

# The Old Workhouse at Wokingham.

By ARTHUR T. HEELAS.

**A**MONGST the parochial documents belonging to Wokingham Old Church (All Saints') is one entitled 'The Charities and Disbursements to the Poor of Oakingham, 1769 to 1776.' I am indebted to the rector, the Rev. B. Long, for kindly allowing me to make extracts from this old-time record, which throws much light upon the condition of the poor in the Eighteenth Century and the means taken for the relief of destitution.

The old Workhouse at this period was situated in Denmark Street ; the building is still in existence and is now used as a decorator's paint shop and store by Mr. F. Dearlove, the present owner. Recently he was showing me round the old premises and pointed out in the loft a small door, about two feet square, in the outside wall, somewhat similar to a trap-door : this opening was used to slip out the coffins of deceased inmates without attracting the attention of the others. An old inhabitant, since dead, well remembered the opening being used for that purpose.

The workhouses of the Eighteenth Century were miserable places in comparison with the present-day institutions : they were much dreaded by the poor, who always did their utmost to exist without resort to them. There was no comfort, the feeding was bad and the whole system of management disgraceful. Extracts from the book enables one to have some idea of the conditions then prevailing.

The book contains an inventory of the furniture and household goods of the Workhouse, which shows how limited the accommodation of that institution was as compared with the present establishment. In the year 1766 the number of inmates varied from fourteen to twenty-two, and the weekly payments out of the rates varied from £1 2s. 6d. to £1 19s. 0d. : these were the contributions from the town rates or the district now known as 'Wokingham Within.' The poor in the House were 'farmed' by the Master and his wife, who were paid from 2/- to 2/6 per week per head, for their keep, which accounts for the small

weekly contribution from the rates. In addition, about £1 10s. 0d. per week was paid to the Master for 'weekly poor,' evidently outdoor relief for specified cases on his list as apart from these weekly payments there are many payments made direct by the overseers to the poor for sickness, clothing, burial, etc. During the year 134 ells of 'doulas' were distributed to the poor: it was supplied by two local firms—Brooks and Griffin & Togwell.

The overseers were Nathaniel Basnett and Benjamin Beaver in 1766; Sam'l Trash and Mark Hatt in 1767; Wm. Hambleton and Thos. Houlton in 1768; George Trash and John Ellis in 1769; Joyner Beecher and Edmund Togwell in 1770; John Beaver and John Field in 1771; Wm. Wheatley and John Harris in 1772; and Brookes and Leach in 1773.

Edward Hibbert appears to have been the Master of the Workhouse as all payments were made to him and he was responsible for the contents of the House, which is proved by a new inventory that was taken when he left in 1769. The weekly payments were entered in the accounts thus: 'Edward Hibbert for 22 House Poor, £1 18 3.' This was an exceptionally low payment, being well below the average of 2/- per head.

The Inventory was as follows:—

'Goods in the Workhous Easter 1766.'

'Three pair New sheets Six pr old Ditto  
three pair of blancoates five Coverlids  
two feather beads. & one flocke & feathers  
two feather bolsters. & one flock Ditto. one  
Chaff bead good. & one good flock Ditto  
one old blancoate, five beadsteads  
& one small Ditto, two old Chairs Six stooles  
five Spining wheels, two reales, two wash  
tubbs, one old Cradle one Iornpot &  
Iorn work hung. one brass kittle hung  
and no Iorn work. two Iorn pots & one  
pair of pot Hooks, one large block  
one beerStand. a Salting tub for meat  
one flower tubb, one pr. Cottrelle in the

Chimbley, & 2 S Hooks, one Large table  
 4 formes, 1 water tubb. 2 water pales  
 3 dressers & Shelves. & the Shelves in the  
 pantry. 18 trenchers, 18 Spoons, one  
 Wooden plater Large. 2 Large Earthen pans  
 8 wooden Dishes.'

On looking through this list one wonders what sleeping accommodation there was for the unfortunate inmates who were not favoured with one of the six bedsteads ; there is an entry below the list that may help to solve the problem, as it states : ' had made two beads of Hopbags &c & filled with straw,' it is possible that this was an emergency measure when the House was full, otherwise most of the inmates would have to sleep on the floors. There is only one medical charge during the twelve months under review : it is dated May 20th, 1766, and is as follows :—' paid Surgeons bill and other expenses relating to Prince by order of the Justices being the Arrears of last year, £28 10s. 6d.'

The overseers' disbursements for the year amounted to £357 16s. 10½d., the Vestry Meetings were held monthly and seldom attended by anyone judging by the frequent entry : ' No body attended the vestry.' The two Overseers carried on alone the distribution of money and goods as they thought fit, their methods of book-keeping were very crude, phonetic spelling strongly appealed to them and their writing varied from copper-plate to hieroglyphics, mostly the latter, which is almost unreadable.

Mr. Brooker was undoubtedly the best scholar : his accounts are very clear ; they are reproduced below as they show the rate and what it brought in :—

' Disbursements from Easter 1773 to Easter 1774	£477	15	0
Interest on £200, Borrowed	...	9	0
		<hr/>	
		486	15 0
		<hr/>	
Collected on a 3/6 Rate	...	254	18 0
		<hr/>	
Due to Mr. Brooker	...	231	17 0
		<hr/>	
		<hr/>	

Collected on a 3/6 Rate	...	...	...	...	£254	18	0
Arrears supposed good	...	...	...	...	159	17	3
do	bad	...	...	...	8	1	0
					<hr/>		
					422	16	3'
					<hr/>		

The following extracts from the accounts are both interesting and also amusing as they show the cost of articles and give an idea of the value of money in those days :—

		£	s.	d.
' 1766.	Dame Gost ill for bread, (blind) ...		10	
	Young Gost an inflammation in his leg		1	0
	Coach hire to & from London & expenses after Vickers ...	1	2	10
	Chips 2d, candle 1d, sugar 1½, basket 2d.			6½
June 1.	Sent the Infant that was this day found in Harry Pryers yard to the workhouse.			
	Pd expenses of the Baptizing the child called Abraham June for beer &c	3	6	
	Wine 6d, Sugar 1d, Cinemon 1d, (a sick woman) ...			8
	Pd expenses of a Sick Sweep Chimbley boy ...	8	0	
	„ George winn for mending the rope of town Bell ...			4
Funeral expenses.	Laying out 3/-, Wooll <sup>1</sup> for ditto 1/-, bell 1/6 ...		5	6
	Beer &c. 4/-, coffin 8/- ...	12	0	
	To the men Extra to carie hur ...	2	0	
	Mending shoves for old Clerke ...	1	8	
	Old Gibbs for medsons ...	2	0	
	To & for the Dum boy &c ...	1	6	
	To old Clerke for shaveing & toobacca			6
	Salts for dame Collier ...			8

<sup>1</sup> The entry ' Wooll ' refers to an Act of Parliament of 1679, which made burial in woollen garments, instead of linen, compulsory. This Act remained in force until 1814, when it was repealed.

		£	s.	d.
	A Galls Hat ... ..			8
	Washing old Spratleys Shurts ...			4
	Carting beer for turf to foster ...		5	0
	Well rope ... ..		1	0
	Ginn to the wimen with M Clarke ...			3
	A Shurt wast-Coat briches & Stockings for the Hatter ... ..		7	0
	To John Willats for a Cord for the bulls Leg ... ..			6
	pd. J. Loreance for the bull House ...		3	0
	Beer for the Stroler ... ..		1	2
	Years Shaving old Clerke ... ..		8	0
1768	Eight Lodes of turf for the Whorckhouse		12	0
	Gave to the Whorckhouse for to Meack Shifts & Shorts Eighttein Ells & a halfe of Dowlus ... ..		18	$\frac{1}{2}$
July	Gave W Clarck on a Count of the Small pox <sup>2</sup> ... ..		1	0
	Wheackley pensioners for one Month	10	2	8
	Peaid for Shaving a man in the Whorckhous Whithe Small pox ...			6
	Bought at Muncks a Whascoat & hank- shift for hould Clarck ... ..		4	8
	Gave Hould Hawgkins on a Count of Being Lane ... ..		1	6
	Gave a Pore Man By Oader of the halderman ... ..			6
	Gave Gills Cotterell on a Count of his Legs Being Brock ... ..		1	0
1769.	Gave Pore Whomun On the Rods ...	0	0	6
	Widow Chaplin Tobacco ... ..			1
	tracle & Brimstone ... ..			$1\frac{1}{2}$
	2 oz Tobacco old Clark ... ..			$1\frac{3}{4}$
	3 Chamber Pots ... ..			$4\frac{1}{2}$

<sup>2</sup> There was evidently a serious outbreak of small-pox as many received help from the overseers about this month for this disease.

		£	s.	d.
1770.	1 pair Spectables for Pinners wife ...			7
	Beer for 2 Christ'nings at ye Workhouse ...	2	6	
	A Bullocks Head for ye Workhouse ...	2	6	
	A Leg of Veal for Workhouse ...	3	10½	
	Pd for Beef at ye Workhous ...	2	6	
	Beer for ye burial of a Child ...	2	0	
1771.	Jane Cotterell for carrying the Woman to the Workhouse ...			6
1772.	Paid towards ye Bull ...	4	10	0
1773. Dec. 20.	Cash to Mr Trash for part of the Bulls	3	2	6½
	1 Barrel Small Beer ...	8	0	
1774.	Expences in sending a Man to the Vale who had Small Pox ...	2	2	0
1773.	Chambers ringing the Bell ...	12	0	
	Cutting hair for 2 persons ...			2
	Making 17 Coats ...	14	2	
	17 pair Breeches ...	8	6	

The payments for the bulls refer to the bulls bought for bull-baiting, which was the favourite sport of the inhabitants of the town for nearly two centuries. It arose in the following manner. By his will dated 5th May, 1661, George Staverton bequeathed property at Staines, the income of which was to be expended in the purchase of a bull, which was to be baited on St. Thomas' Day (December 21st) in the Market Place; the carcase to be sold and the proceeds to be laid out in the purchase of shoes and stockings for poor children. In time the estate at Staines became more valuable, there being enough money to buy a bull and a half. So two bulls were bought to be baited, and the balance of the money required was provided out of the poor rates.

With the dawn of the Nineteenth Century public opinion began to feel shocked at the cruelty of 'bull-baiting,' and in a sermon entitled 'Barbarity to God's dumb creation,' preached in Wokingham Parish Church on December 20th, 1801, by the Rev. Edward Barry, of Reading, the preacher appealed most



earnestly to his hearers to assist in putting a stop to the Wokingham bull-baiting. However, it was some years before the preacher's desire was accomplished; it was not until the year 1821 that the Corporation prohibited the baiting of the bulls, which were slaughtered and the meat distributed to the poor. So ingrained in the popular mind was the sport of baiting the wretched animals that the populace in 1835 broke into the stable where one of the two bulls was kept and baited it in spite of the efforts of magistrates to stop the proceedings. Though the 'sport' is discontinued the benefits of the charity yet survive. The income from the property at Staines produced about £50 per annum, which was expended on the purchase of beef for certain of the poor of the Borough of Wokingham. The property was sold in 1923 at an enhanced value, so that the income in future will be greatly increased.

There was undoubtedly a serious outbreak of small-pox in July, 1768, as the entries show that many patients of this dreaded disease received help from the Overseers during that month. I am unable to trace where 'the Vale' was, the place where small-pox patients were sent for isolation: it is quite probable that it was in an out-of-the-way spot in the woods. In more recent times an isolation small-pox hospital, consisting of old railway carriages, was placed in the pine woods on the Barkham Ride, near Finchampstead, and was used during the last serious outbreak.

Amongst the entries of payments for various articles, coal does not appear. This is not altogether a matter of surprise when one considers the state of the coal trade in the eighteenth century and the difficulties of transport owing to the condition of the roads.

Turf was evidently used in place of coal as there are several payments made during each year for loads of turf which shows that quite a large quantity was used. No doubt the turf was what we should now describe as peat and procured from the forest lands surrounding the town.

The inmates were only supplied with meat once a month and then only a small allowance was served out to them; this is

proved by the small joints purchased and the monthly payment for same.

In the accounts for the year 1772 there is a list of the 'irnings of the pore, money irnd of mr crutwel at Silk hous'; this amounted to £21 os. 5d.: it was added to the total of the rates collected. These entries therefore show that inmates of the House who were able to spin and work in the Silk Mills were sent there to earn a little towards their keep and thus relieve the rates.

Local names taken from the Overseers' Disbursement Book, 1766 to 1774:—

The Rev. Pennington (1774), who carried out the duties of Chaplain to the Workhouse. *Doctors*: Wheeler, Turner, Crutwell. *Lawyer*: Richards. *Brewer*: Wheatley.

The following local traders supplied goods to the Overseers, but in some instances the nature of the articles supplied is not stated, also their christian names and initials are often omitted. The spelling of proper names is not always reliable as some of the Overseers were poor clerks.

*Butchers*: Wm. Cruttwell, Maynard, Wm. Hambleton, Simon Wallin (also a baker), Richard Hall.

*Bakers*: Houlton, Binfield, Leach, Mrs Sharps, John Lawrence (who also supplied coffins).

*Barbers*: John Burrutt, C. Shephard.

*Blacksmith*: William Hibbert.

*Drapers and Clothiers*: Brooks, J. Wallin, Monk, Beaver (worsted and yarn), John Bennett, Doggett (cloths).

*Grocer*: George Trash.

*Bootmakers*: Ed Houlton, Wm & Jas Watts.

*Farmer*: Norris.

*Clockmaker*: George Wynn. *Undertaker*: Cyprian Cotterell.

*Trade unknown*: Jennings, Webb, Feltham, Bunce, S. Walden, Trickey, Willats.

Names of some of the poor who received relief from the Overseers:—Beaver, Peg Brumbley (? Bromley), Clark, Cotterill, Chapman, Collier, Dormer, J. Ducks, Ghost, Hefford, Hibbert, Langley, T. Mills, Netherclift, Prince, Pinner, Spratley, Wheeler, Wooderson, Whinch, Wm Watts; also Adwarter, Gibbs, Vickers.