

A village workhouse, 1727–33

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The usual image we have of the Workhouse, especially those introduced by the Poor Law (Amendment) Act in 1834, is one of unremitting harshness. Before that Act, however, there was much more scope for local variation in workhouse regimes and East Meon in Hampshire appears to have been run on more humane lines.

East Meon's Workhouse, accidentally destroyed by fire in 1910, long after it ceased to function as such, had almost certainly been adapted from a pair or terrace of old thatched cottages. Fortunately, one of its account books, covering the period 1727–33, has been preserved and records literally every farthing expended or received during that time.

Predictably, the greatest expenditure was on food and drink, both remarkably varied. Meat purchases included beef, usually described as 'buttock and flank' or 'rump and surline', weighing from 39lbs up to 106lbs and costing barely 3d. a lb. Mr Tirrell was the village butcher, whose shop could well have been the Tudor High Street premises which were still being used as a butchers until the 1950s and subsequently reopened as 'Bennett's Dairy'.

Bacon was mainly acquired from outside, a typical entry relating to three sides bought at Winchester Fair for £3 14s. 7½d., whilst another bacon supplier was Mr Boyes of Alresford. But expenditure on cheese seemed to exceed that of all other foods. Every year, on or about 22 July, approximately **half a ton** was bought at a fair — probably Alresford's, costing between £9 and £11. Doubtless these large purchases of bacon and cheese at fairs were more economical than dealing locally, even allowing for cost of transport. Certainly cheese **could** be had in the parish, though quantities so acquired were usually less than 30lbs at a time.

As a rule bread was baked at the Workhouse from local wheat costing about 12s.0d. for 3–4 bushels, though once 10 loaves were bought for 3s.9½d., and occasionally a 'white loaf' as an invalid's delicacy.

Turning now to less staple food-stuffs, variety was impressive. Quantities of vegetables and fruit appear rather limited and mainly consisted of turnips, peas, apples, prunes, 'maligo reasons' and 'currans', though purchases of parsnip, carrot and dwarf bean **seeds** point to home production. Other bought foods and condiments were oatmeal, rice, sugar, butter, 'biscakes', honey, salt, nutmeg, cloves, mace, carraway seed, saffron and ginger.

As for liquids, milk, sometimes amounting to 30 quarts a week, was supplied by several small producers at 1d. a quart. Beer, brewed at 'the house', was supplemented by substantial purchases — e.g. '6 Oct 1730 Paid for 11 hogsheads of small beer which was brought in before we brewed £5 10s. 0d.'. As that entry refers to no less than 550 gallons, the inmates were either numerous or very thirsty! Other liquids, often medicinal, included sweet oil, vinegar, brandy, sack, tentwine, clove syrup, backshorn syrup, elder syrup, spearmint, ruewater, eyewater, distilled water, 'a bottle of stuff for Goody Bones child', 'a cordial for Goodman Richards', a purge and a 'phisick and metson'.

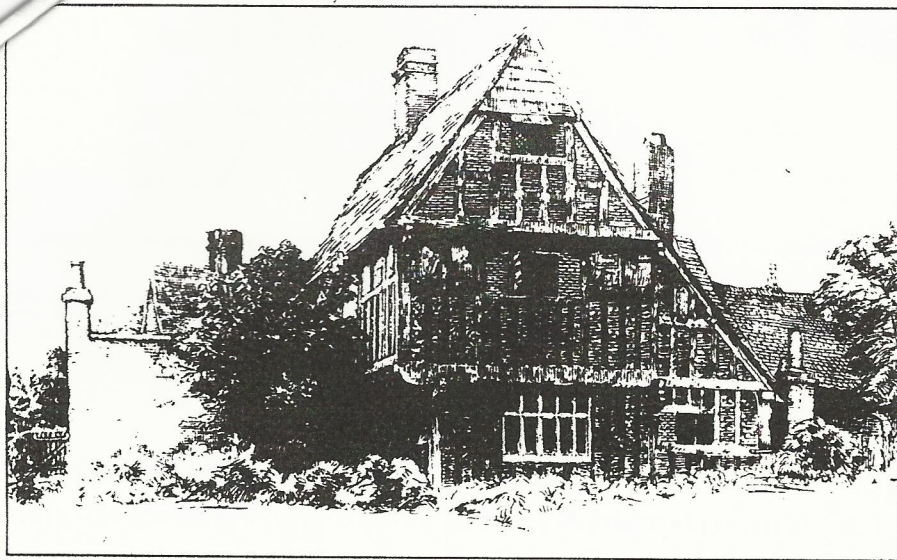
Having referred to expenditure on food and drink, it is time to mention other bought items, some tragic, others perhaps faintly amusing at the

present day and all informative. Among what could be termed 'domestic purchases' were a scrubbing brush, brooms, a ladle and skimmer, candles, watchlights, a tap, a cup, needles, ink and quills, soap, an hourglass, 18 shirt buttons, a mouse-trap, a bedpan (i.e. a warming pan), a broadaxe, a large awgar, a cord of wood, 250 faggots and two chamber pots.

Other purchases underline the presence of children: 'One pair of stockings for the child; six yards of binding for the children's hats; two boys' hattsons girl's hatt; strings for the children's shoes; half a skin of leather to mend the boys' breeches; and a pair of stays for Mary Valar's child'.

As well as the syrup, cordials, purges, 'phisicks' and 'metsons' previously mentioned, other 'medical' items were 'a plaister and a paper powder, ½lb of lard for ointment, allum, a pair of spectacles for Goody Richards — 6d., a small-tooth comb and a tape and a piece of cork to make a truss'. Curiously, the only payment to a physician was 1s.0d. to 'Doctor Wheeler for letting Goody Ford blood', although unpaid attendances may have occurred.

Smallpox, with a 30% fatality rate, was a scourge whose East Meon victims were transported to its pest house, purpose-built in 1703 at Stoud, then just within the parish's north-eastern boundary, and now renamed Mount Pleasant Farm. Part or all of the cost of running that establishment was funded by the over-



An etching of The Tudor House, Workhouse Lane, East Meon, which stands a few yards from the site of the old workhouse.

seers and debited in the Workhouse accounts:

'1727 Dec 16 What we have paid for the people with the small pox 10s.9d.' By February 3 such weekly payments had risen to a peak of £2 1s. 4³/₄d., thereafter tailing off until mid March when that particular outbreak had subsided.

Births and, more frequently, deaths occurred at 'the House': '1728 May 4 For beer when the child was crizened 2s.8d.'. Two days earlier, midwife Goody Russell had earned her 5s.0d. fee for 'coming to Mary Valar' the mother. Then, Goody Baker was paid 2s.6d. a week for nursing the baby, an arrangement continuing until the following December. Irrespective of whether Goody Baker filled the role of wet-nurse, the mother remained in the workhouse and was sufficiently fit to go out to work as a daily laundress.

Each death was usually preceded by the purchase of 'a cordial' for someone gravely ill, followed a few days later by debits for coffin boards (3s.6d.), a barrel of 'lamb black' and half a pound of glue (6d.), making the coffin (6d.), laying out the body (4d.), ringing the knell and digging the grave (1s.6d.), the vicar's fee (6d.) and, sometimes, 'one dozen of beer for them that carried him to Church'. The coffin maker, for at least five years, was Peter Stigants, himself an inmate who acted as carpenter/handyman in spite of a persistently bad leg that required many applications of alum and ointment.

Before considering the receipts side of the accounts, three other ex-

penses are worth mentioning: first, the periodical buying of tobacco, usually for Betty Guy at the rate of an ounce a fortnight; secondly: 'Paid for an order to bring Wm Haris and his family unto house 1s.0d.'; and thirdly: 'Paid to redeem John Short's tools 6s.0d.'. So Betty Guy, for several years an inmate, was indulged with the luxury of tobacco, William Haris and his family were **compelled** to become inmates, and the overseers were sufficiently business-like to pay 6s.0d. to prevent John Short (and perhaps a dependent family) entering the house.

As for receipts, the bulk came from the more affluent parishioners, mostly farmers, their compulsory contributions being based on Poor Rate assessments. Thus 'laid down by John Rook £8.10s.0d.' was at the higher end of the scale and 'laid down by George Lock £1.1s.0d.' at or near the lower end. Yet the greatest single recurring receipt fell under another heading:

'Recd. of Anthony Bulbeck £10 which is to excuse him from taking an apprentice untill it comes to his turn again'. The explanation being that orphaned or otherwise destitute children above a certain age were put out as apprentices, and farmers, according to a rota, were obliged to accept them — unless buying exemption for £10.

Other income resulted from the labour of inmates, either working at 'the house' or going out daily, typical entries being: 'Rec. of Wm Horwood for 13 days work a threshing [by] Thomas Stigants 6s.6d.'. 'Rec. of Joseph Tirrell for the boyes keeping of cows 1s.6d.'. Other outdoor tasks, some undertaken by women, including weeding, hedging, flint picking, digging, underwood cutting, haymaking,

winnowing, burning couchgrass, dung-spreading, way-mending and 'turning ye grindstone'. Earnings at 'the house' were mainly from spinning, knitting, shirt-making and sales of bran, ashes and, on one occasion, five pigs!

Payment for most outdoor employment was at the rate of 6d. a day of which the worker was usually allowed to retain 2d. in the shilling, sometimes less.

Two other entries are interesting: '1729 Dec 28 Recd. of Daniel Ford keeping the children 1 week 2s.6d.' and '1730 March 20 Recd. of Edward Lide for 1 months pay for his father ... 3s.4d.'. Apparently therefore, young and old members of families could be boarded out at the workhouse, though presumably only when this was necessitated by compelling circumstances.

Tentative conclusions can be drawn from this evidence which, of course, relate only to this particular workhouse during a seven year period:

1 The workhouse was in some ways largely self-supporting, with its inmates growing vegetables, breeding pigs, making and mending most clothing, grinding flour, baking bread and even partially maintaining the building.

2 Although the number of inmates at any time is unknown, they must have been relatively numerous to justify such large purchases of food and drink.

3 The remarkably varied diet seems to have been reasonably balanced when taking into account limitations of availability and nutritional knowledge.

4 It is hard to believe the character of the establishment was in any respect akin to that of the harsh and frightening union workhouses that appeared a century later.

5 On the contrary, some long-term inmates attained a special, almost pampered status, as exemplified by the skilled and highly trusted Peter Stigants and elderly pipe-smoking Betty Guy.

6 Ironically, inmates may have been better housed, fed, clothed and generally more comfortable than many a villager dwelling elsewhere.