

# DARK DAYS OF THE WEST BROMWICH POOR

*“Very few people can afford to be poor”....*

When the author and playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote the above words, it could easily have been referring to the very large number of families who were eking out their meagre existence during an era when society approached the poor with an attitude of indifference and on many occasions sheer callousness.

Like regions across Britain, the Black Country was not immune to the savagery of impoverishment. The blight of unemployment meant that if your income had ceased, you and your family would go hungry. It was as simple as that.

The advent of the Workhouse in Victorian Britain isn't a point in history where one can point and say, 'this is where poverty started'; this phenomena was not new and had been an obstacle to many families' futures for many

generations and this was without doubt a factor known to many Black Country men and women.

West Bromwich is one town whose history has seen both rapid development during the Industrial Revolution and a darker, somewhat uneasy past that reflects the hungry, jobless and dispossessed.

The presentday **St. Clement's Lane** in West Bromwich geographically marks the spot where the origin of the town's history of the workhouse begins, a history which may indeed have started and finished there and then as in 1735 the costs for building such an institution were opposed by the freeholders, who in a petition said such a project would be a 'great damage and pernicious consequence to the parish'. This had been signed by 70 prominent local individuals who no doubt thought their influence would stop such plans in their tracks; history though had different plans

and the workhouse was to go ahead. On St. Clement's Lane stood a former nail warehouse; the purchase price for the building at the time in 1735 amounted to a little over £87, over £10,000 at today's value. It was believed that 20 paupers could be accommodated initially and yet by the last quarter of the 18th century and after some renovation the building was to accommodate over 100 inhabitants, a figure I very much doubt reflected the true nature of poverty that inflicted the town and its environs.

Approaching the end of the century spiked walls had been erected in order to prevent the inmates from leaving (or indeed absconding!). Perhaps it was at this juncture in time that those authorities responsible for overseeing the town's poor had realised that the building was unfit for its original purpose. By 1814 the building had ceased to perform at all as its role as workhouse due to its comprehensive and utter dilapidation. A new home was now desperately required for those impoverished residents of an ever growing West Bromwich. Having to plan for an even larger home for these residents wasn't exactly a proud moment in the town's history; funds however for such a project never materialised.

Before moving on to look at the development of the workhouse in West Bromwich it may be both prudent and wise to look back further in time to discover a little more of the town's poor and its general effect on society at that time and how they were originally catered for and perceived by their contemporaries.

If we cast our eyes back as far as the 12th century, the responsibility and care for the poor of West Bromwich, which at that time was scarcely a struggling village of very little importance, lay on the shoulders of the Priory which had been founded in

By Mike Fenton



Heath Lane memorial sculpture.

what is now Sandwell Valley in 1160. Records for the numbers and activity of the poor at this time are not known and as such any comment on their involvement in supporting the struggling and destitute would be idle speculation.

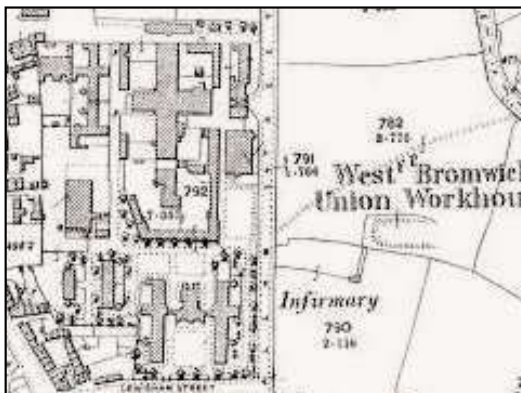
The first organised attempts to counter the rising tide of the impoverished were seen in the medieval period when the English Poor Laws made their appearance with the Ordinance of Labourers in 1349 under King Henry 3rd. This was in effect a response to the outbreak of the Black Death in England which had decimated the population both nationally and on the local communities of the Black Country.



Heath Lane memorial plaque.

The monasteries such as the Priory mentioned above were for generations the prime source of poor relief until Henry 8th dissolved them after his rift with the Catholic Church; it was from this

period that the support of the poor was moved from a voluntary basis to a system of compulsory taxes at parish level. West Bromwich in 1599 was reported to be 'overcharged with



1901 map indicating the location of the workhouse.



St Clements Lane as it is now.



The original street sign.



Entrance to Heath Lane cemetery.

poor to the number of three-score and more'. By 1601 every parish was an autonomous governing body which organised its own poor relief, this in turn being entrusted to a body called Overseers, the latter supervised by magistrates. Money was raised from local parishioners for the upkeep of those less fortunate and collected by a local officer by the enforcement of a poor rate.

Fast forwarding to the 18th century we can observe a rapid increase in the number of paupers registered within West Bromwich parish. Records show that in October, 1789 the workhouse had 39 inmates but had a total of nearly 250 who were being given outside relief; 1817 saw totals of 72 and 244 respectively. By 1820 the numbers had ballooned to just fewer than 2,000 in receipt of parish assistance. The workhouse in 1837 had 'welcomed' 57 through their doors with 500 asking for help outside. There had been periods in the history of the parish when outside relief was denied, in 1780 for example only the sick, those affected by accidents and the aged (70 plus) were eligible. Monies paid to the old could not be more than 6d a week, £34 at today's average earnings. Only 8 years previously the workhouse governor was paid £20 (£27,000 at today's rate). The gulf between the destitute and those more fortunate was evidently palpable even at this point in history.

In 1836 the West Bromwich Poor Law Union was established. It was formed out of the adjoining parishes of

Wednesbury and Handsworth with the inclusion of Oldbury, Perry Barr, Warley Salop and Warley Wigorn. The Union had much work to do as was evident by the remarks of Lord Dartmouth in 1844, when he described West Bromwich Workhouse as 'a disgrace to the place'. The workhouse at this juncture could accommodate 140 paupers which surely in no way reflected those who were in dire need of food and money. It has to be remembered that the town had grown rapidly and so had its industries. People were coming into the town from more rural areas as the Industrial Revolution advanced. The town's population in a 10 year period had increased from a little over 50,000 in 1841 to 70,000 in 1851. Such a sharp increase and the commensurate rise in the number of the poor now meant that a new building to cater for them had to be realised.

### Hospital

The Birmingham architects Briggs & Everall designed a Gothic style institution, the cost for its construction believed to be around £30,000. It stood in **Hallam Street**, a portion of which still remains today as part of the present day's hospital. It eventually opened its doors on September 25th, 1857 and was locally nicknamed '**The Bastille**'; the same day witnessed 216 residents in receipt of relief. These inmates on admission like those to follow would be separated according to their gender, told to strip and wash and

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then be provided with workhouse uniform. Their daily routine was harsh and bleak but perhaps preferable to their former existence outside where life had driven them to their current circumstance.

They would be woken at 6am and after a short breakfast work would begin at 7, dinner following at mid-day. A further 5 hours labour would follow with supper between 6 & 7pm. Lights out was observed at 8 o'clock. A hard 10 hour day therefore; this comprised work such as general labouring, laundry work, breaking stones and oakum picking. Oakum was a preparation of tarred fibre used in shipbuilding, the picking of which was a common task in Victorian workhouses.

Workhouse children were treated somewhat differently as they were not viewed morally responsible for their circumstances. In fact in 1862 an Act of Parliament was introduced specifically to address this. It provided for the care and education of pauper children, Poor Law Board Officers carrying out relevant inspections to ensure their correct supervision. In 1869 the West Bromwich & Walsall Poor Law Unions combined to establish the **Wigmore District School**. The building in many ways was similar to the orthodox workhouse consisting of workshops, classrooms and dormitories. It could accommodate up to 400 children. Typically the boys were schooled in industrial or agricultural trades and the girls trained as domestic servants or made ready to enter factories. This workhouse school which was situated in Pennyhill Lane was finally closed in 1934 when it became a Borstal institution until the 1950s. It was demolished in 2002.



The Hallam Street building which housed the Guardians' Boardroom.

buried in mass graves, 20 feet deep; the identity of these unfortunates is almost impossible to discover. The indignity of life in the workhouse was evidently matched in death. Many Black Country families were touched by such indifferent treatment. Indeed my Great great Uncle, James Fenton ended his days in the Hallam Rd Workhouse in 1880 at just 39 years of age. James had a brother called John whose 3rd wife Maria Taylor also died in the workhouse in 1905; she had already been listed as a pauper in the 1901 Census. She too was interred at the West Bromwich Cemetery in Heath Lane. Like thousands before her, no headstone is visible as burials at the time

which were undertaken at public expense were forbidden by law to be erected. It wasn't until 1937 that the West Bromwich workhouse doors were shut after 'serving' their guests in circumstances surely none of us could imagine.

### Unveiling

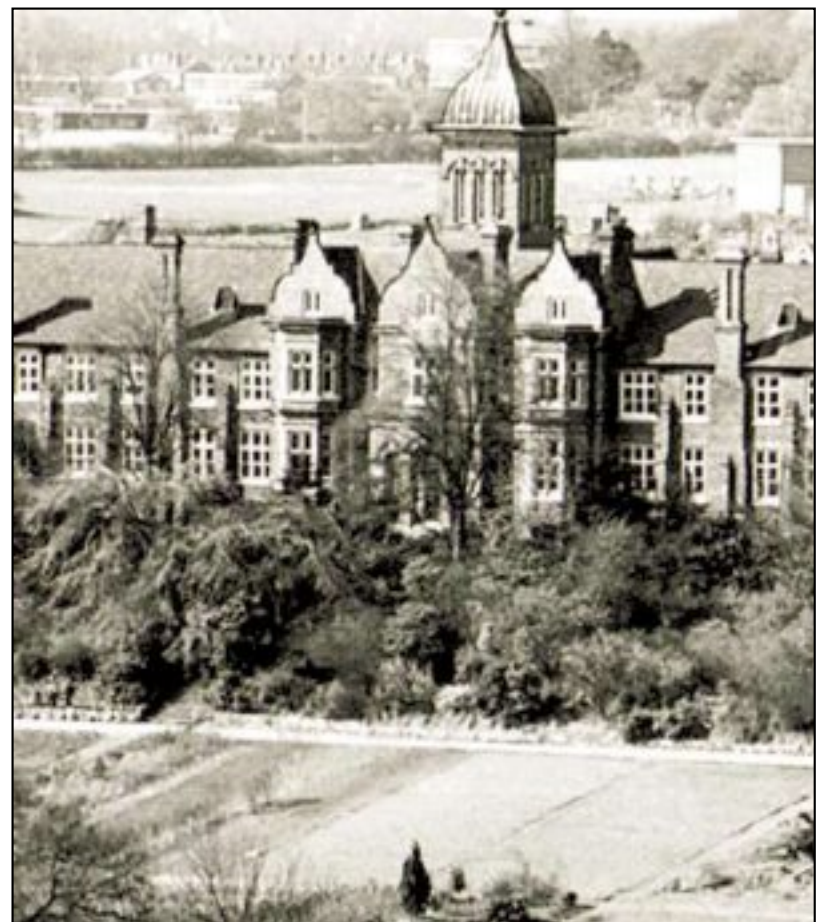
Fortunately, November of 2008 saw the unveiling of the **Heath Lane Memorial** where families and the community as a whole are able to show their respect to the town's impoverished forebears and perhaps where now in death they can rest and be afforded the dignity that was denied them in life.



Blue plaque on the facade of the Guardians' Boardroom.



Typical oakum pickers.



Wigmore District School as it was.