cup and saucer "in order that they may have the gratification of making their own tea" (these are humane considerations, though one wonders how much tea, and what facilities for making it were provided). There were shelves where these articles could be placed, and these were preferable to cupboards as ensuring that crockery was cleaned and that "no facilities for concealing provisions were afforded" (what provisions, one asks, had they to conceal?). Some inmates washed their feet in buckets but handbowls were provided and towels changed two or three times a week. A new supply of earthenware plates had been ordered to replace the old tin ones. As for the trough at Chailey - the guardians were informed that there were separate compartments in it, and clean water could be

supplied on request. New rugs had been ordered for Ringmer House. No defence was attempted against the serious criticism of the staffing and supervision at Ditchling. The guardians added this significant comment: "It should be borne in mind that the class of persons availing themselves of the House are agricultural labourers whose habits and manner of living are entirely different from those of a town population and who on admittance to the workhouse invariably find themselves in a far greater degree of comfort than they had enjoyed in the homes they have left". They added that no objection had been made by any inmate.

The Poor Law Commissioners were not moved by these representations, and tightened the screw. They asked the guardians to consider the effect of an insufficient amount of workhouse accommodation upon the administration of the law. They also complained about the numbers in receipt of outdoor relief as compared with those maintained in the workhouses (outdoor relief at Ringmer varied from £200 to over £400 per quarter during this period). The guardians riposted that the workhouses were not insufficient and not full - the outdoor relief was given to the able-bodied when there was sickness in the family. Such relief was sanctioned by the Board "and was at the same time the most consistent with humanity and economy, combining as far as may be the interests of the Rate payers and the Poor" (4).

The Struggle Continues

This was the beginning of a long struggle. A new inspector, J.J.Henley, agreed with Dr.Smith that the condition of the Ditchling Workhouse did not meet the requirements of the present time. The other local unions were asked what number of inmates they could receive should Chailey be dissolved; but though Lewes and West Fille were prepared to be accommodating Uckfield refused. The guardians wrote to Mr.Henley reiterating their opinion that the houses were adequate, and added this moving plea: "The Guardians disclaim the slightest desire to withhold from those who are compelled to seek admission into the workhouses any comfort which they might reasonably expect to enjoy, but they cannot forget that there are very many rate payers in the Union who are but one degree removed from the recipients of relief and to whom even a slight addition of taxation is likely to prove so heavy a burden as to reduce them from the class of rate payers to the receivers of relief". At the same time they declared that of late years pauperism generally had diminished. Ditchling, which could accommodate 53, had an average of 21 inmates during the last two years. Ringmer, built for 80, had averaged 23 and Chailey, that would take 87, averaged 55 during the last 8 years.

Final Fiat : The New Workhouse

In spite of these arguments the Poor Law Commissioners insisted that the interests of the poor and the ratepayers would be better served by a central workhouse. So, in October 1868, the guardians began to look for a site. Their first attempt to purchase a portion of Wickham Farm from Sir George Shiffner failed. They then seem to have tried to stall. At one meeting they adjourned the matter of a new site in the absence of the Chairman. In March 1869 they sent a deputation with instructions that "every effort be made to induce the Poor Law Board to allow the present workhouses to continue to be used". All was in vain. A year later they received a letter from the Poor Law Board stating that "Nothing short of the erection of a new building would suffice for the actual wants of the Union".

A committee was perforce appointed to select a site, and after nine months, on 1st January 1871, it was agreed to buy six acres, part of a small farm at Chilmington belonging to Mr. Edgar Blaker, and occupied by Mr. Austin Olive. J.G. Blenzowe Esq. was appointed chairman of a building committee, and Mr. Card was directed to prepare plans. The probable cost was reckoned at £13,988 all told, but that was considered too expensive by the Poor Law Board architect. The guardians were directed to build the new workhouse in twelve calendar months at a cost not exceeding £12,000, and they were authorised to borrow money to be repaid by thirty equal amounts in thirty years. The tender of Mr. James Peerless, of Eastbourne, of £10,489 was accepted.

The new workhouse was not, however, ready for occupation till 1873, and meanwhile the troubles at Ditchling continued. The M.O. in August 1872 called attention to "the danger likely to arise from the outrageous outbreak of passion in the case of Susan Wright". She was ordered to be removed to Chailey. In July 1873 the Local Government Inspector found Ditchling workhouse "exceptionally dirty and offensive, much out of repair and most abominably infested by vermin - the earliest opportunity should be taken of removing inmates to the new workhouse". The master replied that he had not thought it worth the expense to limewash the workhouse this year and added "The offensive smell was only in the room occupied by a woman of the name of Hemsley who was so filthy in her habits that he was obliged to give spirits to the women who cleaned her".

The Changeover - Ringmer loses its Workhouse School

But the days of Ditchling and the two other houses were numbered. In June of 1873 a notice of dismissal was given to the officials employed therein to take effect on September 29th. Mrs. Jones, the schoolmistress at Ringmer, died on

June 27th. The guardians requested a superannuation allowance of £30 to Mr. Jones, who had held the office of schoolmaster since 1855 "to the satisfaction of the guardians and his general character and conduct were always good". The Board replied that "in order to entitle an officer to a pension he should have become incapable of discharging the duties of his office with efficiency by reason of permanent infirmity of mind or body or of old age". Mr. Jones must have been proved to be sufficiently infirm or aged, as he got his pension.

Officers of the new workhouse were appointed. Mr. Adam Spary and his wife were Master and Mistress at £65 per annum with the usual rations. The nurse and porter had £20 each, and the Medical Officer £40. As an attempt to transfer the children to Lewes Union failed, it was agreed that one schoolmistress would be enough to teach both boys and girls; Mrs. Elizabeth Ayling was appointed schoolmistress at a salary of £25, and the Rev. Henry Shirm became Chaplain. The officers' rations have already been given in detail. The old books, account books and schoolbooks were to be sold. Vaccination at Ringmer would in future take place in a room at the Anchor Inn.

The inhabitants of Ringmer asked that the old workhouse property be sold and the proceeds applied towards the liquidation of the share of the parish in the new workhouse. On the 10th June 1874 the old workhouse was auctioned at the Anchor Inn by direction of the guardians. Two garden plots were sold separately as potential building sites, but all three lots were purchased by Charles Bodle, the innkeeper of the Anchor, for a total of £374.

Bodle built himself a new house on part of the garden, and was living there at the time of his death in 1881. The workhouse, described as a brick built and tile-healed messuage in 1874, had by 1881 become a terrace of four large cottages. Union Terrace, as it was called, survived until the early 1960s, and there are Ringmer residents today who once lived there. The title deeds imply that the workhouse was simply converted into cottages, but photographs of Union Terrace suggest that it may have been very largely rebuilt at this time. The Edwardian postcard on which the accompanying drawing is based shows the inscription "Union Terrace" below the gable facing the Lewes Road. Corner Green (Terrace) now stands on the site (5).

Union Terrace, from an Edwardian postcard



Thus ends the story of the Ringmer Workhouse and its two companions. No doubt the new workhouse at Chilmington was more convenient, and for the aged, more hygienic, but one doubts if it was more attractive to the Betty Higdens of East Sussex.

References

- (1) Margaret Diggle, "Ringmer Poor in Chailey Union, 1835 - 1841". Ringmer History, No.1. pp.19-27.
- (2) East Sussex Record Office (ESRO) G2/1a/2-5.
- (3) The Sussex Post Office Directory, 1855, is on the shelves in the Research Room at ESRO.
- (4) On the question of the Poor Law regulations affecting outdoor relief in England and Wales, and of the guardians' resistance to them see Anne Digby, "The Poor Law in Nineteenth Century England and Wales", The Historical Association General Series, 104 p.21. This short pamphlet provides a very helpful general background to my local study.
- (5) For this and the preceding paragraph I am indebted to Dr. John Kay. Title deeds for the period 1874 - 1883, including a copy of the auctioneer's advertisement for the 1874 sale, are to be found in ESRO/GBN/1/3 and /8/5.