



# Wiltshire Workhouses

## *Semington*

### **Workhouse at Semington, Melksham Union**

The workhouse at Semington, part of the Melksham Union, was erected as a result of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Prior to its erection there was a Poor House in Melksham having a budget of £10,500, in 1835, to run this and to provide parish relieving officers with money to distribute to outdoor paupers.

In the Poor House there was strict segregation between the sexes and the adults and children and conditions were harsh, acting as a deterrent. The sick were cared for outside the workhouse under the old parish system.

In 1836 Melksham Poor House housed 45 inmates. Of the 23 adults only 2 were able bodied. 3 girls were able to work and 4 boys worked, spinning hemp – the proceeds of which paid part of the Master's wage. There were 12 sleeping rooms which could accommodate 100 people. By the end of January 1837 there were 87 inmates, 28 of whom were under medical care. This large increase in less than one year coincided with the rapid population rise in the country. The Poor Law Commission hoped that the subsequent increasing expenditure on relief for the poor could be mitigated by the construction of a workhouse.

In January 1837 plans were drawn up by a Mr. Bryant. These were taken to the firm of Cubitt's in London. Lewis Cubitt was the son-in-law of the architect H. E. Kendall, who considered Bryant's plans to be inferior and offered to draw up plans himself. The Board of Guardians at Melksham Union accepted on 21st January 1837 and Kendall set to work. The plans were based on the cruciform plan which had been prepared by Sampson Kempthorne for the Poor Law Commission in 1835.

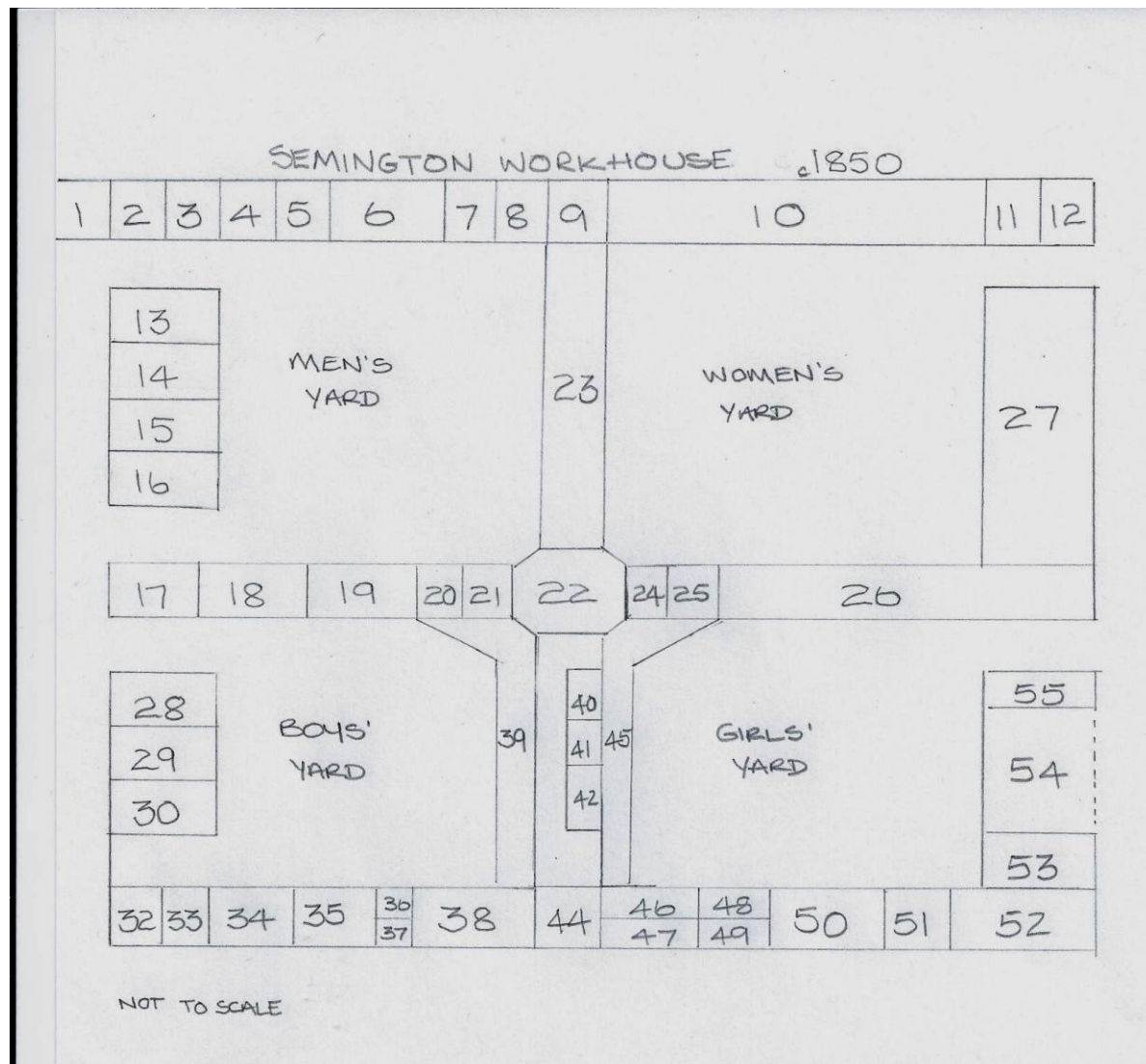
Instructions were sent to Kendall, informing him that there should be no separate rooms for married paupers. There was to be one receiving ward, where new inmates were washed and clothed prior to admission and 2 types of sick ward on the ground floor. The men had their own sick ward and the second, for women and children, was located in the boys' yard. Adjacent to the second sick ward were 2 small detached rooms where a pauper "might be allowed to have his wife attend upon him".

The front reception block was 3 storeys, behind which were three 4 storey blocks and one 2 storey block. They were all arranged around a central octagon room. The kitchen was located here. Single storey blocks were arranged at the end of the 4 large blocks and these formed a perimeter wall enclosing the 4 yards for the inmates. An external work area was situated outside the perimeter wall.

Sleeping wards for vagrants were to the east of the workhouse, as was the stone breaking yard where they would be expected to work in return for a bed. The dead house was next to the vagrants' sleeping ward and to the west of this was the refractory ward which was used for solitary confinement. At the end of the 19th century there were 8 separate cubicles for vagrants with space for a hammock and a separate work area. A metal plate sat upon a large stone slab for the vagrants to break stones. There was a grille

through which the crushed stones were dropped on to a chute, which was emptied by opening a trapdoor on the outside of the wall.

The front façade projected a dignified face to the public, hiding the utilitarian appearance behind. Rooms for administration were at the front and rooms for the Master and his family were on the upper floors. Generally the day rooms were on the ground floor with dormitories above. External passageways led from the front to the back wards. By 1870 it was necessary to add a T shaped extension. Other alterations followed including the demolition of the stable and coach house to make way for a chapel and mortuary in the 1920's and '30's.



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|--------------------|------------------|
| 1) Tramps' Ward    | 11) Lock-up      |
| 2) Tramps' Ward    | 12) Lock-up      |
| 3) Dead House      | 13) Men's Privy  |
| 4) Refractory Ward | 14) Wash House   |
| 5) Potato Store    | 15) Bathing Room |

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|---------------------------|----------|------------------------------------|
| 6) Men's Workshop         |          | 16) Receiving Yard                 |
| 7) Workshop               |          | 17) Men's Sick Ward (heated)       |
| 8) Shoemaker's Shop       |          | 18) Men's Day Ward                 |
| 9) Unlabelled             |          | 19) Men's Day Ward                 |
| 10) Laundry and Bakehouse |          | 20) Passage                        |
| 21) Bread Room            |          | 39) Passageway                     |
| 22) Kitchen               |          | 40) Scullery                       |
| 23) Dining Hall           |          | 41) Surgery                        |
| 24) Larder                |          | 42) Larder/Clothing Store          |
| 25) Passage               |          | 43) Stair and Passage              |
| 26) Women's Ward          |          | 44) Waiting Room                   |
| 27) Women's Ward          |          | 45) Passageway                     |
| 28) Sick Ward (heated)    |          | 46) Relieving Officer's Room       |
| 29) Detached Sick Ward    | (heated) | 47) Porter's Lodge                 |
| 30) Detached Sick Ward    | (heated) | 48) Porter's Bedroom               |
| 31) Boys' Privy           |          | 49) Porter's Sitting Room (heated) |
| 32) Coals                 |          | 50) Girls' School (heated)         |
| 33) Boys' Wash Room       |          | 51) Girls' Wash Room               |
| 34) Boys' School (heated) |          | 52) Stable                         |
| 35) Clerk's Room (heated) |          | 53) Girls' Privy                   |
| 36) Iron Closet           |          | 54) Coach House                    |
| 37) Lobby                 |          | 55) Girls' Privy                   |
| 38) Board Room (heated)   |          |                                    |

The workhouse remained as such until after World War II when it then became a hospital for geriatric patients. This closed in 1988, although part of the building was used as a day care centre. By the end of the twentieth century the building was sold and converted into flats known as St. George's Court.

For details of inmates of the Workhouse 1841 – 1911 please see the Census Records.