

13. Workhouse Management 1834

Members who read our latest edition of Pots and Papers (No 10) will have seen Jessica Spinney's seminal article on Romsey's poor between 1834 and 1948. She relied heavily on records in Hampshire Record Office. Since that was written, Colin Moretti has been to The National Archives at Kew and found additional material about Romsey and its workhouses.

The New Poor Law was passed by Parliament in 1834, and the Poor Law Commissioners then sent Assistant Commissioners to each parish to ascertain the current state of affairs and to arrange matters in line with the new Act.

One such Assistant was a Mr C. A. a` Court who worked in Romsey and the surrounding area. A letter to his employers, dated 22nd November 1834, has survived. He was very disparaging about the state of affairs in Romsey, commenting that there had been no improvement since a previous visit. He noted that the same individuals were still in charge 'and still worse I find but little disposition to remove them'. His frustration comes through in the following paragraph. Unfortunately the same heedless expenditure is of the Parish funds, - the same carelessness, - the same indifferences, - the same absence of arrangement and the same want of energy, are everywhere manifest; and tho' the evils of the present system are acknowledged by all, it appears to me that but few are prepared to exert themselves to correct them. All seem to expect that the Poor Law Commissioners are bound to and can alone relieve them from the difficulties, which their own very culpable negligence has created.

He arranged a meeting in the town hall at which it was agreed that the two Romsey parishes should join together to establish a joint workhouse with a steering committee of five gentlemen 'to examine the workhouses and to suggest the alterations that may be necessary to establish a complete system of Work House discipline'. One of the five gentlemen was Mr W.E. Nightingale, a neighbouring magistrate and father of Florence.

It was decided 'that the poor house in Romsey infra should henceforward be appropriated solely to the old, infirm and impotent - all other paupers will be sent to the house in Romsey extra, when the alterations necessary to ensure classification and discipline will immediately be chalked out and

be submitted for your approbation’.

By then, the poor house in Romsey Infra was in Middlebridge Street and when no longer used as a poor house was sold to the Nowes Charity, pulled down and replaced by the flint-faced school building that still stands there. The house in Romsey Extra served as Romsey Workhouse until 1948 when such institutions were abolished. It lies behind the Sun Inn in Winchester Road and is now known as The Gardens.

In Romsey, Mr A’Court remarked upon the ‘enormous amount of Church rate’ levied and the incompetent way in which the accounts were kept.

So great is the confusion in them that it is next to impossible to ascertain the exact amount of the money expended solely on the poor for any given year. In Romsey infra, the asst overseer even with the aid of an accountant, has in vain endeavoured to satisfy me on this point for the year ending the Lady day 1832.

He made proposals for better record keeping, but of course his letter was written before he knew whether his advice would be heeded. He also reported on the arrangements in neighbouring parishes. He said that the poor houses at Mottisfont and Michelmersh were rented and did not belong to their parishes and were not suitable ‘for forwarding the work house system’. He did not think there was anyone who could superintend paupers in those two parishes even if suitable premises were available. He had hoped to establish a union at Stockbridge or Broughton but the prospect was not promising.

His most critical comments were reserved for East Tytherley and Houghton Drayton.

In two parishes, East Tytherley and Houghton Drayton, the alleged illiberal conduct of the principal proprietors of the soil descends to every grade. As the Lord of the Manor will employ but few hands, so the farmer feels justified in following his example; and the consequence is that where every labourer ought to be in employment, too many are sent to idle away their time on the parish roads, to plot mischief and breed discontent and dissatisfaction throughout the neighbourhood. In many parishes I find a standing poor rate:- in some instances, none which can legally be so called. Often the rate is without signature; and not infrequently the amount of the sums to be levied is not stated.

Such then was the administration of the care of the poor in

1832 in this part of England.

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Article by Phoebe Merrick