

Deddington's Workhouse

Mary Robinson

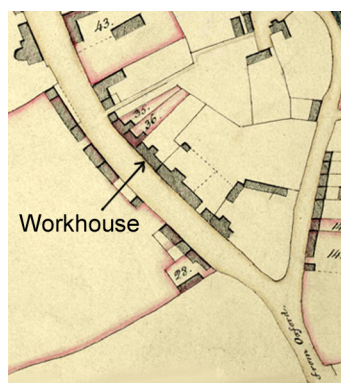
The Old Poor Laws

In the 17th century it was recognised that society as a whole had a responsibility for the destitute and the disabled, which led to the [1601 Acte for the Reliefe of the Poore](#). Adminstration of the Act was carried out by the 'Vestry', a group comprising the minister of the parish, churchwardens and certain respected householders. Overseers of the poor were appointed annually to ensure the sick, needy, poor and aged were assisted either in money or in kind, distribution of which often took place in the Vestry of the Parish Church (see also Buffy Heywood's [Looking after the Poor in Deddington](#)).

In 1723 [Knatchbull's Act](#) (the Workhouse Test Act) was passed allowing officers to purchase buildings to be used as workhouses. Parishes could deny out-relief (money, clothing, fuel or food given to those living in their own homes) and offering claimants only the workhouse instead. Rural workhouses were often small, rented buildings rather than specially built. And in Deddington such a house consisted of five cottages in New Street – one for the master and the other four for inmates.

Descriptions of the workhouse appear in: *The Story of Deddington* by Mary Vane Turner, 1933, pp 36–7; *A History of Deddington Oxfordshire* by H M Colvin (one of the Victoria County History authors), SPCK 1963, pp 73–4; *A History of the County of Oxford – Wootton Hundred – Deddington*, Vol. XI, 1983 (aka the VCH), ed. A Crossley (London: Institute of Historical Research).¹ What follows is drawn from the three sources.

The earliest mention is in the VCH: 'In 1737 the parish workhouse was estimated to have cost £50 in the year, excluding a small rent. Perhaps, as later, it stood on the east side of New Street; in 1808 it seems to have been a group of properties north of the Plough Inn, in various hands.'² (These probably refer to the same buildings.) In 1742 there were only three or four inmates, but 18 in 1796 and 26 in 1803. The 1777 parliamentary survey of parish workhouses lists Deddington as having a parish workhouse for 25 inmates.



From the 'Plan of Deddington Town', 1808³

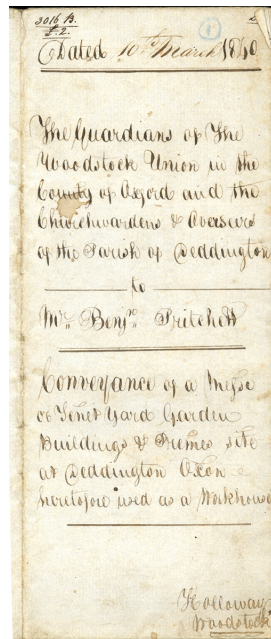
¹ Available at: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=101855#n606>.

² O.R.O., incl. award (possibly nos. 34–9 in schedule); cf. O.R.O., S. & F. colln. D 6, bdle. 9 (rental mentioning workho.).

³ Bodl. MS. Don. b. 36. f67v.

The original legal description in the 1840 indenture reads:

All that Freehold Messuage or Tenement Yard Garden Buildings and Premises to the same belonging situate and being in the New Street in Deddington aforesaid and heretofore used as a workhouse for the said Parish and now unoccupied.



1840 Conveyance between
the Woodstock Guardians and
Benjamin Pritchett

Mary Vane Turner describes the buildings:

Further in the Oxford direction a monotonous row of cottages marks the time when every parish had to support its own paupers before the passing of the Poor Law Act. The pauper inmates were lodged in the first part of this row, the cottages communicating, and the Master and Mistress were housed in the rather more commodious dwelling at the further (Oxford) end.⁴

This is the wrong way round: the 'more commodious dwelling' is at the Banbury (north) end rather than the Oxford (south) end.



The 'more commodious dwelling' of the workhouse master comprises, we believe, both the three-storey gable, facing, and the right-hand part of the building, viewed from the east (drawing by Ted Robinson, 1973).

⁴ Vane Turner, p. 36.

Life in the Workhouse

In 1742–3 the Deddington overseers seem to have provided work for the poor outside the workhouse by buying hemp, paying for spinning, and selling the cloth, but there is no reference to this later.

In the nineteenth century the administration of the Poor Law was the main responsibility of the Vestry. The running of the workhouse was carried out by a contractor, a workhouse master, who was allowed a fixed sum for each pauper in his care. This was known as 'farming' the poor. The master received an agreed weekly capitation fee for each inmate, so boosting his own income. In the early nineteenth century the capitation fee varied: from 1s.3d. in 1822 to 2s.9d. in 1828, an unusually costly year. In 1825 the parish:

Agreed with John Brotherton for the maintenance of the Poor in the Workhouse for one year ... at the rate of two shillings and five pence per head per week – each poor person to have a pint of beer a day, meat three times a week and a good fire, and a candle to go to bed by.⁵

Workhouse were not always a place of punishment, or even deprivation. Indeed, the conditions described here don't sound too desperate. By a resolution passed in December 1823 each inmate was to be provided with a coat or gown for attendance at church, 'such Clothing to be used on Sundays only, and to be under the care of the keeper of the Workhouse but to be considered the Property of the Parish Officers'; and the children were to be sent to school.⁶ Medical attention for the poor was also arranged by contract, and in 1830 those who were willing were vaccinated at the expense of the parish. Victims of smallpox were nursed in a building known as the Pesthouse, on the northern outskirts of the village, set aside for the purpose.

To read more about workhouses in general and the conditions for the inmates, see Peter Higginbottom's excellent site at <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/>.

When the Poor Law Unions were established by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, it was hoped that Deddington would be a centre. But as a sufficient number of parishes could not be found without going into Northamptonshire, and as there was opposition notably from Mr Cartwright of Aynho, the idea was abandoned, and Deddington was obliged to join the Woodstock Union. According to the VCH, the Workhouse was sold by the Guardians of the Woodstock Union in 1836;⁷ however, the Conveyance from the Guardians of the Woodstock Union Guardians to Benjamin Pritchett is dated 10 March 1840 (see below). Is the VCH entry an error? Is 1836 the date when the workhouse was sold to the Woodstock Union?

Applicants for relief were forced to walk ten miles each way in order to appear before the Guardians at Woodstock, an event indignantly described by William Wing, in his 1879 *Supplement to Marshall's Deddington* as 'if this is not *cruelty*, I cannot define the word' (emphasis in the original). A further attempt to constitute a Deddington Union was made in 1858, but the Poor Law Commissioners were unsympathetic, and there was little support from other parishes which, having already contributed to the erection of their own workhouse were, not unnaturally, unwilling to pay for another.

⁵ Vestry Minutes, 2 November 1825.

⁶ Bodl. MS. d.d. Par. Dedd. b 22, ff. 40v. and passim.

⁷ Bodl. MS. d.d. Par. Dedd. b 22, ff. 107, 110.