

Church Hill Workhouse Children and Vagrants

PART 2

Further to his article in CMPCAnews 11, local historian and writer **James Gardner** looks at the two inmate groups which caused the officials at the Church Hill Workhouse most concern: children and vagrants.



As early as 1822, the workhouse boys were being described as 'rude and abusive'. In 1837, three were brought before the magistrates for refusing to get out of bed and making offensive remarks to the gardener when he tried to get them up. They received two weeks 'hard labour' in the House of Correction. Others regularly absconded to the races or refused to turn the corn mill or deliberately turned it the wrong way. Retribution was often swift with beatings and one boy, George Slaughter, actually died after being kicked by staff.

Workhouse girls were seen as just as troublesome. Having sometimes to sleep

five to a bed may not have helped. In the early 1830s the Guardians hit upon the idea of sending some to Tasmania and congratulated themselves on easing the burden to the ratepayers. However, in 1835 they received a stern letter from the Secretary of the Emigration Board, claiming that the Brighton girls on board the Strathfieldsaye had apparently slept with the sailors all the way there. The Board wanted no more paupers from this parish.

The following year, six girls threw the cocoa fibre (which had been sent to them to pick for mattresses) over the workhouse wall. The governor locked them inside a cottage in the yard. They then knocked two door panels out, put their heads through it and 'abused him with terrible language'. They eventually smashed the door down, broke six windows and encouraged other inmates to do the same: 42 were broken in all. They were sentenced to 'hard labour' by the magistrates and were threatened



with transportation if they came before them again. Most of the girls were groomed for domestic service and found placements, sometimes with unfortunate results. In 1857, Louisa Abinett, a fifteen year old workhouse girl was raped by her 'master'. The man, Joseph Bowtell, a married shoemaker with four children of St James Street, was arrested and charged. But the magistrates decided that 'in consideration for the prisoner's position and the feelings of his wife', to fine him ten pounds instead of sending him to prison.

One fourteen year old boy, John Hedgecock, was brought before the bench for absconding:

- Magistrate:** Why did you leave the Workhouse?
- Hedgecock:** Cos, I don't like it. I want to go to sea. That would do me good.
- Magistrate:** Well, I dare say Mr Thorncroft [the overseer] would be very glad if he could find you a berth.
- Hedgecock:** Aye, that workhouse won't do me any good.
- Magistrate:** And you won't do it much good.
- Hedgecock:** If I go to sea, I could do a good deal of good. I'm sharp enough to get over anybody [laughter].
- Magistrate:** Aye, you're not such a fool as you're taken for.
- Hedgecock:** No, that I ain't be.
- Magistrate:** You're sharp enough to get over walls.
- Hedgecock:** Yes. [laughter].
- Magistrate:** You wouldn't be sharp enough to get over the House of Correction walls.
- Hedgecock:** I don't know.
- Magistrate:** Twenty-one days, House of Correction and there you'll learn to pump water before you go to sea.

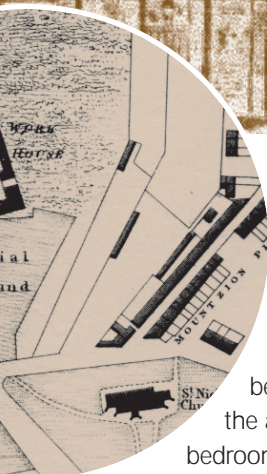




LEFT, WORKHOUSE AT CHURCH HILL IN 1822.

RIGHT, MRS SATTIN MATRON (SEATED).

FAR RIGHT, HUSBAND EDWARD SATTIN, WORKHOUSE MASTER 1859-91.



Most of the misbehaviour of the youngsters in the Church Hill workhouse was put down to their being 'contaminated' by the adults. Only the

bedrooms and school rooms

were separate. A report in 1847 concluded that 'the lack of separation exposed the workhouse children to bad examples from persons of more mature age who were likely to exercise a baneful influence over their minds'. Eventually, in 1854, the Poor Law Board gave permission for Brighton to purchase land for a new workhouse and a separate industrial school for the children. Land was soon acquired at Warren Farm, Woodingdean, for the latter. On 14 August 1862, a procession of 77 boys and 65 girls accompanied by the juvenile band marched from the Church Hill site to the Industrial School. It was reported that the children 'looked well and happy'. That evening the Guardians threw a party for themselves.

By 1863, Church Hill was heavily overcrowded and one Poor Law Commissioner called it 'dilapidated and uncomfortable with not a cheerful well-lighted room anywhere; and the ordinary dayrooms as well as the basements, abominable'. From 1859 to 1864, more than 20,000 paupers had been admitted into Church Hill, three quarters of them vagrants or tramps who had a right to stay one night in any workhouse in the country. In that five year period there had been 177 births and 604 deaths.

Vagrants often left hidden messages in workhouses either recommending places to fellow travellers or warning of severe regimes. One Poor Law inspector

in this period criticised the Brighton Guardians laxity towards vagrants who he claimed used the workhouse as a 'good hotel'. He recommended that after breakfast the able-bodied ones should be sent to work for four hours before leaving. The Guardians rejected this idea explaining that the vagrants' wives and children were often in cheap lodging houses in the town and would be begging in the streets if their men were made to work in the mornings. Far better, they argued, that the vagrants left first thing and took their families with them. Besides, if they worked they would have to give them extra food.

The vagrants' ward was often in a pitiful condition. One sick inmate, James Backing, wrote to the Poor Law Board in 1863 complaining that: 'I was kept in the tramps ward, lying on the boards with a little straw, an old blanket and an old rug full of vermin. I had a bad leg and was attended by a doctor who ordered me poultices for my leg. I was kept there with very little food to eat. Two days later the doctor laughed when

he saw me and I told him about the vermin, the cold and the lack of food'.

In January 1865, at one of the last musical entertainments given to the Church Hill inmates, they were treated to oranges, cakes, coffee and tea and listened to songs by entertainers, including 63 year old Rhoda Martin, an inmate herself. In a speech, the chairman of the Guardians, Colonel Moorsom, said that 'happiness did not depend on wealth or station, and that contentment and real enjoyment were to be found in the Workhouse as well as the palace'. Between 12 and 21 September 1867 all the inmates were removed to the new workhouse at the top of Elm Grove. By the time the Guardians had sold all the grounds of the old workhouse and built the new one they had made a profit of almost £9,000.

Classification of the Paupers

Article 81. The paupers, so far as the Workhouse admits thereof, shall be classed as follows:—

Class 1. Men infirm through age or any other cause.

Class 2. Able-bodied men, and youths above the age of fifteen years.

Class 3. Boys above the age of seven years, and under that of fifteen.

Class 4. Women infirm through age or any other cause.

Class 5. Able-bodied women, and girls above the age of fifteen years.

Class 6. Girls above the age of seven years, and under that of fifteen.

Class 7. Children under seven years of age.

