

PEMBURY WORKHOUSE 1909

From *Tunbridge Wells in 1909* by Chris Jones

One of the more noticeable things about 1909 was the amount of begging, though it is perhaps mainly noticeable because of reports of begging are one of the first things that one reads in the *Courier*. In January the magistrates said that they were determined to put down the begging nuisance. Most of the beggars were harmless characters, and received minimum punishments.

Once somebody got into the situation of needing to beg, it was difficult to climb out. There were steps that could be taken to avoid it like contributing a Friendly Society. These offered support at times of sickness or old age in return for small regular sums, of 4d or 6d a week. In Tunbridge Wells the Friendly Societies' Hall in Camden Road housed some 25 building societies, friendly societies, or similar. There were also 'slate clubs', much smaller affairs but based on the same mutual principles. The difference was that any surplus at the end of the year was distributed, providing a handy bonus at Christmas. Another alternative was the workhouse.

Workhouses were established by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. This ended centuries-old arrangements by which the poor were supported in their home parishes. The 1834 Act brought in two changes: -

it forced most of those seeking relief to go into the workhouse to get it, and it required parishes to combine into 'Unions', and centralise their facilities.

The Pembury workhouse was just outside on the road to Tonbridge, far enough away to be out of sight, but very much in mind for the aged poor and those in financial. It belonged to the Tonbridge Union, which comprised Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells and ten rural parishes from Ashurst to Hadlow and Brenchley. It was built in 1836 with major extensions in the 1890's.

In 1909 it housed some four to five hundred inmates their numbers peaking in the winter months, plus an average of forty to fifty 'casuals' their numbers peaking in the summer months. The workhouse master was William Gatte. He had a staff of about thirty, two-thirds of whom were nurses in the infirmary. These were supplemented by inmates acting as 'helpers'. Other officers worked outside: the Relieving Officers in the parishes, who determined which cases were eligible for entry, and the Collection Officers. These brought in the funds, both by the application of the Poor Rate, and by seeking contributions from the family members of those inside. Despite its notorious penny-pinching, the workhouse was an expensive operation, and the Poor Rate didn't just hit the wealthy.

The workhouse was managed by a board of elected Guardians. Three of them were women, one of whom, Amelia Scott, later wrote her memoirs in *The Passing of a Great Dread*. The introduction of Women Guardians in significant numbers in the 1890's led to improved conditions for the inmates.

People ended up in the workhouse for many reasons, but they fell perhaps into three

groups: the aged, the infirm and the destitute. Vera Coomber has studied the number of elderly (60+) admissions during this period. In 1909 there were 290, about 30% of the total. We might compare that with the number of the people aged 60+ in the Tonbridge Union as a whole, which was about 7,000. So the proportion who ended their days in the workhouse was fairly small. The Receiving Officers were allowed to grant 'outdoor relief' to older people in the community. In November over 1,200 people benefitted (661 in Tunbridge Wells), though the sums were small, as low as 2/- a week, Vera's figures suggest that the majority of those aged 60+ who entered the house were single men, and mainly widowers.

To go into the house at that age was a major step, as there was rarely any possibility of returning to normal life. You gave up your own clothes for a workhouse uniform stamped with the words 'Tonbridge Union'. Man and wife were separated, and you slept in a dormitory. You gave up all personal possessions save those that would fit in a small locker. By 1909 there had been improvements. Those aged inmates considered to be respectable were allowed little privileges: to leave the house for a half-day every month, and to receive rations of tea and tobacco. In the Master's Day Book of expenses there was a heading of 'Necessaries'. This included expenditure on soap, coal, gas and tobacco.

All inmates were subject to the petty tyrannies of the officials. Amelia Scott remembers a new Charge Nurse who cleared the lockers of the Women's Infirm Ward (*A women's 'care home' of its day - JE*) of the small mementoes that for the elderly were all that was left of their previous lives.

There was nothing actually stopping the other inmates from discharging themselves whenever they wanted. There developed the concept of the 'in and outs', mainly families of agricultural labourers who entered the house for the winter and left again in the spring when work was available. This disrupted the education of the children. One particular family from Capel practised this in-and-out behaviour to the extreme: admitted on 9th Dec 1908, discharged on the 2nd January, re-admitted on 5th Jan, discharged on 9th Feb, in again on 13th Feb, out on the 15th, in on the 13th March, out on the 6th April, in on the 14th and out again on the 20th.

It was not a pleasant life for the children. Miss Scott describes the Nursery (for those up to three years old). It was on the third-floor, and had no furniture, no toys and no carpets. The children were just left on the floor all day. They never went outside. And there is a memory from the Tenterden workhouse of how normal routines were often strangely distorted: On her birthday a young girl was thrilled to receive a doll from the matron. She played with it all day. In the evening the matron told her that she should put it away carefully in a cupboard, to keep it clean. She never saw it again, and later learned that the same doll was presented to every little girl on her birthday.

For a while the workhouse educated the children in-house, but by 1909 they were being sent to school in Pembury. This at least gave them some exposure to the outside world, but it also exposed them to the cruelties of that world. With their workhouse uniforms and workhouse haircuts they were an easy target for abuse from the other children.

There was a large increase in the number of admissions in 1909 due to the economic situation *, and a corresponding increase in the number of children (up from about 45 to

about 75). Concern was expressed by the school, and by the Local Government Board inspector. The workhouse sought to board out the children, offering 4s a week, but with little success. The Chairman of the Board rejected as extravagant a suggestion by the Inspector that they establish cottage homes for the children away from the main house. In fact within 4 or 5 years this had become the standard practice. A regulation of 1913 said that no child over 3 was to be kept in the same place as adults (partly to avoid malign influences, such as the young women who entered the workhouse for the birth of illegitimate children).

About a third of the inmates were in the infirmary, suffering either the chronic ailments of the old, or diseases like TB and cancer. There was a staff of trained and probationer nurses, but no resident doctor and very limited facilities. The Medical Officer was concerned about standards, and complained to the Master in November about the practice of probationer nurses bathing male patients. Some of them were strong young men, and "many from the lowest classes of society". He felt it improper. The Master arranged for the bathing to be done by a male inmate.

Then there were the casuals, who were only allowed to stay a night or two. The number averaged about 45 a night through the autumn and winter. It went up to about 60 during the early summer, with a sudden peak at more than 140 for the last two weeks of August, presumably the effect of the hopping season. 80% were men, though there were women and children too. Casuals were required to work, typically at tasks like picking oakum or stone breaking. There were special cells at Pembury for this latter task. The work meant that they were not able to leave until half-way through the following day, and in a dirty and disheveled state.

Some of the more colourful accounts of workhouse life are by social commentators who went on the tramp and experienced life as casuals. One of the worst aspects was the requirement to have a bath on entry in bathwater that had already been used by dozens of other not very clean individuals. At Pembury the casual ward had no beds; hammocks were strung up in the evening. It had no chairs either, so they had to sit on the floor. The food was bread and cheese, with 'skilly', a form of gruel, served from a pail.

The food given to the regular inmates was a little better, but still consisted mainly of bread and porridge. A new Cook appointed in November was sacked after a week: "he has shown that he is quite incompetent to discharge his duties". A complaint was made in April about the patients in the infirmary being given *Grape Nuts* instead of porridge for breakfast.

** Chris Jones may be referring to the Great Agricultural Depression which most affected the counties of Suffolk, Essex and Kent in the 1890s (P J Perry - Where Was the Great Agricultural Depression?). Another factor may have been the general softening attitude towards pauperism; brought about by events such as the 1905 Royal Commission into the workings of the Poor Law, the change from a Conservative to a Liberal government in 1905, and the activities of Beatrice Webb. – John Evans April 2016*