



Westbury Workhouse

Workhouses were set up in 1722 to give work to the poor of each parish – the principle occupations were spinning flax and worsted, knitting hose and picking hemp. Other tasks included darning and patching, housekeeping and gardening.

The dietary patterns for a workhouse in 1769 could be as follows: beef only provided on Sundays; pork and peas on Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays; flour and suet used on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Cheese appeared everyday and there was always plenty of bread, beer and molasses.

The contrast between this and a nobleman`s meal is enormous – the two courses included pike, pigeon, lobster, greens, artichokes and apricot. Workhouse residents were never given any fruit.

The workhouse reputation and conditions were generally so appalling that one would go to almost any length to avoid becoming an inmate. Outdoor paupers were non-resident but were provided daily with bread. According to the poor law, no-one could move out of their local area unless they had guaranteed work for a year and a day. Anyone applying for assistance would be sent to their home area.

There were several paid employees – the Master and Matron (often husband and wife), a school master, school mistress and a porter. Bread and flour were supplied by local tradesmen. The coal was not for the inmates but used to heat the room where the `guardians` held their weekly meetings.

The 1861 census returns show that there were 88 residents in the Westbury Workhouse – ranging from babies to octogenarians. The majority were children under fourteen – 52 of the 88 residents.

The poem below was reputedly written by one of the Westbury Workhouse residents and sums up life in the workhouse:

*There is yon house that holds the parish poor,
Whose walls of mud scarce hold the broken door,
There where the putrid vapours flagging play,
And the dull wheel hums doleful through the day,*

*There children dwell who knows no parents care,
Heart broken maidens on their joyless bed,
Forsaken wives and mothers never wed,
Dejected widows with wheeled tears,
Crippled age with more than childhood fears,
The lame, the blind, and far the happiest they,
The Moping Idiot and the Madman Gay.*

OPC Note:-

The above poem may have been a revised version of that written and published by George Crabbe in 1783. George Crabbe was an English poet, surgeon and clergyman who died in Trowbridge in 1832.

THEIRS is yon house that holds the parish poor,
Whose walls of mud scarce bear the broken door;
There, where the putrid vapors flagging play,
And the dull wheel hums doleful through the day;
There children dwell who know no parents' care;
Parents, who know no children's love, dwell there;
Heart-broken matrons on their joyless bed,
Forsaken wives and mothers never wed;
Dejected widows with unheeded tears,
And crippled age with more than childhood-fears;
The lame, the blind, and—far the happiest they!—
The moping idiot and the madman gay.

Here too the sick their final doom receive,
Here brought amid the scenes of grief to grieve,
Where the loud groans from some sad chamber flow,
Mixed with the clamors of the crowd below;
Here, sorrowing, they each kindred sorrow scan,
And the cold charities of man to man:
Whose laws indeed for ruined age provide,
And strong compulsion plucks the scrap from pride,
But still that scrap is bought with many a sigh,
And pride imbitters what it can't deny.

Say ye, oppressed by some fantastic woes,
Some jarring nerve that baffles your repose;
Who press the downy couch while slaves advance
With timid eye, to read the distant glance;
Who with sad prayers the weary doctor tease,
To name the nameless ever-new disease;
Who with mock patience dire complaints endure,
Which real pain and that alone can cure:
How would ye bear in real pain to lie,
Despised, neglected, left alone to die?
How would ye bear to draw your latest breath
Where all that's wretched paves the way for death?