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Snapshots in Time:  
Mapping Wells

## WELLS UNION WORKHOUSE

### Historical Background

Before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, care of the poor was dependent on charitable donations, philanthropy, giving of alms, food and shelter. It was seen to be virtuous and an important religious duty to help those less fortunate than oneself, and at the same time it was a route to religious salvation. In Wells, almshouses already existed and Bishop Bekynton had built Penniless Porch in 1450 to provide shelter for people begging for alms.

However, as the number of people in need increased, the church, individual philanthropists, merchant guilds, etc. could no longer cope.

The 1536 dissolution of the monasteries, an important source of help for those in need, didn't help! The state stepped in and various Acts and laws were passed setting out how the poor and needy were to be supported and treated. These were brought together in the 1601 Poor Law Act. This laid a responsibility on the parish to:



Figure 1 Wells Union Workhouse as shown on the 1886 Ordnance Survey map of Wells. Reproduced with permission of Wells City Council Archives (WCC/3401/1).

- ❖ Collect money - poor rates (based on land and buildings) – and distribute it to the needy of the parish in the form of ‘out relief’. This could be money to pay for rent, etc or ‘in kind’, such as food and clothing, enabling people to stay in their own homes.
- ❖ Provide materials, such as hemp, wool, flax, with which the able-bodied could work.
- ❖ Set children to work.
- ❖ Take care of the sick, elderly and others unable to work such as people with disabilities. This could be done through providing support such as money, food, clothing, etc. or by providing accommodation in specially created houses – almshouses or poorhouses.

This Act divided the needy into two groups: those who could work and wouldn't and those that would work but couldn't – the social stigma of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ was rearing its ugly head. The Act also allowed for Justices of the Peace to send to the “*House of Correction or common gaol such as shall not employ themselves to work*”.

Further legislation was enacted, one of which was the 1722 *Knatchbulls Act*. This created the workhouse. Parishes were enabled to purchase or rent properties into which the needy were placed, and in return for their food, clothing etc, were obliged to work. If they refused to enter the workhouse, they would be thrown out of the parish and expected to fend for themselves. In 1782 *Gilberts Act* offered an alternative to Knatchbulls Act: the old and infirm were to be cared for in poorhouses whilst the able-bodied would be provided employment or poor relief outside – ‘out-relief’. However, there was no compulsion on parishes under the Act to adopt this approach to helping the poor.

By the early 1800s, attitudes towards the poor were changing. There was a growing view that the provision of relief led to laziness and vice and that the individual was solely responsible for his own poverty, unless he or she fell into the category of being too old to work, was disabled, etc. Lack of employment opportunities was not considered a factor in someone's failure to get work and poverty was seen as the natural order as exemplified in the words of the verse from the well-known hymn *All things bright and beautiful* published in 1848:

*The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them high and lowly,  
And ordered their estate*

Many people in rural areas suffered from the loss of animal grazing and wood-gathering rights resulting from the enclosure of common land that took place between 1760 and 1820: a new generation of rural poor emerged struggling to survive.

A major criticism was the growing cost of relief – the money was coming out of the pockets of the upper and middle classes through taxation. Other critics of the poor relief system felt that it encouraged families to have more children because they could rely on ‘cash handouts’ to support them. The prevailing opinion was that action needed to be taken to reduce the cost of looking after the poor, encourage them to find work, and work hard, to support themselves, and to provide workhouses as a final deterrent to ‘idleness’.

The outcome was the 1834 *Poor Law Amendment Act* which brought back the workhouse and did away with the provision of ‘out-relief’ except in exceptional circumstances. Parishes were grouped into unions and each union was obliged to build a workhouse if none existed already. This brought in the era of the workhouse so eloquently described by Charles Dickens. Conditions were harsh and deliberately so to act as a deterrent. Only those who had no alternative would decide to enter the workhouse: those driven by homelessness, the prospect of starvation and the appalling misery in which some people were forced to live, for whom workhouse conditions, harsh though they were, offered something better! It was also the view that the workhouse was there to improve the moral character of the individual. Susan Marshall in her book on the Wells Lunatic Asylum refers to a comment made by Dr Boyd in the 1863 Annual Report: “*a certain class of paupers in the workhouse preferred gaol and were ‘in the habit of qualifying themselves for a temporary residence there’*”.<sup>1</sup> As a result of ‘outside’ relief being harder to qualify for, workhouses became the home for not only the unemployed able bodied, but also the physically and mentally disabled, the elderly, the frail, widows and children. Women made up a high proportion of inmates: deserted wives, widows (often with young children), unemployed domestic servants and unmarried mothers – referred to in the literature of the time as ‘fallen women’.

Whilst it is undoubtedly true that conditions in workhouses were harsh, these did improve over the decades as public sentiment and better inspection of workhouses brought about changes for the better. However, the stigma of having been born in a workhouse (this was noted on birth certificates until 1904 when the rules changed and an alternative place of birth was allowed on certificates for those born in a workhouse),

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<sup>1</sup> S. Marshall, *Mendip Hospital, An Appreciation* (Melrose Books, 2006)

or lived in a workhouse was to have a lasting impact on many. It affected their feelings of self-worth, creating a loss of dignity and feelings of shame.

## Provision of help for the Poor, Poorhouses and Workhouse in Wells

An overseers account for 1603<sup>2</sup> lists money provided to the poor and those in need as 'out-relief'. It includes the following:

- ❖ To Captain Smith for keeping of Collins: One shilling
- ❖ To Jane Bowall blind in her eyes: One shilling
- ❖ To Ann Chippor's boy to buy bread: Six pence

A poorhouse was established in the parish of St Cuthberts. Its 1732 rules and regulations required "*that the whole family rise to be at their work by six of the clock in the morning between Lady day and Michaelmas and by Seven in the morning between Michaelmas and Lady day; that no more than three pints [of beer] be allowed to any grown person in a day and discretionary to children; that every child have two hours in each day to learn to read and the Master take care to instruct them in reading and the Catechism.*"<sup>3</sup> The 1776–7 Parliamentary Survey of poor relief expenditure in England and Wales: Abstracts of the Returns Made by the Overseers of the Poor<sup>4</sup> cited 30 inmates in the St Cuthbert's parish poorhouse. Nearby parish workhouses were to be found in Croscombe with places for 20 residents, Shepton Mallet, 140 residents and Wedmore, 40.

## Wells Union Workhouse

The 1834 Act led to the formation of the Wells Union made up of 19 parishes. The first meeting of the Union took place in January



Figure 2 From: Order to build Workhouse and Plan of Workhouse, 1836, Reproduced with kind permission from South West Heritage Trust, (ref: D\GWE/32/1/3)

<sup>2</sup> Overseers Account, 1603 (Photocopy held in Wells & Mendip Museum Library, Osborne/4.7)

<sup>3</sup> St Cuthberts Workhouse Rules and Regulations, 1730-1740, Somerset Heritage Centre D\P\w.st.c/9/1/1)

<sup>4</sup> <http://workhouses.org.uk/parishes/> (accessed 25/01/2017)

1836. By the end of that year, agreement had been reached to build a new workhouse on land adjacent to the turnpike road from Wells to Glastonbury; it was completed in 1839. The building was designed by Samuel Thomas Welch who also designed the workhouses at Axbridge and Clifton

The Wells Union Workhouse was constructed with several wings which allowed for the separation of males and females. The building included: separate dormitory accommodation for boys and girls; shared men's bedrooms, 'first class' and 'second class', and shared women's bedrooms 'first class' and 'second class', both with an adjoining infirmary; dining room; kitchen; scullery; larder; bakehouse with an "*oven sufficiently large to bake 12 pecks of flour*"; piggeries; privies; separate male and female 'tramp' rooms; and, a chapel. Inmates could go outside into separate male and female 'airing yards'.<sup>5</sup> It is unclear what the difference was between 'first class' and 'second class'; it could have related to the perceived moral character of the individual or may have been down to the classification system which distinguished between able bodied and the elderly/infirm.

Further building work took place: fever wards in c.1867 as a consequence of a serious outbreak of cholera in the county, and an infirmary and sick wards c. 1870/1 which were in a separate section of the building.

The building was designed to house 300 inmates but census returns show that this figure was never reached:

Year	Staff	Total inmates
1841	11	114
1851	9	229
1861	6	173
1871	7	161
1881	8	132
1891	7	135
1901	13	128
1911	14	142
Source: Census returns, accessed via <a href="http://www.Ancestry.com">www.Ancestry.com</a>		

It is striking how many children found themselves in the workhouse – these would have been children of adult inmates, abandoned children or orphans. Many were born to

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<sup>5</sup> *Order to build Workhouse and Plan of Workhouse, 1836*, South West Heritage Trust (D\G\we\32\1\3)

unmarried mothers, as the register of births for the first ten years in the following table shows. This register noted whether a child was illegitimate or not:

Register of Births		
Year	Illegitimate	Legitimate
1838	11	1
1839	4	
1840	10	
1841	9	1
1842	15	
1843	9	2
1844	14	
1845	14	
1846	18	
1847	13	

The register of births also noted, for example '3<sup>rd</sup> bastard', '4<sup>th</sup> bastard' against some records and noted the sad events of still birth, 'died'.<sup>6</sup> Later records did not always record illegitimacy or legitimacy.

### Life in the Workhouse

What would life have been like in the workhouse? Overcrowding would not have been a problem as it was in other workhouses particularly in bigger towns and cities. Life would also have been dependent on the benevolence or otherwise of the Board of Guardians, appointed to oversee the running of the workhouse, and the Master who was responsible for its day to day management. Some Masters were known to be cruel. But workhouses were intended to be a deterrent and thus conditions were not meant to be comfortable and pleasant. The Wells Union Workhouse was a stark and austere building, built with grey stone and in an almost prison-like design. Inside, there would have been no pretty pictures on the walls to liven the atmosphere. Detailed specifications accompanying the original plans for the building note "*stone baths hewn out of stone*" <sup>7</sup>. Conditions in the Guardian's accommodation were less austere as the specification instructed: "*to supply and set a handsome Painswick chimney piece in the guardian's room*".<sup>8</sup> The workhouse would also have followed the regulations laid down by the Poor Law Commissioners who were charged to set up the detailed rules. Thus:

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<sup>6</sup> *Register of births in the workhouse. 1838-1879* South West Heritage Trust (D\G\we/67/1)

<sup>7</sup> *Order to build Workhouse and Plan of Workhouse, 1836*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

- ❖ Paupers would have been grouped into distinct categories on entering the workhouse and would have then been kept in separate sections of the building, and generally not allowed to mix with other groups. Parents could see their children at pre-arranged times. The groups were:
  - Men infirm through age or any other cause
  - Able-bodied men, and youths above the age of 15 years
  - Boys above the age of between 7 years, and under that of 15
  - Women infirm through age or any other cause
  - Able-bodied women, and girls above the age of 15 years
  - Girls above the age of between 7 years, and under that of 15
  - Children under 7 years of age<sup>9</sup>
- ❖ On entering the workhouse, paupers would be examined by the medical officer, then, *“shall be thoroughly cleansed, and shall be clothed in a workhouse dress, and the clothes which he wore at the time of admissions shall be purified and deposited in a place appropriate for that purpose, with pauper’s name affixed thereto. Such clothes shall be restored to the pauper when he leaves the Workhouse”*<sup>10</sup> Other items brought into the workhouse would also be confiscated and only returned when the inmate left.

The quality and quantity of food in workhouses varied from good to poor. The well-known scene in *Oliver Twist* where Oliver asks for more gruel was certainly reflective of many workhouses where quantities were meagre and a diet of tea, often without milk, bread, 1-2oz of cheese, gruel, watery soups, potatoes, infrequent meat and occasional suet or rice puddings was the norm. An extract from the Wells Union Workhouse 1841 quarterly accounts shows that the provisions for inmates included: bread (best seconds), meat, butter, cheese, potatoes, bacon, tea (congue kind), sugar (moist) and rice (best patna).<sup>11</sup> The same ledger also noted that the average weekly food cost per head of the ‘in-door paupers’ was 2s 1d in old money and 4d on clothing, equivalent to £11.50 today.

And, under the rules, inmates had to work for their ‘board and lodging’. Work depended on the perceived ability, age and sex of the inmate and ranged from doing the work associated with the running of the workhouse (cooking, cleaning, laundry, sewing) to

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<sup>9</sup> *The General Consolidated and other Orders of The Poor Law Commissioners and The Poor Law Board* (London, Butterworths, 1868), Article 98

<sup>10</sup> *The General Consolidated and other Orders of The Poor Law Commissioners and The Poor Law Board*

<sup>11</sup> *Wells Union Extract from the Ledger and Quarterly Abstract for the quarter ending Michaelmas 1841*. South West Heritage Trust (D\P\w.st.c/13/9/3(or1?))

looking after the younger children, working in the vegetable garden (if one existed), working on a trade such as tailoring and menial tasks such as stone breaking and picking oakum.<sup>12</sup>

Stone breaking was often a task given to vagrants who turned up at the workhouse looking for temporary bed and board. The Wells Union had a separate building specifically for vagrants and here they were obliged to not only break up stone until it was small enough to go through a grill but to also fulfil a specified weight (5cwt in 1907)<sup>13</sup> before they would be 'discharged'.

Inmates could find themselves in jail if they failed to follow the rules: in 1882, Mary Summers, 25, was jailed for 7 days for refusing to do plain needlework<sup>14</sup>; and, Thomas Hucker, a casual pauper, was sent to Shepton Mallet gaol for 3 months hard labour as a consequence of absconding from the workhouse before he had worked his required four days.<sup>15</sup> (See Appendix 1 for the rules set by the Poor Law Commissioners in 1842.)

The Union itself was not above criticism: in 1908 the Wells Journal reported a court case regarding a child's death and wrote: "*in the opinion of the jury there appeared to be great laxity in the treatment of female casuals in the Wells Union Workhouse and that grave censure was attributable to the officials in charge, namely the assistant matron and cook in refusing the request of the mother of the deceased child to be allowed to see a nurse or medical officer*".<sup>16</sup>

As today, fathers could be pursued to support abandoned families. A certificate for one inmate in 1840, charged the local constable of the parish to bring the father before the Justice of the Peace so that he could be dealt with.<sup>17</sup>

Although a workhouse, Christmas was a time of celebration and in 1886 the Wells Journal reported that inmates were given a Christmas meal of roast beef and plum pudding, adults were given beer and tobacco and children were given cake for tea.<sup>18</sup> A

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<sup>12</sup> The separating out of the individual strands making up old ropes – this was exceptionally hard on the hands which would become red raw and with broken and torn away nails.

<sup>13</sup> P Jenkins, *Priory Hospital Wells*, 1988

<sup>14</sup> Wells Journal, 25 May, 1882

<sup>15</sup> Wells Journal, 17 Dec, 1891

<sup>16</sup> Wells journal 24 Dec, 1908

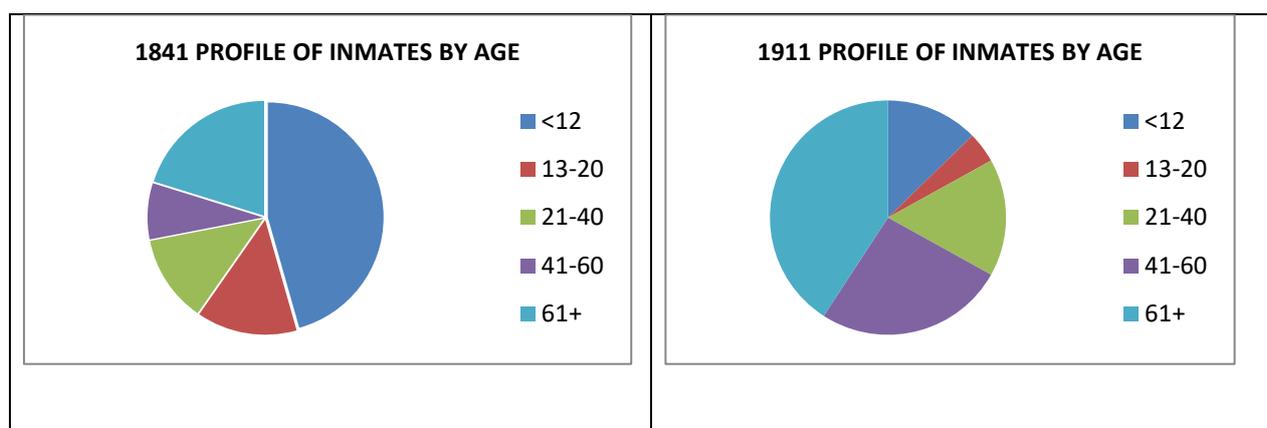
<sup>17</sup> List of Paupers in Wells Union Workhouse, 1840, South West Heritage Trust (D\P\chewt.m/13/3/20)

<sup>18</sup> Wells Journal, 22 Dec 1866

postponed Christmas entertainment was reported as consisting of singing, a maypole dance and the showing of a phonograph or 'Talking Machine'.<sup>19</sup>

### Age Profile of 'Inmates'

As time went on through the 1800s and into the 1900s, the profile of inmates in workhouses changed and the elderly, infirm and sick formed a sizable proportion of inmates. In Wells, the over 60s accounted for 21% of inmates in 1841 but this had risen to 40% by 1911.



### Occupations of Inmates

What occupations had inmates before they were forced to turn up at the workhouse door? Unsurprisingly, given that Wells lies in the centre of a predominantly rural area, a sizable proportion of the inmates, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had had agricultural and land based jobs as can be seen in the table on the next page. Agricultural workers had been hit by several factors beyond their control such as the free import of cheap wheat from America which played a part in the agricultural depressions of the 1800s. Many of the women in workhouses were likely to have been domestic servants, charwomen and washerwomen.

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<sup>19</sup> Wells Journal, 8 Feb, 1900

Wells Union Workhouse: Inmates' Former Occupations			
Percentage of total inmates	1841	1881	1911
Farm labourer	0	30	21
Farm servant <sup>20</sup>	0	12	0
Farmer	2	0	0
Farm carter	0	0	1
Dairy woman	0	1	1
General Labourer	48	0	11
Domestic servant/servant	17	6	13
Charwoman	0	14	1
Laundress/washerwoman	13	5	4
Cook - domestic	0	1	3
<b>SUB TOTAL</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>55</b>
Other occupations	21	31	45
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Source: Census Records, accessed via Ancestry.com			

## The End of the Workhouse

Workhouses were abolished in 1930 by The Local Government Act of 1929. This same act gave local authorities the power to take over workhouses and turn them into Public Assistance Institutions. This is what happened in Wells. The National Assistance Act 1948 was the final nail in the coffin, formally abolishing the old poor law system that had been in existence for several centuries and brought in a financial means of assistance for those in need. Wells Public Assistance Institution became Wells Infirmary and was the first NHS hospital in the city at the start of the National Health Service which came into being on the 5<sup>th</sup> July 1948. It was re-named Priory Hospital in 1961. The building still stands on the Glastonbury Road. It is no longer a hospital but is now Priory Health Centre.

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If you would like further information on the history of Wells and its buildings, you are welcome to contact or visit Wells City Archives ([archives@wellsmuseum.org.uk](mailto:archives@wellsmuseum.org.uk)) and Wells & Mendip Museum ([admin@wellsmuseum.org.uk](mailto:admin@wellsmuseum.org.uk)).

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<sup>20</sup> NB Farm servants were generally unmarried and had board and lodgings on the farm; they were generally hired by the year. Farm labourers/general labourers would normally have a family and lived in cottages away from the farm and would be hired for specific periods of time ranging from a day to longer periods over, say harvest time

## Appendix 1

### Rules set by the Poor Law Commissioners in 1842<sup>21</sup>

Any pauper who shall neglect to observe such of the regulations herein contained as are applicable to and binding on him; -

Or who shall make any noise when silence is ordered to be kept;

Or shall use obscene or profane language;

Or shall by word or deed insult or revile any person;

Or shall threaten to strike or to assault any person;

Or shall not duly cleanse his person;

Or shall refuse or neglect to work, after having been required to do so;

Or shall pretend sickness;

Or shall play at cards or other games of chance;

Or shall enter or attempt to enter, without permission, the ward or yard appropriated to any class of paupers other than that to which he belongs;

Or shall misbehave in going to, at, or returning from public worship out of the workhouse, or at prayers in the workhouse;

Or shall return after the appointed time of absence, when allowed to quit the workhouse temporarily;

Or shall wilfully disobey any lawful order of any officer of the workhouse;

Shall be deemed DISORDERLY.

Any pauper who shall, within seven days, repeat any one or commit more than one of the offences specified in Article 34:

Or who shall by word or deed insult or revile the master or matron, or any other officer of the workhouse, or any of the Guardians;

Or shall wilfully disobey any lawful order of the master or matron after such order shall have been repeated;

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<sup>21</sup> Extract from *The regulation of outdoor poor relief and work-house rules, 1841* (<https://www1.umassd.edu/ir/resources/poorlaw/p5.doc>). Website references: (*General Order Regulating outdoor relief, 1841, Parliamentary Papers, 1842, XIX*, pp. 42-43, 47-53); in G. M. Young and W. D. Hancock, eds., *English Historical Documents, XII(1), 1833-1874* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 722-26

Or shall unlawfully strike or otherwise unlawfully assault any person;

Or shall wilfully or mischievously damage or soil any property whatsoever belonging to the Guardians;

Or shall wilfully waste or spoil any provisions, stock, tools, or materials for work, belonging to the Guardians;

Or shall be drunk;

Or shall commit any act of indecency;

Or shall wilfully disturb the other inmates during prayers or divine worship;

Shall be deemed REFRACTORY.

It shall be lawful for the master of the workhouse, with or without the direction of the Board of Guardians, to punish any *disorderly* pauper by substituting, during a time not greater than forty-eight hours, for his or her dinner, as prescribed by the dietary, a meal consisting of eight ounces of bread, or one pound of cooked potatoes, and also by withholding from him during the same period, all butter, cheese, tea, sugar, or broth, which such pauper would otherwise receive, at any meal during the time aforesaid.

And it shall be lawful for the Board of Guardians, by a special direction to be entered on their minutes, to order any *refractory* pauper to be punished by confinement in a separate room, with or without an alteration of diet, similar in kind and duration to that prescribed in Art. 36 for *disorderly* paupers; but no pauper shall be so confined for a longer period than twenty-four hours, or, if it be deemed right that such pauper should be carried before a justice of the peace, and if such period of twenty-four hours should be insufficient for that purpose, then for such further time as may be necessary for such purpose.

It shall be lawful for the Board of Guardians, by any special or general order, to direct that a dress different from that of the other inmates shall be worn by *disorderly* or *refractory* paupers, during a period of not more than forty-eight hours, jointly with, or in lieu of the alteration of diet to which any such pauper might be subjected by the regulations herein contained; but it shall not be lawful for the Board of Guardians to cause any penal dress or distinguishing mark of disgrace to be worn by any adult pauper or class of adult paupers, unless such pauper or paupers shall be *disorderly* or *refractory* within the meaning of Article 34 or Article 35, of this order.