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CARING FOR THE POOR IN YEARS GONE BY

## George Nugent's Gift

Referring to recent articles on John Sayer and his almshouses, a correspondent points out that an equally generous local benefactor, the Rev. George Nugent, is in danger of being forgotten. Until 20 years ago his name was "advertised" in the same way as John Sayer's, for it was inscribed on the building which, after the word "workhouse" was officially vetoed, was known as "Nugent House."

For the benefit of newcomers it must be explained that the workhouse stood for over a century on the land now occupied by the row of modern shops and flats at Kilsbury Road corner. And thereby hangs a tale which starts in 1601, when the first Poor Law Act compelled local authorities to maintain the aged and incapacitated poor, and to provide work for unemployed able-bodied adults.

### A WRETCHED HOVEL

For more than two centuries Berkhamsted churchwardens appointed those important functionaries known as overseers of the poor, who had the responsibility of collecting the poor rate and relieving the poor entirely at their own discretion. The office of overseer was no sinecure; as in more modern times, unemployment was rife, especially in the winter months, and a large share of the poor rate was disbursed in out-relief. A workhouse had to be provided, too, and in good and bad times it was crowded with men, women and children.

An early workhouse stood on the land now occupied by Park View School. Edward Salter bequeathed the site, with other local property, to the parish in 1695, stipulating that the rent was to be distributed among "the industrious and laborious poor." A house on "Salter's Charity," as the land was called, was converted into a workhouse, and a Victorian writer described it as

"one of the most wretched hovels in the town... It was straw-thatched, and its tumbledown condition must have aroused the sympathy of right-minded people as they gazed upon the miserable home of the aged poor."

### THE WORKHOUSE MASTER

Many references to this workhouse appear in parish account books and other documents. In 1767, we learn, George Hoare was appointed governor at £28 per calendar month—on the face of it, a princely salary at a time when a skilled worker was lucky to receive £1 a week. Moreover, the governor was permitted to pocket the proceeds of the "work, labour and service" of the poor in his charge. But he had to clothe and feed the inmates, pay for their medicines, and undertake to "deliver up the poor to the parish officers in good condition"—a necessary clause, but scarcely sufficient to exclude exploitation of the poor and abuse of public money.

The churchwardens, who paid the rent of the workhouse, kept it in repair, and provided furniture, ordered the governor, in 1777, to "bring or cause to be brought twice every Sunday to church all the men, women and children that are able."

### CHILD LABOUR

The Berkhamsted overseers (Thomas Dorrien and James Croft) made it known that not more than six children were to be apprenticed to each chimney sweep, the period of apprenticeship lasting from the age of 8 to 16 years. Exploitation of child labour may have been condoned at home, but the churchwardens were not prepared to let boys in their care face unknown hazards across the seas. An offer by a sea captain to take unwanted boys to America at a cost of £5 each was declined.

When a Berkhamsted girl, Lydia Bird, had an opportunity of going out to service and applied to the overseers for money to buy "clothes," she received 6s. But it was a loan, not a gift, "to be returned out of her wages." A man was given 2s. 6d. to "try for work in London, and 5s. relief was paid to a woman whose husband had been sentenced to a long term of imprisonment at Hertford for poaching.

### THE POOR RATE

Perhaps the worst period in the history of Poor Law came after the Napoleonic wars. The system of out-relief, in the opinion of irate ratepayers, was grossly abused, and in Berkhamsted the poor rate rose to 8s. or 9s. in the £—in some parishes even to 20s. in the £.

Despite their preoccupation with out-relief, the Berkhamsted Vestry adopted what was an enlightened policy for the period. Consultations were held with Northchurch to consider uniting the two parishes for the maintenance and relief of the poor, and to

erect a new workhouse that would serve both parishes. In 1824 they toyed with the idea of building a workhouse next to the Pest House on Berkhamsted Common, but nothing came of this proposal.

A few years later the Vestry decided to build the workhouse on a site which had already been associated with pauperism for a couple of centuries. In 1620, Charles I (then Prince of Wales) gave £82 for the benefit of the poor of Berkhamsted, and this money was used to buy several small cottages near Kilsbury Road corner. Tenants were selected by the overseers and no rent was charged. Next to nothing was spent on these tenements—known as "Ragged Row"—and by the 19th century they were as wretched as the old workhouse.

### GEORGE NUGENT'S GIFT

In 1833 the last of the "Ragged Row" tenements were pulled down to make way for the new workhouse, and as soon as it was ready for occupation the old workhouse was demolished and replaced by our first elementary schools.

Chairman of the Select Vestry up to the time of his death was the Rev. George Nugent, who was rector of Bygrave, near Baldock, but preferred to live at the Red House, Berkhamsted. His heart was "moved to compassion towards those poor unfortunate creatures" condemned to live in the old workhouse, and he left £1,000 towards the cost of the new building.

Shortly after the workhouse was built the administration of Poor Law was taken out of the hands of the Vestry. Groups of parishes were formed into unions under the control of Boards of Guardians, and the new workhouse, intended for the poor of Berkhamsted and Northchurch alone, had to serve a much larger area.

A document headed "Dietary of the Workhouse of the Berkhamsted Union," dated 1836, is of unusual interest. It shows that breakfast consisted of 14 oz. bread and 1½ pints gruel (but only 8 oz. bread on Friday). For dinner there were 5 oz. beef and 1 lb. potatoes on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday; 1½ pints soup on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday; 14 oz. suet pudding on Friday. Inmates received, for supper, 2 oz. cheese on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and 1½ pints broth on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday.

For the aged and infirm there was a slightly different menu which specified 10 oz. rice pudding on Friday. Tea was to be made by the matron and one pint given to each person twice a day, with bread and butter, in lieu of gruel or broth. For children under ten years of age the "dietary" was as follows: Breakfast, 10 oz. bread and ½ pint milk or gruel. Dinner: 4 oz. beef or mutton and ½ lb. potatoes on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday; 6 oz. suet pudding on Tuesday and Friday; 6 oz. rice pudding on Thursday and Sunday. Supper: ½ pint milk or gruel.

### SOLD FOR £3,700

The workhouse ended its days in a blaze of publicity. It was no longer

## EMERGENCY MEDICINE

### Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine now operating in Berkhamsted is as follows—

### CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening (6-7 p.m.) and Sunday morning (11.30 a.m.—12.30 p.m.) service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the current month—

July 28—August 2: Taylors.  
August 4—10: Boots.  
August 11—17: Figg.  
August 18—24: Dickman.  
August 25—31: Tutors.  
Bank Holiday—August 3: Figg.

### LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Pease Edward Street on the following days and times—  
Monday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.  
Tuesday—10 a.m.—7.30 p.m.  
Wednesday—Closed.  
Thursday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.  
Friday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.  
Saturday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m.—5 p.m.

(Continued from previous column.)

called a "workhouse," but "Nugent House" in memory of a great-hearted clergyman. Hundreds of people protested against the removal of the aged inmates to Hemel Hempstead, but their desires were over-ruled by the County Council who, as the Public Assistance authority, closed the building in 1935. Two years later—in February, 1937—Nugent House was sold by auction to a Watford builder for £3,700, and down came thousands of bricks and the inscribed stone which proclaimed George Nugent's "munificence" to passers-by.

The least we can do to perpetuate the memory of a generous benefactor, I think, is to name a new street after George Nugent. And the same time, a similar honour may be paid to another charitable man—Edward Salter. Perhaps the Urban District Council will bear these suggestions in mind.

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