

THE HISTORY OF SUTTON'S WORKHOUSE: 1737-1903

By Mike Hinson

Background

In medieval times, most poor relief was conscientiously undertaken by religious orders as an important part of their Christian duty. Between 1536 and 1540, the Dissolution of the Monasteries initiated by Henry VIII resulted in the appropriation of vast sums of money from religious foundations to fill the royal coffers. Religious houses were stripped of their wealth and closed down, thereby rendering many nuns and monks homeless. The poor people to whom they had previously given succour were often left without support. Some people's attitudes to Christian values changed and charitable acts of mercy intended to relieve the sufferings of the unfortunate were less likely to be regarded as an obligation.

During the late 16th century, there was a 25 per cent increase in the population, coupled with a series of poor harvests that resulted in starvation for many people. At the same time, the success of the wool trade had led to changes in agricultural practice. Land enclosures to create more pasture resulted in a decrease in agricultural work, forcing people to leave their homes in order to search for work in towns. A series of **Poor Laws** were enacted in 1563, 1572, 1576, 1592 and 1597, of which the following are of particular relevance:

- ***The Poor Law Act, 1572*** required each parish to provide work for the unemployed in a house designated for that purpose and made local officials responsible for each parish's provision for the aged, sick and poor. In order to pay for this a tax, known as the Poor Rate, was collected locally from those who owned property in the parish.
- ***'An Act for the Reliefe of the Poore, 39 Elizabeth I, c.3, 1597'***

This Act not only strengthened the powers of local JPs, but also made provision for the appointment of parish Overseers of the Poor to supervise the everyday running of poor relief:

'Be yt enacted by the Authority of this present Parlyamente, That the Churchwardens of every Parish and fower substancial Howsholders there ... shall be nominated yearly in Easter Week ...shal be called Overseers of the Poore of the same Parish, and they or the greater part of them shall take order from tyme to tyme by and with the Consent of two or more such Justices of the Peace, for setting to worke of the Children of all whose Parents shall not be said persons be thought able to kepe and mayntaine their Children. And also all such persons maryed or unmaryed as having no means to mayntaine them, use no ordinary and dayly Trade of life to gett there lyving by; and also to rayse weekly or otherwise ... a convenient Stocke of Flax Hempe Wool Threed Iron and other necessary Ware and Stuffe to set the Poore on worke, and also competent summes of Money for and towards the necessary Relief of the lame ympotente olde blynde and such other amonge them being poore and not able to work, and also for the putting owte of such children to be Apprentices, to be gathered owte of the same Parish according to the ability of the same Parische ...' ⁽¹⁾

- ***The Act for the Relief of the Poor (43, Elizabeth, c.2, 1601)***, often referred to as **'the Old Poor Law'**, refined this legislation by creating a nation-wide system to be paid for by levying a tax based on the value of each individual's dwelling. The Act drew a clear distinction between those who were able to work and those who could not. With regard to

the able-bodied poor, it became the duty of the parish officers to assist them over a difficult period in their lives and to facilitate their early return to independence.

Establishing Workhouses

Nationally, demands for poor relief continued to increase during the early 18th century. As a means of coping, individual parishes were empowered to establish workhouses.

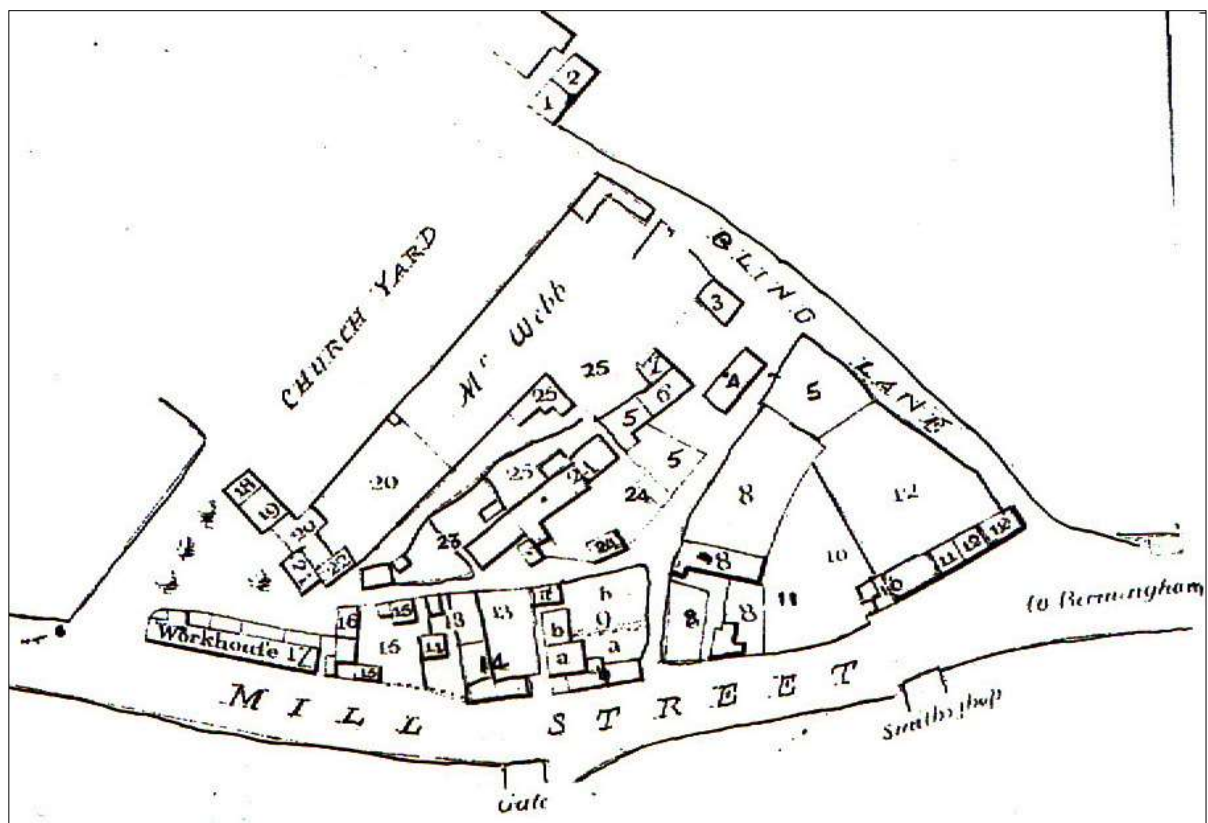
In 1723, *The Workhouse Test* [or *Knatchbull's*] *Act* was enacted by Parliament. Officers in a parish, or of two or more parishes working together, were then empowered to buy, rent or build premises in which the poor could be set to work – the term ‘workhouse’ was used to describe such places. The ‘workhouse test’ was applied whereby a person who had requested poor relief was required to enter a workhouse and to undertake a set amount of work. They had to apply for relief to either the parish’s Overseers of the Poor, or the Churchwardens, or to the parish Vestry [the regular meeting of ratepayers]. Poor persons who declined to enter the workhouse or who, having entered, refused to submit to its regulations, did not receive relief. As a result, many paupers who had previously received pensions [sums of money regularly paid by the local officers of the poor] then preferred to depend upon their own exertions rather than to enter the workhouse .⁽²⁾

The Building of Sutton’s Workhouse

In his book, Fentiman ⁽³⁾ refers to an entry in the minutes of the Warden and Society concerning the Old Grammar School. The Schoolmaster had approached the Corporation because the accommodation in St Mary’s Hall had become untenable. A three-acre plot at the North end of the Town was offered as a new site for the school and a sum of £400 was allocated to build it. A total of £1200 was raised from the sale of trees from Sutton Park to pay the building costs. Any excess funds were to go towards erecting a **Workhouse** in Mill Street. However, ten years elapsed before any further action was taken. An entry in the minutes for 6 March 1737 reads as follows ⁽⁴⁾:

‘At this Hall or Mooting [of the Warden and Society], it was unanimously agreed upon by all the Members that the Almshouses belonging to this Parish (which are become very ancient and much decayed) shall be taken down and the Timber, Brick and Materials that arise therefrom shall be applied towards building a Workhouse where the old school stood, for the maintenance of the poor belonging to this parish as soon as conveniently may be. And that what money shall be wanting for completing such a workhouse shall paid out of the money from the late sale of timber in Hollyhurst and that the said Corporation shall pay to the Schoolmaster for the time being the yearly rent of four pounds for such part of the Old School House as is now remaining and the land where the same stood and the Barn, Gardens and all appurtenances thereto belonging, if the same can be saved, to the said Corporation as they shall think proper ... And that Pudsey Jesson Esq., Mr John Riland, Mr Richard Riland Clarke and Mr Paul Lowe fix upon a plan, buy all manner of Materials and employ Workmen for taking down the said Almshouses and building such a Workhouse in such manner as they or the greater number of them think proper.’

No plans, details of costs or records of the eventual opening of the Workhouse, have survived. A plan of 1811 ⁽⁵⁾ indicates its position facing on to Mill Street.



There is a depiction of its possible external appearance in the picture of Sutton Coldfield in 1840 by Norman G Evans ⁽⁶⁾ (this picture could not be found – editor). Prior to 1819, occasional details of poor relief were included in the minutes of the Warden and Society [the Sutton Corporation]. It appears that the Churchwardens and the Overseers of the Poor in Sutton undertook their responsibilities for the day-to-day running of the workhouse and for the ‘out-relief’ of the poor in a similar manner to that of officers in other parishes and were accountable to the general vestry. None of their records or accounts for this period have survived. However, the Minutes of the Warden and Society (Sutton Corporation) indicate that particular problems were referred to them and, once resolved, duly recorded. For example:

17th May 1780

‘Ordered that the Warden do pay into the hands of Mr Thomas Cooper [a member of the Society] the sum of Twenty Guineas according to his direction for the relief of Widow Savage.

‘Ordered that Mr Henry Curzon [also a member] do purchase a cow at the expense of the body corporate, and that the same be lent to Thomas Hughes for the use of his family.

7th October 1803

‘The Overseers of the Poor were summoned to appear before the next meeting of the Warden and Society because their annual accounts [normally approved at a meeting of the general vestry] were ‘adjudged imperfect’, ⁽⁷⁾.

Sutton's Select Vestry

Nationally, there was a colossal rise in the cost of the Poor Rates, from approximately £2 million in 1785 to more than £10 million in 1817-19. In order to bring the situation under control, both Houses of Parliament appointed Select Committees to consider the more effective working of the poor laws. The recommendations of the Commons Committees, under the chairmanship of Sir Sturges Bourne, led to the passing of two *Acts* in 1818 and 1819. These drastically revised the procedures for vestry meetings, authorising any parish that wished to do so to establish a standing committee (a **Select Vestry**) to deal solely with poor relief. General vestries were still allowed to retain their other powers ⁽⁸⁾.

The *Acts* also required parishes to keep separate vestry minutes. As from 1819, meetings of Sutton's Select Vestry and General Vestry were recorded in the same Minute Book. At a meeting of the General Vestry on 17th December 1819, it was agreed unanimously that a Select Vestry should be established ⁽⁹⁾:

'Resolved that ... that the Warden, F B Hackett, Esq., Mr. Benjamin Bourne, Mr. Samuel Thompson, Mr. William Twamley and Mr. Charles Cooper be of the select vestry.'

At the time, the Poor Rate in Sutton was collected quarterly. There were five Overseers of the Poor, elected annually, one for each area, or 'quarter', of the parish: **Great Sutton** [the town centre]; **Hill and Little Sutton** [communities north of Great Sutton]; **Moor and Ashfurlong** [for communities west of Great Sutton], **Beyond the Wood** [for the south-east, more familiarly known as Walmley], and **Maney and the Wild** [south and south-west]. The total sum raised by the 'levies' that they collected was recorded in the minutes of the Select Vestry.

Farming Sutton's Poor

Under the provisions of the 1723 *Act*, parishes could provide either relief as an individual parish, or in partnership with other parishes, or appoint sub-contractors who would undertake the relief of the parish poor, feeding, clothing and providing basic necessities in return for an agreed regular payment.

Initially, Sutton's Select Vestry had intended to appoint a Workhouse Master. However, at a General Vestry meeting on 7th January 1820, it was resolved that it might be more cost-effective to 'farm' the poor instead. As a result of this decision, an advertisement was placed in Birmingham's local newspaper, *Aris's Gazette*. A sub-committee of the Select Vestry was designated to consider the four tenders submitted in response:

'Joseph Adams of Great Barr, Birmingham	£2100. 0. 0 [p.a.]
John Lewis of Bridge North	£2000. 0. 0
John Davis, Blucher Street, Birmingham	£2000. 0. 0
W. Browning, West Bromwich	£1600. 0. 0'

The tender of Mr William Browning was preferred and he was subsequently awarded a three-year contract. He became wholly responsible for the welfare of the parish poor, paying the weekly bills and charges, except for law charges and the county rate. Brown was paid £61. 10. 9 per fortnight for this service. Mr. Salt of Paradise Street, Birmingham stood as his surety. It was agreed that Browning should

covenant £10 per fortnight for ten fortnights to provide a surety of £100 to the Corporation. He was responsible to the Select Vestry that met on Friday mornings each fortnight.

For a time, the arrangements for farming the poor appeared to work very well. However, by July 1822, the General Vestry had resolved to dissolve the contract with Mr. Browning, probably in an effort to save money. A Mr. Thomas Kempson then submitted a tender to manage and maintain the poor for £1200 per year. His offer was regarded as being ‘advantageous to the parish’ and was accepted. This sum turned out to be somewhat optimistic for, in June 1823, Mr. Kempson gave the Corporation notice that he would be giving up the contract for farming the poor at Michaelmas. He subsequently withdrew his notice after the vestry had offered him a further £200 per year to continue. An entry in the minutes for 28 January 1825 shows that he was being paid £53. 16, 11 per fortnight.

It was the duty of the Select Vestry to offer relief to the poor, on behalf of the ratepayers, in as cost-effective way as possible. A summary of Overseers’ expenditure between 1818 and 1825 demonstrated that some savings had been achieved:

Year ending March 25th	Total Annual Expenditure
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(under the management of the General Vestry)

1818	£2621. 9. 10 ½
1819	£2630. 7. 6 ½
1820	£2987. 1. 10 ½

(under the management of the Select Vestry)

1821	£1918. 19. 10 ½
1822	£2047. 18. 2 ½
1823	£1799. 9. 1
1824	£1543. 8. 5 ½
1825	£1802. 4. 4

The Assistant Overseers

In March 1825, a review of the cost of farming the poor resulted in both vestries agreeing to appoint, as an alternative, an Assistant Overseer of the Poor at an annual salary of £40 and ‘the common board of the house’. His duties were to include: collecting the levies; keeping a Book of Accounts and a Minute Book [the Vestry Minutes]; managing the workhouse and ‘residing therein’, having temporary powers of relief, and acting as clerk to the Select Vestry ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Mr. Browning and a Mr. Sharrad (sometimes referred to in the Minutes as Mr. Sharratt) had applied for the post and Mr. Sharrad was subsequently appointed. The Vestry notes that ‘in consideration of his family he is expected to pay weekly for each child that is maintained in the workhouse’. From the job

description, the post probably proved to be onerous and, by March 1827, Mr. Sharrad had given notice to the Select Vestry that he wished to resign unless he received a rise in salary. Two contractors had got wind of this and swiftly submitted tenders for, once more, farming Sutton's poor. However, after having reviewed the situation, it was decided to continue with an Assistant Overseer. Later minutes indicate that Mr. Sharrad's salary had been raised to £50 per annum. He continued in the post until October 1829 when, apparently, there was a discrepancy in his accounts and he owed the Corporation a sum of £179. 8. 0 ½. This unacceptable conduct was discussed by both vestries and he was subsequently relieved of his duties. Once again, the future management of the poor 'whether by Contract, Assistant Overseer, or otherwise' was under review. Yet again, the vestries decided *not* to farm the poor and on 27th February 1830, they resolved to appoint Mr. Samuel Turner of Langley as Assistant Overseer at an annual salary of £60.

Mr. Turner assumed his duties as Assistant Overseer having been offered a significantly increased salary to that of his predecessor. Unfortunately, by April 1831, serious charges regarding his efficiency and general conduct had been lodged. The Minutes, page 422 ⁽¹¹⁾ record that:

'The Overseers and Churchwardens for the past year be severally asked by the Chairman how far in their opinion the charge of general neglect and of being frequently intoxicated and of using abusive language to the paupers ...

'Resolved that Mr. Turner be called in and that he be admonished by the Chairman to be more correct in his habits ...'

'Resolved that the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor for the coming year be directed to attend closely as their bounded duty to do, to the conduct of Mr Turner in his situation of Assistant Overseer and that they do report their observations to such succeeding Select Vestry meetings.'

Samuel Turner had owed money from his accounts since Lady Day [25th March] 1831 and by March 1832, he was still in arrears. At a meeting of the Select Vestry on 6th April, a request was made to the General Vestry for the Corporation to dispense with his services and to appoint a more suitable successor as Assistant Overseer. Interestingly, at a meeting on 14th April, the General Vestry disagreed, its members being of the opinion that his conduct might improve and that he should be given a further chance. However, by 9th May, the Select Vestry was at the end of its tether:

'Having heard the charges made against Mr. Turner by Mr. Oughton as well as the charges made against him by other Inhabitants of improper conduct and obscene language and also of neglect of duty and disobedience of the Magistrate's orders, [members of the Select Vestry] have come to the unanimous resolution that he should not be continued in his situation.'

He was dismissed and after several efforts to redeem the money owing, in July 1833, court proceedings were taken against him. The judgment was that Turner and his surety should repay the full amount by installments due on each quarter day. Farming the poor was discussed yet again, but the vestry resolved to appoint another Assistant Overseer and Mr. Charles Brentnall was chosen. He proved to be a most suitable choice, a minute of 9 November 1832 recording the Select Vestry's great pleasure in being able to speak favourably of 'his attention and diligence'.

Relieving Sutton's Poor

The two Churchwardens and five Overseers of the Poor were elected annually and were unpaid. They spearheaded the relief of the parish's poor on behalf of the ratepayers. Even with an Assistant Overseer, employed to undertake the day-to-day management, they still had to tackle a range of responsibilities. The outcomes of their decisions are recorded in the two Minute Books of the Select Vestry.

Indoor and Outdoor Relief

'Indoor' relief was given to members of the poor residing in the workhouse: 'outdoor' relief was given to those whose applications had been approved, but who remained within their own homes. The Select Vestry was responsible for determining which form of relief a person might receive, for example ⁽¹²⁾:

15th May 1828

'That the Widow Marston have her weekly pay increased from 3/6 to Five shillings for herself and her family.'

'That the Widow of William Edge has a pair of shoes given her.'

'That the Widow of Richard Turner have six shillings per week allowed for her and her family.'

'That William Haywood's wife has a petticoat given her.'

25th November 1831

'[Resolved] That Wm. Benton has Six shillings per week till Xmas with the understanding that his family must come to the House if they cannot do with that relief.'

20th March 1834

'Resolved that Harry Brown leave the Workhouse immediately and that he be allowed 3 shillings per week for six weeks.'

25th April 1834

'Ordered that Thos. Green be received into the workhouse and that the Parish Surgeon examine him as to his state of health and if necessary to be kept on a spoon diet.'

24th October 1835

'Hugh Hopley applies for relief. Order to have 2/6 now and 2/6 in a fortnight and if he wants relief afterwards to come to the Workhouse.'

Settlement and Removal

Under the provision of *The Settlement Act, 1662*, any stranger settling in a parish who might require relief could be removed by the justices if the house that he or she rented was worth less than £10 a year. After 1697, *Settlement Certificates* were introduced. Any poor person moving to another parish was required to show this document to the Overseers of the Poor in the host parish. Settlement certificates became binding legal instruments, certification covering not only the certificate holder, but also members of his family. Any children subsequently born might, if they became paupers, be sent back to their father's parish of origin, and so on, from successive generation to generation. The process of

removal or settlement frequently involved the Select Vestry in negotiations with other parishes and, sometimes, expensive legal proceedings at quarter sessions of the county court. For example:

28th April 1820

'That Dorothy Green, single woman, having returned to this Parish after order, be apprehended and proceeded against as she will not return to Packington her parish.'

19th January 1821

'That the order of Removal to Middleton with William Kendrick and family be left to Mr. Charles the Middleton parish officer signifying their consent, subject to the application of Mr. Palmer their solicitor.'

16th February 1821

'Warrant having been obtained against William Stone for the purpose of bringing him to be examined assessing the place of his last legal settlement ...resolved that William Browning [contracted to farm Sutton's poor] take charge of the warrant and proceeding to Bristol therewith as also with the woman Charlotte Stone and make the best terms he can ...'

Accounts for the end of March 1825

'Advance towards expenses at Sessions in appeal with the parish of Eddlethorpe (sic) [might be Edenthorpe, Norfolk] on the removal of Josiah Dale and family - £50.'

11th October 1833

'Watkin's wife, under order of removal from Glascote, be allowed 2/6 per week till their place of settlement be decided. Resolved that the order of removal of the Watkins family from Polesworth and Glascote be entered subject to the enquiries by Mr. Smith of the father of the pauper.'

3rd January 1834

'Resolved that the Watkins family be transferred to Sutton.'

Bastardy

In the 19th century, babies born to poor mothers out of wedlock often became the responsibility of the local poor law officers. Under the Old Poor Law, parish officers were empowered to enforce maintenance orders against putative fathers, whilst the mothers were entitled to receive a weekly allowance.

Nutt ⁽¹⁴⁾ points out that levels of illegitimacy rose during the 18th and 19th century and that some parishes were spending about 38 per cent of their relief budgets on unmarried mothers. When a woman became pregnant with a child likely to be born illegitimate, she was legally obliged to notify her parish of settlement at least 40 days prior to the expected birth. Assuming that the local justices had persuaded the expectant mother to reveal the father's name, the parish would seek an indemnity from the named father against any charges that it might incur in supporting the mother and child. This often involved the drawing up of a Bastardy Bond or an affiliation order to ensure that the father paid a regular sum to

support them. If a father failed to pay, he was legally obliged to pay the parish compensation and might also be faced with three months imprisonment. The mother was entitled to receive the sum whether or not the father paid, the difference being made up from the parish rates. The average sum paid was between 1/6 and 2/6 (ten to 12 shillings per week being the average labourer's wage at the time) until the child was seven. In Sutton, evidence of such payment can be found in the Minutes of the Select Vestry. For example:

9th November 1832

'Resolved that a Ledger for Bastardy Cases be kept for the Parish and that the same Book that contains the abstract note do for the purpose.'

'Ordered that Sml. Baylis's pay for Bastard Child be reduced to 1/6 per week till the case be investigated.'

24th May 1833

'Ordered that Hannah Jenkins be allowed 1/6 per week for her bastard child, affiliated to John Lovatt.'

13th September 1833

'Ordered that Rich[ard] Nicklin must pay the amount due to the Parish for the maintenance of his bastard child by Ditchfield by this day fortnight or find security for the payment or be proceeded with immediately.'

'Resolved that Mr Wilkins, Overseer, be requested to make enquiries respecting James Kendrick and Frederick Bird of Wednesbury for non-payment in bastardy cases and report to the next Select Vestry.'

11th September 1835

'Resolved that application be made at ensuing sessions for order [of] affiliation for Cooper, Morris and Raddons' illegitimate children and that notice be given to the unmarried fathers...'

The sums of money involved were payable either to or by the Select Vestry and the total sums involved were duly entered into the annual accounts submitted to the general vestry and to the Corporation.

Apprenticeships

The Poor Law Act of 1601 encouraged churchwardens and overseers of the poor to set children of the poor to work by binding them into apprenticeships, having first sought the consent of two justices, 'where they shall see convenient'. After a year, the boy or girl concerned might then become legally settled in the parish in which he or she was apprenticed. This in itself was an incentive to parish officers to place that child anywhere but in his or her home parish in order to cut costs. By the early 19th century, there was legislation that stipulated that children suitable for apprenticeship must be at least nine years of age, that the boy or girl could not be sent more than 40 miles from the home parish and that they worked for a maximum of 12 hours per day. Brief details of apprenticeships are recorded in the minutes of the Select Vestry. A modest premium was paid to the tradesperson who took on the apprentice. The phrase, 'in the usual way' implies that indentures were drawn up, but there are no details of any follow-

up enquiries as to the apprentice's progress. As in other parishes, it would appear to have been a low-cost arrangement that freed the parish from any responsibility:

11th April 1823

'That William Gillman son of John Gillman of Sutton Coldfield, aged 14 years on 10th day of Dec. last be bound apprentice to John Priestland of the parish of Sutton Coldfield, Cordwainer. in the usual way with £2 in lieu of clothing.'

13th August 1824

That Henry Gilmore son of John Gilmore of Sutton Coldfield aged 11 years May last be bound apprentice to Wm Grove of Digby Street, Aston Road in the parish of Aston, Snuffer maker, in the usual way with £2 premium.'

1827

'That Samuel Stones, son of John Stones deceased and Jane his wife, be put apprentice to William Hunt of Ashted near Birmingham, wheelwright. Samuel is 14 next April. £2 and a little clothing.'

Pauper 'Lunatics'

In the late 18th and early 19th century, people with mental health problems (generally classified as 'lunatics') were outcasts from society. Those that were harmless were likely to be ignored and left to cope as best they could: those that were violent were confined in prisons, houses of correction, hospitals or workhouses. Privately run 'madhouses' were common, their owners running them for profit and being willing to take paupers boarded out by parishes who paid the inmates' fees.

The *County Asylum Act, 1808* (Wynn's Act) gave JPs power to build asylums 'for the better care and maintenance of lunatics' using local funds. County authorities were slow to make provision, however by 1818, a public asylum in Stafford had been opened. Pauper lunatics were the responsibility of Sutton's Select Vestry and entries in the Minutes show that patients were boarded out at the Stafford Asylum:

16th November 1827

'That the wife of Obadiah Randle be immediately brought from the asylum at Tamworth by Mr. Sharrad.'

25th January 1828

'That Randle's wife be sent to the Stafford Infirmary at the expense of this parish and that Mr. Proctor of the parish wherein she is now residing be requested to get her to the Infirmary.'

Income and Expenditure

The Annual accounts of the Select Vestry were recorded in its Minute Book. A closer examination of the summary of accounts for the year from March 1825 to March 1826 reveals some clues as to how

poor relief was financed and organised. The Poor Rates provided the main source of income, however other sources were tapped whenever possible:

Receipts [left hand column]

- ‘Bastardy money’ was collected from the fathers of children born to unmarried mothers whether they lived in Sutton or elsewhere. From the money collected, the Guardians made regular maintenance payments to the mothers, usually about one-shilling-and-sixpence per week.
- The following entry was recorded in the Minutes of the Warden and Society for 2 November 1739:

‘At the (same) Hall or Assembly it was Unanimously agreed upon by all the Members then present that all that parsole of Wast [sic] Land in the Manor of Sutton Coldfield aforesaid called the Blabbs shall be immediately fenced and inclosed and shall be for the use of the poor people in the workhouse of Sutton Coldfield aforesaid or in aid of the poor rates.’

The Blabbs (the common name for the Kingcups that flourished there) was an area of low-lying land in the Riland Road area that was leased to local farmers to graze cattle. The Guardians also owned another piece of land in Four Oaks that was rented out for a similar purpose.

- The items referring to the sale of a calf and butter indicate that the Workhouse also kept cattle. There are also references elsewhere in the records of the paupers tending to poultry.
- Male paupers were hired out to farmers as labourers. For example, there are references to paupers carrying out ‘marl wheeling’, an agricultural practice whereby marl was dug from a pit in a field and then spread on to the surface before ploughing in an effort to improve the top soil’s moisture retaining capacity.
- Although the Assistant Overseer was granted free accommodation at the Workhouse it appears that, nevertheless, he had to pay for the board and keep of his family [he might have been a widower].
- The reimbursement from Willenhall might have arisen as a result of the Sutton Workhouse caring for a pauper with a Settlement Order from that parish.

Payments [right hand column]

- The first four items records the transition from Mr. Kempson’ contract for ‘farming’ the poor of the parish to the workhouse being managed by Mr. Sharrad, the Assistant Overseer.
- Most of the remaining items are self explanatory. Messrs Croxall and Holbeche might have been the Guardians’ lawyers. The final item was for official printing and the distribution of notices to ratepayers announcing the half-yearly levy.

Managing Sutton’s Poor Under the Old Poor Law

The Old Poor Law was heavily dependent upon the parish as the unit of government, administered by unpaid non-professionals. Poor relief might be regarded as more humane because local officials often knew its recipients personally. On the other hand, the relief given may have been more indiscriminate. Most parishes were small with limited finances, therefore in lean years, poor relief became a heavy burden on the ratepayers. The annual poor rate was determined at a meeting of the vestry that all ratepayers were entitled to attend. Since they were the ones that provided the money, they were in a position to change the rules.

In the period covered by the Select Vestry, Sutton Coldfield was a small market town. In 1819, the population was 3400. By 1836, it had risen to be 4000.

The Poor Law Amendment Act, 1834

In 1832, Parliament ordered an enquiry into the administration of the Poor Law. In consequence of the Commission's damning report, the *Act for the Amendment and Better Administration of the Laws Relating to the Poor in England and Wales* (4 and 5, William IV, cap. 76, otherwise known as the 'New Poor Law') was passed in 1834.

This legislation was primarily intended to reduce the excessively heavy poor rate. One of the *Act's* basic tenets was the 'principle of less eligibility', whereby any person in receipt of poor relief was to be placed on a worse position than 'an independent labourer of the lowest class' ⁽¹⁵⁾.

Instead of each parish being responsible for its own poor, groups of parishes were joined together to form *Unions*. The whole system became centralized under the Poor Law Commissioners who were empowered to frame and enforce regulations for the government of workhouses, the nature and amount of relief to be given, and the labour to be exacted. These regulations were made uniform throughout the country.

The Aston Union

Each union was placed under the management of a Board of Guardians whose members were elected annually. At a meeting of the Warden and Society held on 27 August 1836, Sutton Corporation resolved to send a request to the Poor Law Commissioners asking if it could become a union in its own right. It received the following reply ⁽¹⁴⁾:

'Sandwell, September 11th 1836

'Sirs,

'The Commissioners have sanctioned the Union of Sutton Coldfield with the parishes which I mentioned at the meeting I held many weeks since, and it is owing to circumstances unconnected with the District that the declaration has been delayed.

After the communication with parties at Sutton Coldfield which I then had, I regret to find that any repugnance to the proposal should exist, but of course the partners entertaining it have it in their power to apply to the Poor Law Commissioners if their wish be that Sutton Coldfield remain single. I am bound to say that I think it most improbable that it can be complied with, and I know of no arrangement which is likely to be so beneficial as the proposed Act of Union.

Your letter having travelled through Leamington and London, I have been unable to reply to it earlier.

I remain,

Yours faithfully,

Richard Earle [Assistant Poor Law Commissioner]

No further objection appears to have been raised, thus the parish of Sutton Coldfield became part of the Aston Poor Law Union, together with the parish of Aston (which incorporated Bordesley, Deritend, Duddeston, Nechells, Castle Bromwich and Erdington), also the small parishes of Curdworth (which included Minworth) and Wishaw.

The Aston Board of Guardians was constituted on 12th October 1836. It held its first meeting on Tuesday 8th November 1836 in the boardroom of the workhouse facing the Village Green in Erdington. The Board itself was a voluntary body whose 25 members had been elected from within the Union. There were 18 Guardians representing Aston, four from Sutton Coldfield, and one each from Curdworth, Minworth and Wishaw. Various honorary and paid officers and employees were appointed to assist the Board in carrying out its various functions. A Rates Collector was appointed for each parish, each being allowed to retain a percentage of what they collected as remuneration. (For example, Sutton's Collector received £2 ½ per cent in 1839.)⁽¹⁶⁾

The Disposal of Sutton's Workhouse

After 1836, the Aston Union Workhouse that faced on to the Village Green in Erdington was used to accommodate paupers from all the parishes encompassed by the Aston Union, including Sutton Coldfield. In 1867, a new and much larger, purpose-built workhouse opened in Gravelly Hill. The old workhouse in Erdington was sold in 1867 and the site subsequently became the site of a new Library (now Erdington Community Lending Library) that opened in 1906.

At its first meeting, the Aston Board of Guardians resolved that the inmates of Sutton's Workhouse should be transferred to the Union's Workhouse in Erdington. With the implementation of the *Act*, responsibility for the Sutton Workhouse passed to the Aston Union. At a meeting of Sutton's General Vestry held on 12 May 1837, it was resolved that the Aston Union should sell Sutton's Workhouse and that the proceeds should be invested for benefit of the poor of the parish. Accordingly, an advertisement appeared in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* 29th May:

SUTTON COLDFIELD WORKHOUSE

To be sold by auction by Mr Webb at the Three Tuns, Sutton Coldfield on Wednesday the 7th day of June 1837 at two o'clock in the afternoon, subject to conditions as will then be produced, and without reserve, all that large and spacious Freehold Building called the WORKHOUSE situate in and fronting Mill Street, in the town of Sutton Coldfield, in the County of Warwick, together with the building used as a Hen House, Outhouses, Yard

and appurtenances thereto being contained in the whole about eight perches.

For further particulars application is requested to be made to Mr Pearson, Woodcock Street, Birmingham, to the Auctioneer, Castle Bromwich, or at the office of Messrs Holbeche, Son and Willoughby, Sutton Coldfield.

The Workhouse was sold to Sir Francis Lawley of Canwell Hall for £735 (plus auction duty and expenses totaling a further £94. 18. 0). Prior to this, in 1836, Sir Francis had sought to obtain a piece of land at Roughley that was administered by the Corporation. A minute dated 14 March 1836, indicated that it was favourably disposed towards his suggestion making an exchange for another piece of land of similar value. The Corporation was interested in regaining possession of the old Workhouse to use for parochial purposes and, following a visit from the Poor Law Commissioners, a sub-committee negotiated and agreed an exchange with Sir Francis. A minute of 12 June 1837 records⁽¹⁷⁾:

‘Sir Francis Lawley having purchased the Workhouse, Resolved That this meeting agree to receive the same at the price which he gave for it and to give to Sir Francis in exchange land and buildings to the same amount near Roughley in the occupation of Colbourne and Brown. The value of such land and buildings to be fixed by Mr. Harris. And that if any land be given up in balance by either party, the value of that also is to be fixed by Mr. Harris.’

The piece of land in question was valued at £540. The Warden and Society, having concluded that the Workhouse exchange would be beneficial to the Corporation, relinquished another piece of land in the Slade to make up the value⁽¹⁸⁾.

It is interesting to note that Curdworth and Minworth workhouses were both sold in 1838. However, it was not until 1846 that the Poor Law Commissioners discovered that the workhouse at Wishaw had also been sold, but without their permission. They sent a terse enquiry to the Aston Board of Guardians who gleefully replied that it had nothing to do with them!⁽¹⁹⁾

Development of the Sutton Workhouse

In June 1837, the Warden and Society decided to demolish part of the Workhouse premises situated lower down Mill Street, doubtless in preparation for the building of the new Moot Hall (or Town Hall as it became, now known as the Masonic Hall). It was also decided to recycle the building materials by transporting them to the Manorial Farm (in Hillwood Road, Mere Green) in order to build ‘a proper farmhouse’.

In March 1838, the Society requested that its School Committee should prepare plans for the conversion of the Workhouse into a house for the School Master and for a proper application of the ‘two tenements between the Workhouse and the Jail.’ Mr. Hill, the architect, was commissioned to prepare a set of plans. The Committee’s report was subsequently approved:

‘Resolved – That the Committee be authorized to proceed in making the alterations proposed, it being understood that the whole expense inside and out do not exceed three hundred pounds,’ (20).

Despite this caveat, the expenses of the alterations *were* exceeded, as demonstrated by these items extracted from the Warden's Accounts for 1838:

May 8	Mr. T Smith on account of alterations at the Workhouse, now School House.	£50. 0. 0
June 29	Thomas Whitworth on account of alterations at the School House.	£50. 0. 0
Aug 20	Mr. Thomas Smith on account of alterations at the School House.	£100. 0. 0
Oct 5	Thos. Smith on account of alterations at the School House.	£50. 0. 0
Oct 25	Mr. Hill on account of designs & supervising alterations at the School House.	£51. 1. 9
Oct 31	Mr. Hollis works at School House and policeman's house.	£14. 15. 0

The Accounts for 1839 recorded that Mr. Hill received a further sum of £24. 3. 6 for his services. Indeed, the over-spending may have been even greater. Twamley ⁽²¹⁾ opines:

'The next place was the Old Poor House, purchased by the Corporation out of their reserves at a sum about £100 [sic]. The expenses of altering it into a School House and premises for a schoolmaster to live in, and take borders into his house, with the cost of erection of the School on Church Hill, in the year 1835 [sic], purchase and altogether came to a sum of about £2000, an excessive waste of Trust property, to gratify the whim, or unbounded assumption, of the late Mr. Charles Barker, and a few other supercilious folk.'

Despite certain inaccuracies, this statement does provide some evidence indicating that the alterations to the Old Workhouse had converted it into a substantial property.

Further evidence can be found in the Warden's Accounts for 1840 which record that the Window Tax for the School House amounted to £5. 12. 3 per half-year. The sum of £11. 7. 0 was paid by Mr George Meaby, the Schoolmaster, for a half-year's Window Tax and Poor Rates in 1843.

The old Moot Hall at the top of Mill Street became unsafe and was subsequently demolished in 1854. The construction of Sutton's new Moot Hall, with a Council Chamber and Court Room, was not completed until 1859. In the meantime, official meetings had to be held at some other venue. In August 1855, there was an official inquiry into certain petitions for and against the granting of Municipal Corporation status to Sutton Coldfield. Part of the published evidence is concerned with complaints from residents that they had been excluded from 'public' meetings and alluded to their location ⁽²¹⁾:

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'Mr. Clabon: How about the accounts of the Corporation?

Witness [Mr. Edwin Lewis]: I never heard of such a thing – in fact, I have seen closed doors at their place of meeting. They have got another pair of doors put to it.

Mr. Clabon: Where is it they meet?

Witness: Just below there, at the Workhouse.

Mr. Holbeche: You say at the Workhouse. I ask you a civil question. Is it a Workhouse?

Witness: It was a Workhouse.

Mr. Holbeche: Has it been very much altered?

Witness: Yes, it has two pairs of doors.

The Commissioner [Major Warburton]: Have you ever tried to get into meetings?

Witness: I have been led to believe it was almost treason to go into the place.’

Page 31 – Mr. Gregory Cooper examined by Mr. Clabon.

Mr. Clabon: Was there another meeting?

Witness: I heard that 15 of the Corporation went to the Reading Room and closed both doors ⁽²³⁾.

Mr. Holbeche: You heard?

Mr Clabon: The Corporation could not get anyone to their meeting.

Witness: I think that there were two or three or four who followed them to the Reading Room. ...’

Leaving aside the main purpose of that enquiry, which is not relevant to the present study, this extract, nevertheless, furnishes evidence of the School House being used as a meeting place for transacting Council business. It appears that the premises also housed a Reading Room to which the public might have had restricted access.

On 26th October 1877, a Vestry meeting was held to authorize the Churchwardens and the Overseers of the Poor to rent accommodation in:

‘ the premises known as ‘The Old Workhouse’ situate in Mill Street, Sutton Coldfield, as Offices for the transaction of the business of the Parish in accordance with the Act 24 and 25, Vict. Cap 125. ’

This was, ‘ *An Act to enable Overseers in populous Parishes to provide Offices for the proper discharge of Parochial Business.* ’

Permission was granted, the officers concerned being authorized to make any alterations necessary ‘for their convenience’ for a sum not exceeding £25. Further to this, an Agreement, dated 28th October 1878, exists drawn up between the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield of the one part and the Churchwardens and Overseers of Sutton Coldfield of the other part, for renting three rooms. The annual

rent of £50, inclusive of ‘firing, lighting and attendance’. was payable half yearly on 25th March and 29th September, for as long as the premises were required (24).

Location, Location!

It appears that the course of parochial business did not always run smoothly. An entry in the Overseers’ Minutes for 2nd September records that Mr. Bibby, Assistant Overseer of the Poor, had received authority from the Parks and Estates Committee to purchase a new desk for the Officer in order that the long desk already used might be transferred to the upstairs office in the Old Workhouse. This was to enable two clerks to be working at the desk at the same time. However, the Inspector of Nuisances distinctly and most emphatically stated that, ‘ if either a desk or a clerk were placed in that Office, he should turn them out!’ The Office had been allocated to *him* in order that he could carry out his work efficiently – ‘and he would have no intrusion’! (25)

The argument must have raged for several months, for it was not until 14th July 1899 that the Parks and Estates Committee resolved that Mr Bibby, the Assistant Overseer (26), be instructed to accommodate all of his clerks in his own offices. After further discussion, funding was made available to erect a match-boarded partition, three inches thick and filled with sawdust, with a pair of baize-covered doors to complete the sound-proofing.

The New Council House

By the end of the 19th century, the population of Sutton was at least 14,000 with a consequent increase in the Corporation’s responsibilities. The Moot (or Town) Hall and adjacent municipal offices situated in the former workhouse building, in Mill Street, were no longer adequate for carrying out the administration of the Borough’s affairs.

At a meeting of the Sutton Coldfield Borough Council held on 1st January 1902, the General Purposes Committee reported that permission had been received from the Local Government Board for Council to borrow £10,000 in order to purchase the Sutton Coldfield Sanatorium [originally The Royal Hotel] that overlooked Station Road, with a view to it being converted into a new Council House. It was purchased from the Charity Commissioners for £9000 on 13th February 1902 (27).

The open space in front of the new municipal building was named ‘King Edward Square’ to commemorate the coronation of King Edward VII. The Council House was officially opened on 26th June 1902. The General Purposes Committee subsequently recommended that the Overseers of the Poor be asked to pay a rent of £10 per annum for the use of their offices, plus £40 per annum for heating, lighting and cleaning (28).

By October 1902, permission had been received from the Local Government Board for the old Town Hall and municipal offices to be sold by public auction. On 11th February 1903, the premises were sold to the Freemasons (Warden and Hertford Lodges) for £4150 and the Council resolved to affix the Corporate Seal to the conveyance documents (29). (The Warden Lodge had previously used the old Town Hall for its meetings since 1859.) It was refurbished and became the Masonic Hall. The former workhouse was converted into office premises for commercial tenants, and remains so to this day.

Notes and References

1. Quoted from <http://www.keele.ac.uk/history>

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3. Fentiman, A R, *Sutton in the Past – Disconnected Jottings II*. QSH 97 SUT.
4. Minutes of the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield, 1722-1776, 6 March, pp 127-127.
5. plan reference here.(1811)
6. Picture of Sutton Coldfield by Norman Evans here.
7. Minutes of the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield, 1722-1776, op. cit.
8. Wood, P (1991) *Poverty and the Workhouse in Victorian Britain*. Alan Sutton: 1991.
9. Borough of Sutton Coldfield Vestry Minutes, 1819 -1833.
10. op. cit.
11. op.cit,
12. Webb S and S. *English Poor Law Policy*. Longman: London, (reprinted 1983), p 83.
- 13.
14. Minutes if the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield, 1834-1862, 14 September 1836, p.
15. Nutt,T (2006) ‘The Child Support Agency and the Old Poor Law’,
<http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-47.html>
16. Minutes of the Aston Board of Guardians of the Poor, 1836-1839.
17. Minutes of the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield, 1834-62, 12 June 1837, p.306.
18. MS 264, Birmingham Archives (Canwell and Weeford), No 68, Abstract of Title, 1872.
19. Minutes of the Aston Board of Guardians of the Poor, 1839 – 1846, 17 February 1846.
20. Minutes of the Warden and Society, 12 and 26 March 1838, pp. 348 and 351.
21. Twamley, Z (1855) *History of Sutton Coldfield*, (unpublished).
22. Report of the Inquiry in Sutton Coldfield, 1855. Sutton Local History Library, QSH 31.
23. A trade directory for 1872 refers to the Literary Institute, Reading and News Room based in the Town Hall with its own Curator and Librarian.
24. Copy of a Memorandum of Agreement, 28.10 1878.
25. A trade directory for 1900 lists Mr Fred Merrifield as the Inspector of Nuisances at that time. He was also the Borough Sanitary Engineer. The Inspector of Nuisances was a person engaged in order to comply with the *Nuisances Removal and Disease Prevention Act. 1846*. Nuisances included: bad sanitary conditions, obstructions to highways and footpaths, refuse heaps, unpleasant smells and loud noises. He was, in effect, a Victorian Environmental Health Officer.
26. A trade directory for 1880 shows that Mr James Edward Bibby FCA was not only the Assistant overseer of the Poor but also Inspector of Rates and Taxes, Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths, Borough Accountant, Clerk to the Cemetery Committee – and an insurance agent, Truly a late Victorian multi-tasker.
27. Sutton Borough Council Minutes 1902.
28. op. cit, 10th November 1902.
29. op.cit, 4th March 1903.