

THE VAGRANCY PROBLEM IN ALRESFORD

By

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Since the days of the first Queen Elizabeth it would seem that genuine efforts have always been made to care for the poor and the sick in this country. Most communities with problems of poverty in their midst felt it their duty to provide some sort of shelter such as almshouses or poorhouses for those unfortunates who had no source of income or who were too disabled to look after themselves. However, until quite recent times, there had also been a considerable itinerant population of vagrants and beggars. These would be provided with food and lodging in return for casual work. Many would elect to keep moving from one place to another, thus avoiding the work they were expected to do in return for sustenance. As each parish was responsible for its own poor, these wanderers were looked upon with disfavour by the parishioners who were required to provide food and lodging. In addition, they were frequently responsible for the spread of diseases such as the plague and smallpox. These problems increased with the large population explosion which followed the Industrial Revolution. Each parish eventually found it necessary, or was compelled, to set up its own bridewell, or house of correction, later to become known as a workhouse or "spike". If it was thought necessary, vagrants could be branded to distinguish them from more industrious folk.

Daniel Defoe, writing in the early eighteenth century and after visiting Alresford, records that it was a flourishing market town and remarkable in that "though it had no great trade, and particularly very little, if any, manufactures, yet there was no collection in the town for the poor, nor any poor law enough to take alms of the parish, which is what I do not think can be said of any town in England besides".

Thus Alresford, up to the early nineteenth century, and unlike most small towns, was prosperous enough not to require the provision of a special poorhouse. With few poor actually living here, and knowing they would get, scant sympathy from the townsfolk, vagabonds tended to avoid Alresford and to hurry on to a place such as Winchester where they knew they could get shelter for a night.

A distinction must now be made between the itinerants and the poor who actually lived in Alresford. The latter could well form the subject of a separate paper. Nevertheless, some bequests to the Alresford poor are worth mentioning - they were used to help the vagrants as well until the funds were exhausted. There was William Pink "who had himself been a poor vagrant and had received frequent kindnesses from many of the inhabitants of this town at his death about the year 1670 left twenty pounds to the Parish Officers of New Alresford the interest of which he directed to be paid yearly for ever to the poor of the Town on St. Thomas's Day. James Withers' (1630) will made a number of bequests to help the poor Widows and Widowers specifically mentioned. He bequeathed £20 for the purchase of four acres of land in

the Marsh, for each of which twenty shillings were distributed amongst the poor. Jenny Harris who died in 1833 left ten pounds a year for "poor wanderers" to be distributed on New Years Day.

By the 1830s the problem of vagrancy was becoming acute, and a workhouse was opened in 1837 which eventually became known as the Alresford Union Poor House, or the Union of Spike. In 1792 the parishes had been urged to band themselves together into unions in order to provide a better system of local government. Alresford had a separate union whose boundaries almost coincided with the Alresford Rural District, created later. The Alresford Rural District Council had a Committee known as the Alresford Guardians which dealt with the problems of the poor. The Alresford Union Workhouse served nineteen parishes in the vicinity (including Old and New Alresford).

The Poor Law system, which began to expand in the nineteenth century, made places like Tichborne Down House (the former Alresford Union Workhouse) unpleasant to live in as a deliberate policy. Men, women and children were strictly segregated and encouraged to move on to the next union if they were well enough to do so.

An entry in the 1851 Census returns reports the occupants of the Peaceful Home, East Street, as being Timothy Stair, 27, publican and his wife Sarah, 27 and 19 men, women and children listed as TRAMPS. Although, as noted previously, Tichborne Down House had already been opened in 1837, this entry suggests that some of the tramps could afford a few pence, maybe, for some accommodation overnight, perhaps in outbuildings at the rear of the public house, rather than go into the Union workhouse.

A long article appeared in the March 24th, 1866, issue of the Hampshire Chronicle, on the opening of the new Market House, New Alresford. This was celebrated by a dinner held on the premises on March 22nd. The article reported that on the spot (where the Market House was erected) a registered LODGING HOUSE formerly stood. It had an outlet at the back and this retreat for the mendicancy of the county had become a public nuisance. Since the demolition of the building, the report continued, tramps who made this their special and peculiar retreat have become almost unknown in the town in which they notoriously had abounded A most satisfactory result to the inhabitants. (This building was, in fact, the public house known as the Rose and Crown).

Isabel Sanderson, in her latest book in the series Dwellings in Alresford, notes that some elderly people may recall Worthy Light, who was the Relieving Officer as well as the Registrar of Births and Deaths. Worthy Light, his wife Amy and eight children were living in East Street near the Sun Inn when the census was taken in 1881. After moving to Wykeham House, Worthy Light used the front room as his office. Tramps, ragged and often dirty, used to trudge down Mill Hill to his office to

collect a ticket, handed through the window, that entitled them to night's lodging at the Union Workhouse, Tichborne Down. Worthy Light died in 1916.

When the Alresford Workhouse was completed, intended to accommodate 240 persons, it had four three storey wings aligned North, South, East and West, meeting centrally at an octagonal tower where the Master had his lodging and office. The ends of the wings were joined by one storey accessory buildings or walls, so making four enclosed courtyards. From his tower the Master could look into all of them and so waylay an overnight "guest" from the Casual ward who might seek to depart over a roof or wall without having done his allotted task. The West wing was destroyed by fire in 1907 and not rebuilt but a separate block was put up, facing South, on rising ground to the North of the main structure. It was used at one time as a maternity block. The date of this building is not known but it was probably soon after the turn of the century when midwifery regulations became more strict.

In March 1838 the Board of Guardians advertised the post of Medical Officer, to attend the aged, bastards, orphans and all persons with illness likely to last thirteen weeks or more. The salary was not exceeding seventy pounds or more. Such posts continued until the passing of the 1946 and 1948 Acts setting up the National Health Service. Dr. G.K. Thornton remembers having experience of this between the two world wars. By that time duties mostly involved attending old people who, for some reason, did not qualify for the old age pension and occasionally people found in need of the then, still, out relief. He well remembers the sorrow and shame felt by some who, after years of hard work, had to go on the parish.

By the beginning of the 20th century the Alresford Rural District Council and its Guardians were meeting fortnightly, usually at the Union. After the First World War they were able to reduce the number of meetings to one per month.

Two advertisements from the files of the Hampshire Chronicle are of interest:-

ALRESFORD RURAL DISTRICT COUNCIL

INSPECTOR OF NUISANCES

WANTED - An INSPECTOR OF NUISANCES for the whole of this District. Salary £60 a year. He must reside within the District, and will have to carry out all the duties relating to his office imposed upon an Inspector of Nuisances by the Public Health Act, 1875, or by any other Statute or Statutes, or by the orders of the Local Government Board.

Applications, in the candidate's own handwriting, stating age and present occupation, and accompanied by copies of three recent testimonials, to be sent to me on or before Wednesday the 29th October, 1902.

Selected candidates will receive notice when and where to attend, and their third class railway fare will be allowed.

J. RIDLEY SHIELD, Clerk Alresford, Hants., Oct. 21st, 1902.

ALRESFORD UNION

PORTER WANTED

The Guardians of the above Union invite applications for the office above-mentioned.

The Porter must be a single man, and will be required to perform the duties specified by the Orders of the Local Government Board, to superintend the Vagrant Labour, and to have some knowledge of Gardening. The salary will be £20 per annum, with rations, lodging, and washing, with the prospect of an advance at the end of twelve months' service.

Applications, in the handwriting of the respective candidates, stating age and previous employment, accompanied by three recent testimonials, must be sent to me on or before Tuesday the 28th inst.

Selected candidates will have due notice to attend on the day of election.

By Order, J. RIDLEY SHIELD, Clerk. Alresford, Hants. Oct. 21st, 1902.

The meetings of the Guardians were reported regularly and conscientiously. We read that in August, 1923, a scheme proposed by the Hampshire Vagrancy Committee for dealing with vagrancy throughout the County was hotly debated.

Next month, in September, there was a call for a rate of 3s 1d in the £1 for Poor Law purposes. At the same time, and here I quote the press report in full:-

"A case of unusual interest was mentioned. A certain man had died, and application had been made to a neighbouring union for a pauper funeral. The relieving officer of the other union ascertained that although one room of the house in which the family lived was in his union, the remainder of the house was in the Alresford Union, and therefore he referred the case to the Alresford Relieving Officer who found, upon enquiry, that it was really a case of a house being partly in one parish and partly in another, and that, as that part of the house where the deceased man and his wife ordinarily lived and slept was in the Alresford Union, that Union would have to accept chargeability. Some time ago, a child died in the room which was in the adjacent Union, and in that case the chargeability was accepted by that Union without argument.

One member wanted to know what would have been done if the boundary ran through a room, and the man lay dead partly in one union and partly in another. The Chairman (the Reverend E.C. Peake) ruled that the union in which the head lay would have to accept responsibility."

At the meeting in February, 1926, the Honourable A.H. Baring was in the chair. He reported on the meeting of the Hampshire County Vagrancy Committee, and said that it was stated that the casuals' midday meal was generally wasted, being thrown

away when the casuals left the institution. The Master (Mr. Dade) said that the same thing occurred locally, men throwing the bread over the adjoining gardens to the fowls.

Mr. Baring: What is the reason?

The Master: They are fed up with bread and margarine, and bread and cheese. They get good meals at the institution.

Chairman: Then the midday ration is not wanted.

Mr. Baring also called attention to the casuals return for the county. At Alresford they complained about their tramps, but as compared with Winchester they were extremely lucky. Their figures were 2,061, as compared with Winchester's 11,000. Winchester was the worst place in the whole county as casuals went there from every side.

The number of casuals decreased annually throughout the twenties and the Master was able to report in 1928 that the Alresford returns showed a decrease of 900 on the twelve months. The Local Government Board Inspector, throughout this period, repeatedly expressed the opinion that it was a mistake to have tramp wards in the towns. "If men had to tramp halfway between towns there would be no attraction to loaf about the towns and enter the casual wards in the evening."

Local organisations such as the Old Alresford Women's Institute seem to have taken a great interest in the inmates of the Union. Gifts of tobacco to the men and tea and sugar to the women were regularly made. In the report of the January, 1927, meeting of the Guardians we read that the Bramdean and Hinton Ampner Women's Institute female nigger troupe had given great amusement to the inmates.

At the May, 1929, meeting, Mr. Dade the Master, applied for an increase of £20 in his salary. At that time inmates totalled 53, compared with 45 in the previous year (these of course were infirm). Casuals passing through totalled 163 compared with 127 the previous year and 67 persons were in receipt of 'out relief' of an average of 5/- per week. By this time the salary of the Inspector of Nuisances had risen to £200 compared with the £60 offered in the advertisement of 1902.

Gradually, as national pensions schemes were extended, the burden falling on local government for the care of the destitute lessened. Then, on 2nd April, 1932, the Alresford Rural District Council and its Guardians had its final meeting and was dissolved. It was succeeded by the newly constituted Winchester Rural District Council, with no mention of a Guardians' Committee.

Finally, with central government now responsible for the poor, the Alresford Union was closed, with its buildings re-opening in 1949 and converted for use as the Tichborne Down House Hospital for the mentally handicapped.