

# Workhouse to Hospital

A brief account of the Odd Down site of Bath Workhouse



## Preamble

This pamphlet has been produced in support of a campaign to place a permanent memorial at the site of the Bath Union Workhouse Burial Ground in Wells Road, Bath and to improve the field as an amenity for local people.

Opened in 1838, the Bath Workhouse was located between the Midford Road and Frome Road. Surviving buildings include the original hexagon-shaped block, the chapel, the infirmary, the mental health block and the bakery. A wider area was used for growing food crops, and this land included the new housing adjacent to Well Road (Wellsway), Sainsbury's supermarket and St Martin's Garden School. The burial ground was used from 1858-1899.

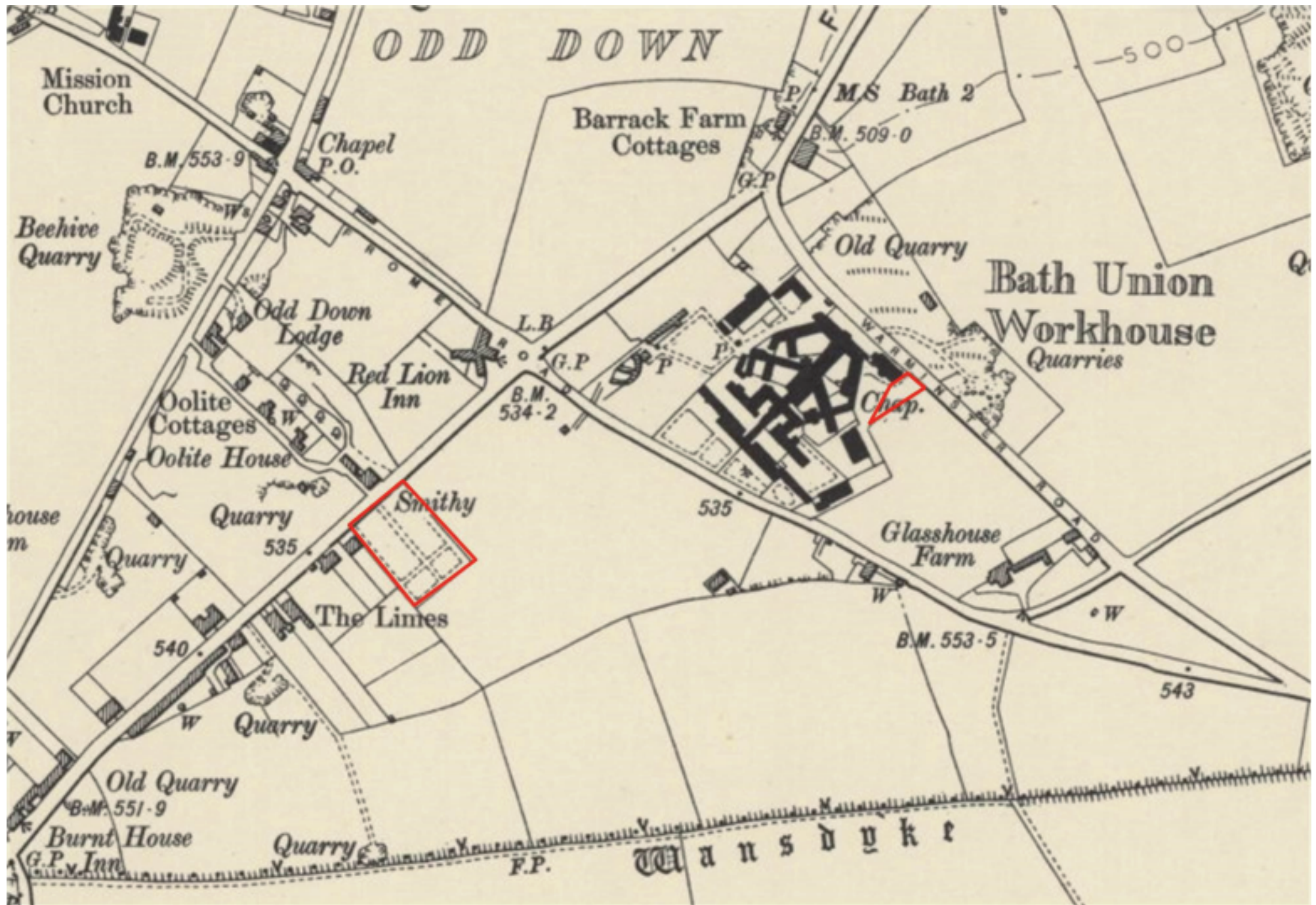
John Payne researched an exhibition on the history of the Bath Union Workhouse for the Museum of Bath at Work in 2017. The Museum Director, Stuart Burroughs, edited this written material for the exhibition and linked it to a number of illustrations, some of which have been reproduced in this pamphlet. There has been further editing of the text for the purpose of this pamphlet. We are grateful to the Museum of Bath at Work for their collaboration in the production of this pamphlet.

The photograph on the front cover shows the Bath Union Workhouse staff in about 1900. The map on the next page shows the location of the Workhouse and Burial Field at Odd Down.

Photographic credits: our thanks to Bath Record Office, the Museum of Bath at Work and Cross Engineering for permission to use photographs.

The website [www.workhouses.org.uk/](http://www.workhouses.org.uk/) is an invaluable guide to the whole field of Victorian workhouses; it contains material about Bath.

Typesetting by Julian Vincent  
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*The map of Odd Down in Victorian times showing the location of the Workhouse in relation to other features. The Burial Ground is on Wells Road opposite the smithy and quarry*

## 1 Provision for the Poor in Bath before 1834

Any provision for the poor – particularly those unable to work through age or disability- before the 12th century is unknown although it probably relied upon individual acts of charity. The existence of a monastery and abbey at Bath from the 8th century may have helped and in the 12th century a leper hospital was provided in Holloway, of which the Magdalen Chapel is the only vestige. St. John's Hospital in the city centre, founded in 1190, offered limited accommodation for the poor.

With the dissolution of the monastery in Bath in 1539, Bath Corporation inherited the lands and charitable responsibilities of the church and in the city itself ran almshouses and distributed bread, coal and wood to help relieve the most extreme poverty. In the 17th century a house of correction was opened to put beggars, attracted to the city, to work. In the individual parishes in and around the city the parish authorities provided some assistance.

In the 18th century the growth of the city prompted the Corporation and parish authorities to greater efforts. Funded through local taxes, parishes provide two kinds of assistance: out relief or accommodation at a poorhouse. Out relief provided financial and material assistance to the poor in their own homes while a poorhouse or workhouse provided accommodation for the desperately poor. However, temporary and permanent residents were often expected to work in exchange for such accommodation.

The parishes of St Peter & St Paul's and St James's built a workhouse on a site between Broad Street and Milsom Street in 1735 while the parish of Lyncombe and Widcombe opened workhouses on Lyncombe Hill and Claverton Street. Bathwick and Batheaston had workhouses by this time and in Walcot a workhouse was opened on the London Road in 1797 to accommodate 101 people. This later became the Walcot Industrial School for Boys. The Female Home and Penitentiary opened in Walcot Street in 1805 to provide accommodation and training to prostitutes in an attempt to provide them with alternative employment. It was funded by church authorities and wealthy individuals.

By the early 19th century other charitable organisations also offered assistance to the poor. The dispensary movement offered medical advice, treatment and medicine. The wealthy were encouraged to support the establishment of three dispensaries, at Cleveland Bridge, Albion Place and Widcombe. Tickets were offered to the poor which could be redeemed at such dispensaries. The Bath United Hospital in Beau Street also offered treatment through this system.

Other charities ran soup kitchens and a lunatic asylum in Bailbrook. The Deaf and Dumb Industrial School in Walcot offered training in dressmaking and needlework. Meanwhile wealthy individuals continued to offer some assistance themselves.

## 2 The New Poor Law and the Bath Union Workhouse

By 1834 the provision for the poor provided by a patchwork of parish authorities and private and religious bodies was under severe strain. The growth of town and cities, particularly in the industrialising north of England, was overwhelming the traditional system of provision. Meanwhile in the south the mechanisation of agriculture and changes in work had thrown many out of work and the rural parish provision was inadequate.

A government commission - The Commissioners of the Poor Law - was established to address the problem and proposed the setting up of Union Workhouses. These large purpose built institutions would centralise the accommodation of the poor across a district and replace the parish workhouses, where these existed. The public rates raised across the district would fund the construction and operation of the new facility. The new centre would accommodate men, women and children separately. Out Relief would continue in a limited form.

The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act was a landmark in the history of social welfare. For the first time it established a uniform system across the country for the administration of welfare. Supporters of the New Poor Law argued that it would save money, especially by ensuring that conditions inside the workhouse were no better than living conditions in the rest of society. As the pictures of the Milk Street slum suggests, this set the bar very low, as there was widespread poverty in the city and surrounding villages.

The new Bath Union Workhouse was built between 1836 and 1838 on Frome Road at Odd Down and replaced the provision offered by 24 individual parishes. Some of the parishes were tiny, but Walcot parish was the largest civil parish in the country and in 1820 16% of its residents were receiving poor relief.



*Milk Street, Bath, in Victorian times*

The first Chairman of the Bath Union Workhouse Guardians, who operated the workhouse, was Rev. Thomas Spencer of Hinton Charterhouse. Spencer believed that while the workhouse should act as a deterrent through a strict regime, it would also provide training. In this way the inmates might learn a trade to enable them to earn a living outside the workhouse. Based on his experience at Hinton, where the decline in the cloth trade had left many weavers out of work, he was a strong opponent of out relief, believing it ineffective.

### 3 For and Against – Debates on the New Poor Law

Bath was at the forefront of debate about the implementation of the 1834 Act. Opponents of the Act described conditions in the new workhouses as comparable to slavery. Others insisted that it was society's duty to ensure that when relief was given to poor people, it should be in return for work, and that conditions in the workhouse should be no better than conditions of working families outside it.

Key players in the debates locally were:

**Thomas Spencer**, curate at Hinton Charterhouse, first Chairman of the Bath Poor Law Board, and later secretary of the National Temperance Society;

**George Barreté**, a Bath magistrate;

**Emma Sheppard** wife of a Frome cloth manufacturer and author of the pamphlet *Sunshine in the Workhouse*.

Many of these pamphlets were printed in London and distributed in very large numbers indeed. The success of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* with its savage and bitter attack on the workhouse is a good example of public criticism of the institution.

As Chairman of the Bath Union Workhouse Board of Guardians, Spencer believed in strict economy and rigid implementation of the national rules drawn up by the Poor Law Commission. Barreté meanwhile argued that

implementation of the Poor Law must respond to local circumstances. Much of his difference with Spencer was

based on Clause 27 of the 1834 Act which stated that paupers had the right to relief outside the workhouse, and that decisions on such cases were to be made by magistrates.

The purpose of the New Poor Law was to reduce the total expenditure on poor relief, especially that given in people's own homes and communities. Yet such expenditure remained pretty constant through the nineteenth century, while the workhouse proved more expensive to run than expected.

By the late 1850s, the main function of the workhouse was already to provide accommodation for the old, the sick and for homeless children. Emma Shepherd argued that befriending such children and the seven hundred thousand infirm in the workhouses was a Christian duty. Her work, like that of other middle-class women, marks a tension between harsh, utilitarian attitudes to poverty and unemployment, and the strong Victorian charitable urge often inspired by evangelical Christian values.

*Sunshine in the Workhouse* was a Victorian best-seller, based on her work as a visitor at the Frome Workhouse. She reproduced statistics showing that the majority of those in the workhouse were there through no fault of their own: abandoned children, the physically and mentally ill and the elderly.

## 4 Architecture and Morality: The Bath Workhouse Building

The Bath Union Workhouse in Midford Road, opened in 1838, was built to a standard design by Sampson Kempthorne. Local architect George Manners oversaw its construction in Bath stone. Three wings radiated from the central offices of the workhouse and the wings were then linked to form a hollow hexagon. The open areas were used as recreation yards. There were day-rooms, dormitories and work-rooms and in addition to an infirmary were a kitchen and laundry (*see plan*).

An impressive block which housed the relieving officer, porter and chaplain stood adjacent to it (*image on the front cover*). Extensive land was purchased south of Frome Road for gardens to grow food. Some of this food was consumed within the workhouse, but crops were also grown for sale to farmers for animal fodder.

Bath Workhouse was designed for 600, but as early as 1845 contained 758 adults and 374 children. On arrival families were broken up as men, women and children were housed separately. Such was the demand for accommodation- particularly for the infirm- that the workhouse was soon enlarged. To the south of the main hexagon, invalid wards were added and in 1857 the so-called 'lunatic wards' for the mentally ill.

A separate laundry and bakery were built in later years. The intention was to reduce costs by employing pauper labour.

Accommodation was also provided for the itinerant poor in what was called the Casual Ward. Diets were simple and boring, beds were hard. The Poor Law Guardians ensured that everything was done as cheaply as possible.

The most obvious discipline of the workhouse was time. The notion of getting up, eating and working at the summons of the Workhouse bell (*see illustration on back cover*) must have seemed a very strange one in 1838. The bell can be seen in the main entrance to St Martin's Hospital.

6.45am Getting-up time  
7.30am Breakfast  
8.00 – 11.45am Morning Work  
12 noon Dinner  
1.00 – 5.00pm Afternoon Work  
5.30pm tea  
8.00pm Bed-time (8.30pm in summer)

There were punishments for those who broke workhouse rules, e.g. by swearing or fighting. There were also rewards such as beer for those inmates who took on responsible roles in the infirmary, laundry, kitchen and gardens



## 5 Worship and Burial –

### The Bath Workhouse Chapel and Burial Ground

The work of building a chapel for the workhouse was directed by John Plass, a stonemason who was one of the inmates. Work began in 1843 and was completed in 1846, when Plass was 78 years old. It is a Grade II listed building owned by NHS Property Services.

The workhouse employed a full-time Church of England chaplain. All inmates were expected to attend chapel on Sunday morning. A major issue in the early years of the Bath Workhouse was whether non-conformist and Roman Catholic inmates should be allowed out to attend their own places of worship.

Before 1847 the bodies of those who died in the workhouse were returned to the parish where they had lived. Once the chapel had been built, burials took place in unmarked graves on the land next to the chapel. 1107 bodies are buried there.

In 1855 the Board of Guardians purchased a further field on the other side of Frome Road, adjoining Wells Road. Pauper labour was used to clear stone from the field. These stones were used to build the wall that is still there today. The new burial ground was opened in 1858 and 3182 bodies were buried there between 1858 and 1899 in unmarked graves. There was a tunnel under Frome Road through which coffins were carried.

The Workhouse Burial Ground is now open space in the care of the Parks Department at Bath and North East Somerset Council. It is still consecrated ground.



*The Burial Ground*

## 6 Children in the Workhouse

Children from poor families ended up in the Workhouse for a number of reasons: some were abandoned by their parents while others were orphans. Some children were fostered locally from the workhouse. Young children from Bath Workhouse were also sent to Canada and Australia as part of national emigration schemes, escorted by adults who would find them suitable foster homes. Lessons were provided in the workhouse school-rooms. There was training for work for both sexes: sewing, knitting and housework for girls; tailoring, shoe-mending and hair-cutting for boys. All the clothing and footwear required in the Workhouse was made by the boys.

Until 1842 children were not allowed out of the workhouse but by the 1850s, play equipment such as cricket bats and balls was provided, and by 1856 country walks had been organised.

We have a good idea of the provision for children at Bath through the diary kept daily by William Winkworth the schoolmaster in 1856. Winkworth was appointed to take charge of nearly 100 boys aided by two pupil-teachers. School-teachers were employed not just to teach the children but to supervise them from morning till night, including chapel on Sunday mornings. Winkworth was a controversial choice, as he was a member of the independent Argyle Street chapel.

One of Winkworth's first actions was to buy a cane to enforce discipline. But he also introduced changes to supplement the curriculum of basic literacy and practical skills. He took the boys on long country walks, and introduced joint walks and singing lessons for boys and girls. He took the boys to a May fete in the city centre, and bathing in the Cam Brook beyond Southstoke. There was a fife and drum band which played at local events.



*Workhouse schoolchildren*

Bath was in the vanguard of local authorities in setting up small children's homes from 1896. Workhouse children were now housed in one of a number of houses spread around the city, in the care of a foster-mother, from where they could attend local schools. In 1917 Three Ways Home (now part of Three Ways School) opened next to the Workhouse as a 'receiving house' for children. A Superintendent was in charge, while his wife acted as relief foster-mother.

There is little evidence available on how the stigma of being a 'workhouse child' affected inmates in later life. The majority of the girls went into service. The Guardians made some attempt to make sure they were placed with respectable families and that they were visited to make sure they were not being mistreated. Willmott's Silk Throwers of Sherborne took a steady supply of young women as apprentices. For the boys a wider range of apprenticeships were available, often based on the practical skills they had learned in the workhouse.

## 7 Workhouse Staff

The difficulties of securing appropriate staff for the Bath Union Workhouse should not be underestimated. It was a large and complex institution of a rather new kind. Other workhouses had existed in and around Bath before the 1834 Poor Law Reform Act, but were rather smaller in size.

The Workhouse was managed by the Master and his wife (the Mistress) who was responsible for housekeeping. A Chaplain administered to spiritual needs and a Medical Officer was assisted by nurses. Other staff included teachers, nurses, porters and supervisors of work. A Relieving Officer administered the outdoor relief to poor residents in their own homes. As time moved on and the role of the workhouse shifted to the provision of medical services the staff became more professional and appointments were made on the basis of qualifications or experience. This was not the case in the early days.

As early as 1839 various charges and counter-charges were levelled against Workhouse staff, including the Master, the Schoolmaster, the Master Tailor and the Chaplain. The Poor Law Commissioners investigated a charge that Mr Lawrence, the first Master, had locked up a woman called Rebecca Collett in a 'black hole' overnight. She later had a miscarriage. The case was proved but no action taken beyond a reprimand since Collett was described as a 'low prostitute.' In the same year, the Board of Guardians rescinded a motion allowing Lawrence an extra £26 per year to employ a clerk. Instead Lawrence had pocketed the money. Lawrence and his wife resigned.

The careers of Joseph and Mary Hagger, who ran the workhouse from 1839-56, offer a more complex picture. They introduced modest reforms in the administration of the workhouse, but there is some evidence that their

'family' model of workhouse management extended beyond their own husband-and-wife team to something we would call nepotism today. Yet the fact that they could raise a chapel memorial to Eliza Norris, the schoolmistress who died very young, openly acknowledging that she was their niece, does suggest that this was not viewed as critically in 1854 as we might view it today.

In reviewing all aspects of employment in the Victorian workhouse it must be remembered that jobs were being invented, and there was not necessarily a clearly written job description for each job, or a clear staffing structure in which staff could locate themselves. Much must have depended, as it clearly did for Winkworth the schoolmaster, on personal relations with the Workhouse Master and his wife.

*NURSE FOR LUNATICS.*

**T**HE BOARD of GUARDIANS of the BATH UNION will, on WEDNESDAY, the 23rd day of JUNE, proceed to the Election of an ASSISTANT MALE NURSE to LUNATICS at the WORKHOUSE, on which day, at Twelve o'Clock, the Candidates must appear before the Board.

The Salary is £20 per Annum, with the usual rations of Officers.

Applications, in the handwriting of the Candidates, stating Age, and whether Married or Single, with Testimonials as to character and fitness, to be sent to me on or before MONDAY, the 21st day of June.

H. P. HULBERT,  
Clerk of the Union.

Poor-Law Union Office, Bath, 2nd June, 1858.

**T**HE BOARD of GUARDIANS of the BATH UNION is desirous of receiving Applications from Single Women, or Females without Inconveniences, qualified to undertake the Duties of SCHOOLMISTRESS at the UNION WORKHOUSE.

The Guardians will require full proof that the Person appointed is competent to the Management of a Large School, and to perform all such Duties as are prescribed by the Consolidated Order of the Poor-Law Board. It will also be requisite that she pass a Successful Examination before one of H.M.'s School Inspectors. Minimum Salary £35 per annum, together with Board, Washing, and Furnished Apartments in the Workhouse, and with such Increase of Salary as may from time to time be awarded by the Committee of Council on Education. There are two ~~single~~ Teachers in the School, for whose Instruction the payments have lately averaged about £10 annually.

Applications in the handwriting of the Candidates, stating age, condition, and place of abode, with recent Testimonials as to character and ability, and which must be unexceptionable and original, to be sent to this Office on or before SATURDAY, the 8th day of JANUARY, and such Candidates as may be selected as most eligible will receive due notice to attend at the BOARD-ROOM, BATH, on WEDNESDAY, the 18th day of JANUARY, when the Guardians will proceed to the Election.

H. P. HULBERT,  
Clerk of the Bath Union.

Poor-Law Union Office, Bath,  
2nd December, 1858.

*Advertisements for jobs at Bath Workhouse.  
The term lunatic was used to describe people with mental health issues*

## 8 The Workhouse Economy

As the name suggests a central concept of the workhouse was the provision of accommodation in return for labour. Able-bodied paupers were given boring, dirty and repetitive tasks to do as part of the aim to make workhouse life as unpleasant as possible and a deterrent to other poor people.

Oakum-picking was thought especially suitable for children – with their nimble fingers - and older inmates. It involved teasing out fibres from old and often soiled ropes. These fibres were later mixed with tar and sold to provide waterproof linings for boats. Stone-breaking was the cost of a night's lodging for homeless people in a cell in the workhouse casual ward. Each tramp was given a pile of stones to break into small pieces that would fit through a standard sieve or grille. These could then be sold to be used in road surfacing. Examples of such cells can still be seen at Ecos Court in Frome, the housing development on the Frome Workhouse site.

Women paupers were used as 'nurses' in the infirmary, as well as on kitchen-work, cleaning and laundry. The bakery, established in 1865, also used pauper labour. Inmates worked on later additions to the workhouse buildings, including the Chapel. After the burial ground was purchased, stone cleared by inmates was used to build the long wall alongside the Wells Road.

In an attempt to reduce the costs, workhouse labour was used wherever possible. Vegetables were grown on land acquired near the workhouse, thus reducing the cost of food in the workhouse. Any surplus could be sold to raise

income. Yet despite the boring diet to which the inmates were subjected, in nutritional terms the population of the workhouse may have had a superior diet to that of labourers in either town or country. There is much room for conjecture, and insufficient evidence, especially at the level of a single workhouse, to draw firm conclusions. Further research might also draw analogies with other 'total institutions' developed in Victorian times such as prisons and long-stay mental hospitals.

Within a few years of the building of the Bath Workhouse, it became increasingly apparent that the majority of inmates were simply not capable of work. This informed the work of the Workhouse Visiting Society, formed in 1858, and built on the work of reformers such as Emma Sheppard of Frome. In her booklet *Sunshine in the Workhouse* she points out that in 1 January 1857, only 139,130 out of a total Workhouse population in England and Wales of 843,430 were able-bodied. The remaining 700,000 were children, old or mentally ill. The fact that only 1-in-6 of workhouse inmates were capable to work meant that as the nineteenth century moves on, the history of the workhouse overlaps more and more with the histories of health and welfare provision.

## 9 Health inside the Workhouse

The Board of Guardians was responsible for the health of the inmates of the workhouse but it was also responsible for issues of public health and vaccination, and the registration of births, marriages and deaths. In the absence of any public provision for welfare, the workhouse was given the impossible task of caring for those who could not care for themselves inside and outside its walls.

In 1857 Bath Workhouse opened two so-called 'lunatic wards', one for women, one for men, in separate buildings to the south west of the original buildings. They hoped to provide for mentally ill inmates more cheaply than by sending them to the county asylum in Wells. In 1865 the medical journal *the Lancet* published a study of conditions in London Workhouse infirmaries. This concluded that although there were virtually no trained nurses, the vast majority of workhouse inmates were sick, infirm or insane (227,000 out of 310,000 in London) while a further 6,000 were 'crippled or diseased' in some way. 'The state hospitals', *the Lancet* summed up, 'are in the workhouse wards'.

The Workhouse Medical Officer, unlike the other staff, had a professional qualification and authority from the outset. He could (and did) override the Master on issues such as suitable food and drink for sick inmates. In 1877 the Bath Statutory Hospital, often referred to as the Isolation Hospital, was established at the top of Brassknocker Hill for the treatment of notifiable infectious diseases. Bath Workhouse worked closely with this nearby organisation, notably during an outbreak of smallpox in 1880.

**The INHABITANTS of the District within which CHOLERA IS PREVAILING, are earnestly advised**

**NOT TO DRINK ANY WATER WHICH HAS NOT PREVIOUSLY BEEN BOILED.**

**Fresh Water ought to be Boiled every Morning for the day's use, and what remains of it ought to be thrown away at night. The Water ought not to stand where any kind of dirt can get into it, and great care ought to be given to see that Water Butts and Cisterns are free from dirt.**

**BY ORDER,**

**THOS. W. RATCLIFF,**  
CLERK OF THE BOARD.

In 1895 a *British Medical Journal* research team visited the Bath Workhouse Infirmary as part of a national survey. They reported on a completely inadequate building, and recommended the building of a new one. This did not happen. They also recommended doubling the number of nurses.

From 1897, workhouses were forbidden to use inmates as nursing assistants. Workhouse Infirmaries became increasingly active and professionalised at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries.

## 10 The Evolution of Care and the Bath Workhouse

In 1908 the Workhouse was renamed the Frome Road House in an attempt to make it appear less forbidding and in 1930 Poor Law Guardians were abolished. Responsibility for 'Public Assistance' passed to Bath City Council. In 1937 the Workhouse Infirmary became St Martin's Hospital. The chapel had always been dedicated to St Martin, the patron saint of beggars. The hospital now provided medical and surgical wards for men and women, a maternity department and a children's ward. Other parts of the old buildings were used to accommodate the elderly and chronically ill. The one tradition of the old workhouse that continued was the casual ward where tramps were given a meal and a night's lodging in a cell in return for stone-breaking the next morning.

In her fine memoir *In the Thick of it*, Dr Clara Cross gives a graphic description of terrible conditions in the ex-Workhouse wards of St Martin's Hospital when she arrived there in 1940 to set up a Wartime Emergency Hospital. This suggests that whatever improvements may have been made after the 1895 *BMJ* report, conditions had deteriorated again by 1940.

The Labour government elected in 1945 moved rapidly to create the National Health Service in 1948, with all publicly funded health care now provided by the state on behalf of the people. In Bath, the new St Martin's Hospital and the Workhouse Infirmary were now combined into a single hospital. Unfortunately the workhouse, or rather the memory of the workhouse, did not die with the institution. Older patients later in the twentieth century continued to be fearful of St Martin's Hospital, and especially its geriatric wards, because of its association with the stigma of the hated workhouse.

With the centralisation of health services in big general hospitals, both Accident & Emergency and Maternity services passed from St Martin's Hospital to the Royal United Hospital in 1980. By 2000, the NHS had begun to reduce its land holdings at Odd Down.

The open area between the workhouse buildings and the Wells Road was used as a cricket pitch for many years but has now been developed for housing. The buildings of the Victorian workhouse were extensively surveyed by Oxford Archaeology and redevelopment proposals drawn up by the Edward Nash Partnership. Their report identified buildings of historic interest that might be put to new uses, especially flats. These included the workhouse hexagon, the 'lunatic wards' of 1857, the chapel and the bakery. Unfortunately not all buildings were retained. The remaining wartime emergency hospital buildings were demolished, although some had already gone to build new wards in the 1990s.

As for provision for the poor, whilst the workhouse and the concept of punitive provision for the needy has been abandoned, the arguments regarding the deserving and undeserving poor have reappeared. The Victorian exchange of work for accommodation in the workhouse has been replaced by a requirement to seek work in exchange for benefits.

There is still homelessness and poverty in Bath. While in principle support should be available from the state, in practice there is a considerable scope for individuals and families to slip between the various services and support mechanisms available from public bodies. Local churches, food banks and charities such as Julian House play a major role in supporting people who find themselves in desperate need.



*Dr Clara Cross*

