



Born 'in house'

Until the early twentieth-century the workhouse was the principle method for dealing with the poor – and the unmarried mother

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Photographs: Local Studies Collection, Lincoln Central Library and Judy Theobald



This autumn's release of the latest film version of Charles Dickens' 'Oliver Twist', will be a reminder of how the thought of entering the workhouse struck fear into the hearts of the poor and destitute.

Lincoln had a workhouse from around 1740, situated in the north of the city. My interest in the history of the Lincoln workhouse was born out of a family connection.

In its early years, the institution was known as Lincoln's House of Industry. A parliamentary report of 1777 stated it could accommodate up to seventy inmates. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a body was set up known as the Directors of the Poor and it was their responsibility to provide relief for the poor of the parish in the form of food, clothing, shelter and employment for the able-bodied.

The Lincoln Directorate's minute books for the period 1796 to 1832, give a fascinating insight into the workings of the institution. Furnishings were austere and strictly utilitarian. This is demonstrated in an entry in the minute book of 1799, which records a request to a local tradesman for twenty-four iron bedsteads and half a dozen strong-armed chairs.

A governor and a matron, usually husband and wife, were appointed to ensure the smooth running of the institution. As overseers they received an annual salary and additional perks. However, on more than one occasion it was necessary to dismiss them for dishonesty.

After entering the workhouse the able bodied, which included some of the older children, were found employment. The chief occupation of the women was usually spinning, whilst the men were engaged in heavier tasks such as gardening, or breaking stones for road repairs. Alternatively, the men were hired out to local employers. In 1809 the minutes recorded that a male was hired out to a rope-maker in Bailgate for thirteen weeks at a rate of 4d a day. The children were apprenticed out individually in the local area, or in groups to be employed in the Nottinghamshire textile industry, such as the Claypole Mills, near Newark,

which manufactured candlewick. In one instance, in 1797, around twenty children were sent as apprentices to the cotton mills in Bolton. The employers paid £5 a head towards the cost of transporting the children to their workplace in Lancashire.

Of the categories applying for relief, able-bodied men were in the minority. This was due to a number of factors the major one being that in times of war, men were enlisted to fight. Women and children who had no financial support were forced to apply for relief. In 1812 one woman and her children had to be admitted because her husband was detained in the debtor's prison in Lincoln Castle. Other vulnerable members of society who were admitted to the workhouse included the aged and the sick. However, the largest category entering the institution was the unmarried mother.

This last group were dealt with harshly by society. Prior to the implementation of the New Poor Law of 1834, much effort was put into determining the identity of the father so he could contribute to the parish for the child's upkeep. The expectant mother was subject to what was known as the Bastardy Examination. If the name of the father was revealed and he subsequently absconded, then the overseer could issue a Bastardy Warrant. At this time, unmarried mothers were eligible for outdoor relief, but because of the social stigma attached to their status, the majority entered the workhouse. If the father of the child was identified, and he was a bachelor, he was pursued and coerced into marrying the girl. Records show that the witnesses to such marriages were often the parish constables.

After the New Poor Law was passed in 1834, changes were made to the criteria applicable to unmarried mothers. This stated that expectant mothers were admitted to the workhouse if relief was applied for but on leaving, all legal claims for parish support for the child would cease. It was the mother's responsibility to find employment and provide support for her child.

Another major change in 1836 was the combining of parishes implemented

by the Poor Law Commission to form unions. Lincoln Poor Law Union was formed and a Board of Guardians selected to manage the institution. To qualify for the post of Guardian, the candidate had to occupy a property rated at £40 a year.

By far the biggest change to the workhouse system in Lincoln was the construction of the new workhouse in 1837-38, designed by W A Nicholson. It was built on a site to the west of Burton Road and south of Long Leys Road. An additional large building was added in 1879-80. It cost £12,000 to build and was used to house the children's quarter and school rooms. The Lincoln Union Workhouse was in operation well into the twentieth century but after 1930 it was known as the Burton Road Institution.

In its final phase, it was used as a home for the elderly and known as 'West View'.

Around 1967 the workhouse was finally demolished and a new housing estate erected on the site which was completed in about 1969. My brother's was one of the first families to be allocated on of the new council houses on the site. This was ironic, considering the family connection with the former workhouse.

I am the youngest child, and daughter, in a family of eleven and was born and brought up in Lincoln. As the 'baby' of the family, I was particularly close to my mother and she often confided in me about her past life. We were on our way to visit my brother when my mother related how she had taken this same route back in 1916, heavily pregnant with her first child. The route is accessed via the original entrance to the workhouse off Burton Road and leads to a tree-lined driveway. This is now used as an alternative pedestrian route to the housing estate.

My mother told me she was unmarried when she became pregnant and was forced to enter the workhouse where she subsequently gave birth to my eldest brother. She never disclosed the father's name to me. I looked at the old trees which lined our route and thought is strange that these same trees witnessed her tentative journey towards the unknown.

After my mother was admitted she had to see the Board of Guardians. Two weeks later her confinement began and she was seriously ill, suffering convulsions during her labour. Neither she nor the child were expected to live. Happily, they both survived but on her recovery,

she was warned by the institute's physician that she would die if she had any more children. Four years later, at the age of twenty-three, she married my father and went on to have ten children, including me. So here I am to tell her story.

Looking back, and thinking what a terrible experience it must have been for my mother, I felt the need to delve deeper because there were still a few unanswered questions. I sought permission to view the Admissions and Discharge books and the record of baptisms - I knew my brother was christened soon after birth as he wasn't expected to live.

Because of the hundred-year closure, I had to get special permission to view the entries relating to my mother, but obviously, other entries on the same page had to be blocked out. My request was successful. It was as though history was passing before my eyes and I felt very close to my mother at that moment. So there it was: my brother was born 'in house'. Both my mother and brother lived to the ripe old ages of eighty-four and eighty respectively.

To get an idea of the layout and running of the Lincoln Union Workhouse, a visit to the Southwell Workhouse, designed by the same architect, would be of great benefit. The property is owned by the National Trust and opens from March to October.

Opposite page from top: A view of the former workhouse BY COURTESY OF LINCOLNSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, EDUCATION AND CULTURAL SERVICES DIRECTORATE

This view of the workhouse shows it was of a considerable size BY COURTESY OF LINCOLNSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, EDUCATION AND CULTURAL SERVICES DIRECTORATE

Below: The former entrance to the workhouse site is now a pleasant footpath

