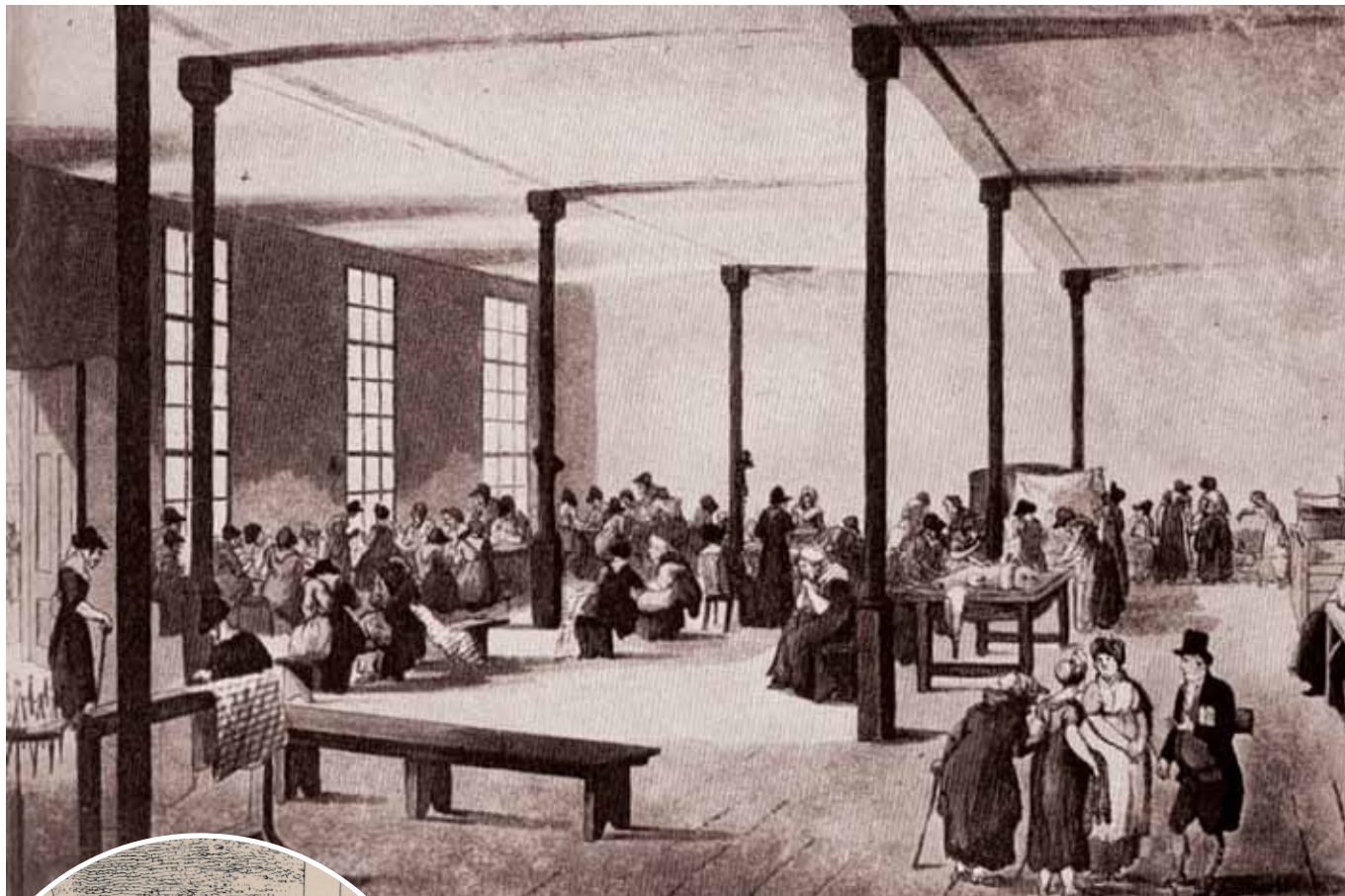


# The Church Hill **Workhouse**



TYPICAL UNREFORMED WORKHOUSE 1834

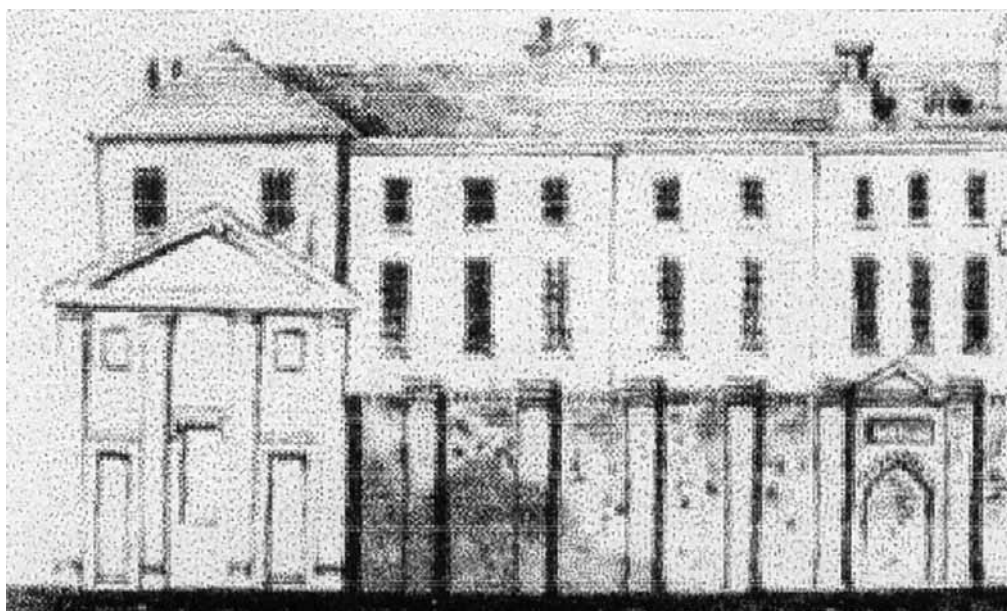
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Further to Peter Tuckett's article in CMPCAnews 10, in the first of two articles, local historian and writer **James Gardner** gives us further insights into the life of the workhouse on Dyke Road

CHURCH HILL WORKHOUSE

In late September 1821, 95 pauper inmates were reluctantly transferred from the old workhouse in Bartholomew Square to the new one in Church Hill in Dyke Road. Because of the swirling rain, those who were old, infirm or small children were conveyed in a covered van. So far up the hill and out of town was their new abode that some said it was like a 'howling wilderness, out of this world'. Apart from the inadequacies of the old workhouse, the Brighton Guardians of the Poor had decided to remove from the centre of the town what they considered to be an eyesore to their increasingly fashionable society visitors.



The new workhouse, situated next to St Nicholas Church, was surrounded by fields with a soap factory and artillery range nearby. The building could accommodate up to 450 inmates and had an L shaped layout that divided the workhouse into sections in order to segregate its inmates on the basis of sex and their ability to work. The authorities described it as “fitted up with every convenience requisite to ensure the cleanliness and health and comfort of its inmates”. In the yards there were workshops and a corn mill for grinding flour. The whole building was surrounded by a high prison-like wall. Outside lay eight acres of gardens where vegetables could be grown and sold in the markets.

The regime at Church Hill was undoubtedly a harsh one, with inmates having to rise every morning at 5am from March to September and 7am in winter. And much of the work was hard and tedious and the diet, meagre of quantity and quality. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 threatened to make conditions even harsher by insisting that outdoor relief should be phased out and that from now on, if an able-bodied man wanted relief, he would have to take himself and his family to the workhouse where he would be separated from them. Under the new guidelines, a man could be punished for talking to his wife.

Fortunately, many of the Brighton Guardians were against the Act and one was loudly cheered at a public meeting in 1836 when he said that “should misfortune bring him to the workhouse he would, if he had a pistol in his hand, blow out the brains of the first man who attempted to separate him from his

wife”. In the event, Brighton continued to provide discretionary outdoor relief for the rest of the century primarily because it was cheaper. The Guardians knew they could never have built a workhouse big enough to hold all those wanting relief.

Church Hill, like most workhouses of that time, was undoubtedly a theatre of misery with young pregnant women frequently abandoned at its doors and with an inordinately high death rate. However, the inmates were not all submissive and, from the local newspapers, another picture also emerges: that of constant battles – sometimes physical – between inmates and the staff, between the Governors and the Guardians and between the Guardians themselves.

If we take just one year, 1836, we can see that it was full of incidents. In January, in freezing temperatures, three inmates refused to work because the fire was not lit (after they had returned from work), and threatened the Governor. They were given 21 days in the House of Correction. In the same month, a workhouse girl was snatched by gypsies. In February, there were complaints that the bodies of paupers were being brought in a vegetable cart for interment. In March, there were rumours that some of the overseers had written to the Poor Law Board complaining about the workhouse diet. One of the Guardians, Mr Hewitt, responded by proclaiming that “they (the Guardians) could treat their paupers as they liked”. In April, a man was sentenced to 21 days on the treadmill for bringing his family into the workhouse, having dinner and then absconding. In May, one Guardian objected to the re-appointment

of the Governor and wanted a committee to enquire into his past conduct as he had heard “he had a very violent temper and was cruel to the inmates”. The Governor eventually resigned.

In June, several Guardians objected to the three hour long Sunday sermon claiming that “the inmates were called upon to attend more religious exercise than their understandings could bear” and one Guardian claimed that the sermons “tired him to death”. In November, an inmate, Robert Pentecost, refused to wear a pair of shoes made in the shoemaker’s shop. He went 60 hours without food as punishment, still refused and was given slippers to wear but wore them out. Whilst the Governor was absent, he laughed at the clergyman during prayers. Brought before the bench he told the magistrates that he had laughed because his stomach was empty: “I have a piece of beef as big as a walnut to do my work upon. I could eat a pound of beef (laughter)”. He was given 14 days’ hard labour. The month ended with the new Governor having a fight with a local tradesman who claimed he had been rude to him.

Finally, in December, a pauper woman, Mary Warmington, on relief in the community, claimed she was carrying the child of the assistant-overseer, Samuel Thorncroft. He had visited her at suspicious times of the night and had granted her a generous weekly allowance from Parish funds. Witnesses claim to have seen him reading a book to her, *The Means to Avoid Pregnancy*. When she told him she was expecting his child he threatened to have her money stopped. Thorncroft was eventually charged in court with failing to support a ‘female bastard child’ but was acquitted through lack of evidence.

But however harsh conditions were inside the workhouse, they were often worse outside. On 23 December 1840, the *Brighton Guardian* reported that “in the neighbourhood of Edward Street and Church Street hundreds and hundreds of poor children were actually famishing from cold and starvation, and were seen five and six together endeavouring to impart heat to each other upon a wretched parcel of straw in the corner of some miserable garret”.

**In Part Two, I would like to look at the two inmate groups who caused the officials at the Church Hill Workhouse most concern: the children and the vagrants.**

