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HISTORY IN AN OLD VESTRY BOOK

## The Poor of Northchurch

I have just been looking through an old Northchurch Vestry book. It is full of interesting tit-bits, and covers the years 1831-1848, a period during which the village yielded for the first time a jittle of its much-cherished independence.

Way back in the 17th century Northchurch declined an invitation to amalgamate with Berkhamsted. It continued to run its own affairs without help or interference from Berkhamsted neighbours and, among other amenities, had its own pest-house and workhouse.

A workhouse may not be a lovable thing, but Northchurch folk were proud of it. When, in the 1830s, it was suggested that the workhouse be closed and the inmates transferred to Berkhamsted, the villagers registered disapproval in much the same way as the townspeople of Berkhamsted resented, a century later, a decision to close Nugent House and send the old people to Hemel Hempstead.

It was the thin end of the wedge. Northchurch lost its workhouse, and a century later the village—or at least a good part of it—came within the enlarged boundaries of the Berkhamsted Urban District Council.

### AN 1832 AGREEMENT

But nothing could be done to stop the first step towards centralisation. The administration of Poor Law was taken out of the hands of the Vestry, parishes were grouped into unions under boards of guardians, and instead of each parish having its own workhouse there was to be one central institution, in Berkhamsted.

On June 18, 1832, a meeting was held at Northchurch to consider the following proposals:

"That the overseers be authorised to enter into an agreement with the

overseers of Great Berkhamsted, for the reception of Northchurch paupers into the workhouse on the following terms:

"That Northchurch shall pay for each person the actual cost of maintenance and sixpence a head per week in addition for clothing, rent, wear and tear, etc.

"That Berkhamsted shall take at its prime cost all the stock on hand and unmade clothing in Northchurch workhouse; that an inventory of all other clothing be made out and the same made over to Berkhamsted, on condition that an equal number of the same articles shall be received out of the clothing stock, when a separation shall take place; that all other articles of solid furniture shall be allowed for the use of Berkhamsted workhouse, but to be properly marked and returned on the termination of the present agreement."

### USED AS A SCHOOL?

After much argument the meeting turned down this scheme by 17 votes to 15. But the opposition weakened, and only six weeks later the transfer to Berkhamsted was approved at a larger meeting by 33 votes to 26.

Shortly afterwards, the empty workhouse was offered to the rector for use as a schoolroom. Was it ever used for this purpose? I do not know. The last reference in the vestry book, dated February 1, 1845, records a decision to apply to the Poor Law Commissioners, through the Guardians of the Berkhamsted Union, for sanction to sell "the cottages and gardens late occupied as the workhouse of this parish."

The cottages, half-timbered and looking far too nice ever to have been used as a workhouse, still add old-world interest to the main road near the "Crooked Billet" public-house. Next door, the two cottages at the corner of Billet Lane, distinguished by their long, well-cultivated front gardens, are said to have been used for some years as a hospital annexed to the workhouse.

### FEEDING THE POOR

Earlier entries in the vestry book show that the poor of the parish were not denied an occasional glass of beer.

Payment of the following bills was authorised at a meeting in June, 1831:

	£	s.	d.
Charles Foster for beer...		8	8
Mrs. Tompkins for meat	3	15	8½
Mr. Littleboy for flour...	5	8	1
Mr. Richard Woodman for grocery	6	7	1½
Mr. Goenn for coffin		9	0
Mr. Norris for burial fees		10	6
Daniel Norris for cheese	2	7	11
Mr. Dell for straw		8	4

Many parishioners applied for out-relief, and sometimes they received

rather tart answers. William Brooks' son David applied for work—and was ordered "to look out for the same"! Many an application, even for a small sum of money, was turned down, yet the overseers were authorised to advance as much as £30 towards sending Joseph Norris and his family to America.

### PICKING FLINTS

Here are some items dated October 17, 1831:

Joseph Brandom applied for labour; was ordered to send a hundred of furze to the poor house occasionally. (This referred to the gathering of furze on the Common, used for firing.)

Richard Baines applied for work, was ordered to come to the poor house on Thursday.

William Ghost's son applied for work, was referred to Mrs. Barnes, New Lodge. Matthew Gower applied for relief, was ordered to go into the poor house.

William Brooks applied for labour, was ordered to go picking flints.

Widow Wood applied for clothes for her son, which was refused.

David Bartrick's wife applied for a doctor, which was granted.

Widow Wood applied for clothes for one of her sons, he being ill; was ordered to receive four shillings.

Thomas Ives' wife applied for relief, but was refused but allowed the poor house.

Thomas Rolph's son applied for work, was ordered to come to the workhouse if he could not get work previously.

### £30 FOR THE DOCTOR

Every year the Northchurch vestry had the duty of appointing a medical attendant. In 1832 the appointment was offered to Mr. Collier at £30 per annum. No extra charges of any kind were to be made, except when he was called in to give evidence on the inquest of a parish pauper or when his assistance was required in cases of childbirth. The fees were a guinea and half a guinea, respectively.

Mr. Collier was required to attend and find medicines for all sick persons on receipt of an order from the overseers, to visit within the distance of six miles from Northchurch church, and to enter the names of all patients in a book kept for the purpose, noting the nature of the disease and adding a report twice a week of the patient's state. This agreement included vaccination.

### FIGHTING AN EPIDEMIC

1832 was a busy year for Mr. Collier, owing to the prevalence of cholera in Northchurch. Nurses were engaged at 3s. 6d. each per day, and when the epidemic was over the vestry substantially increased Mr. Collier's fees. The Rector received the thanks of the parish "for unremitted exertions and attention during the period of affliction and distress."

To relieve distress, subscriptions were invited, and the Countess of Bridgewater, at Ashridge, was invited to head the list. She did so with a gift of £5, and

## 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:—

October 27—November 2: Boots.  
November 3—9: Figg.  
November 10—16: Dickman.  
November 17—23: Taylors.  
November 24—30: Boots.

### LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince 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.)

the first subscription list totalled £37 6s. This was insufficient; the Countess made a second and much more handsome gift of £50, and the grand total was £115 0s. 8d.

Much of this money was spent on improving sanitary conditions in the village. "A great many drains and cesspools are in a very foul and unhealthy state," the clerk reported, and many of the cottagers were unable to effect improvements without financial aid.

Money was spent, too, on blankets, beds, lime, clothing, shoes, tar barrels, meat, and brandy. Brandy, in fact, was the most expensive item of all—£11 14s. 6d.

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