An Old-time Workhouse

As pictured in the account-books of East Meon

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I

IN olden time the *parish* was a *family*. When no daily newspapers told of doings in the outer world, when the rich dwelt gladly amongst "their own people," when no railway or bus service linked county to county or village to village, each parish was a self-contained unit. Parishioners moved within its limits as in a little world—a self-contained family which met Sunday by Sunday at the parish church, wove its own clothes, baked its own bread, made its own preserves and pickles, brewed its own beer, and even manufactured its own chairs, tables and carts. This family life of a parish has been all but destroyed by modern means of transport ; but for centuries it was accentuated by laws which forbade the labourer, under penalty of barbarous punishment, to wander from the place of his birth.

Until a generation ago the parish was still a family as regards the care of its poor. A family is bound to shelter its weaker members, so was it thought right for the parish and the parish only, to be responsible for the impotent and destitute within its borders. In the words of a village overseer's reply to questions put by a certain Poor Law Commission, "There is no persons fitter to manage the parish better than ourselves."

By an Act of Elizabeth each parish was bound to elect every year two or three overseers who, by taxing the parishioners, were to raise money with which to apprentice orphans, buy "stock" to provide work for the able-bodied destitutes, and to relieve the old, lame and blind.

From such beginnings sprang the old Poor Law system which in our own times has passed away. The relief thus afforded to the needy at the capricious will of overseers or justices became, in course of time, so indiscriminate that the rates were enormous, the poor were pauperised, and employers of labour were encouraged to pay starvation wages, knowing that these would be augmented by parish doles.

Workhouses sprang up as a palliative for this state of things. After one or two towns had led the way by building workhouses, an Act was passed in George I's reign (1722) which allowed parishes, either singly or in unions of two or three, to provide houses to receive its indigent. Nobody who refused to be lodged in these homes was entitled to seek parochial relief. For a time this checked the ever-rising tide of rate-expenditure.

II

It is the purpose of this paper not to discuss Poor Law history, but to draw some sort of picture of these village institutions in the eighteenth century—taking George Crabbe's description of a contemporary workhouse as our text, and testing its truth, as far as possible, by comparing

it with the Poor Law accounts of the Hampshire village of East Meon in which the ancient workhouse (though long disused for that purpose) was still standing till forty years ago. Then one hot August Bank Holiday morning a spark from a passing traction engine set afire the whole row of cramped and decrepit thatched cottages, and gutted them completely within an hour.

When the Act of 1722 was passed, no attempt was made, in most places, to raise the barrack-like buildings which the name "workhouse" now suggests to us. Either existing cottages were utilised, or a "parish house" was built on a homely scale. Such buildings—like those mentioned above—were often very mean places indeed, just a row of several old thatched cottages. Into them were thrust the aged and the idiot, the widows, orphans and illegitimate children, under the care of a master who was either in the pay of the overseers, or contracted to keep the paupers at so much a head.

George Crabbe draws a gloomy picture of such a parish house (probably one well known to him near his Suffolk home) and of its inmates.

> "Theirs is yon house that holds the parish-poor,
> Whose walls of mud scarce bear the broken door ;
> There, where the putrid vapours, flagging, play,
> And the dull wheel hums doleful through the day—
> There children dwell who know no parents' care ;
> Parents, who know no children's love, dwell there ;
> Heartbroken matrons on their joyless bed,
> Forsaken wives, and mothers never wed ;
> Dejected widows with unheeded tears,
> And crippled age with more than childhood fears ;
> The lame, the blind, and far the happiest they!
> The moping idiot and the madman gay!"

The poet draws an equally terrible picture of the neglect with which the inmates were treated. According to him the roof did not keep off the wet from the sick-bed:—

> "How would ye bear to draw your latest breath,
> Where all that's wretched paves the way for death?
> Such is that room which one rude beam divides,
> And naked rafters form the sloping sides:
> Where the vile bands that bind the thatch are seen,
> And lath and mud are all that lie between ;
> Save one dull pane, that, coarsely patch'd, gives way
> To the rude tempest, yet excludes the day:
> Here, on a matted floor, with dust o'erspread,
> The drooping wretch reclines his languid head ;
> For him no hand the cordial cup applies,
> Or wipes the tear that stagnates in his eyes ;
> No friends with soft discourse his pain beguile,
> Our promise hope till sickness wears a smile."

The sick were left to the tender mercies of a quack whose visits were a hurried and heartless formality:—

"Soon a loud and hasty summons calls.
Shakes the thin roof, and echoes round the walls ;
Anon, a figures enters, quaintly neat,
All pride and business, bustle and conceit ;
With looks unalter'd by those scenes of woe,
With speed that, entering, speaks his haste to go.
He bids the gazing throng around him fly,
And carries fate and physic in his eye:
A potent quack, long versed in human ills,
Who first insults the victim whom he kills ;
Whose murd'rous hand a drowsy Bench protect,
And whose most tender mercy is neglect.
Paid by the parish for attendance here,
He wears contempt upon his sapient sneer ;
In haste he seeks the bed where misery lies,
Impatience mark'd in his averted eyes ;
And, some habitual queries hurried o'er,
Without reply, he rushes on the door:
His drooping patient, long inured to pain,
And long unheeded, knows remonstrance vain ;
He ceases now the feeble help to crave
Of man ; and silent sinks into the grave."

Before he dies, the pauper longs for some spiritual comfort ; but even this is denied him:—

"Ere his death some pious doubts arise,
Some simple fears, which 'bold bad' men despise ;
Fain would he ask the parish-priest to prove
His title certain to the joys above:
For this he sends the murmuring nurse, who calls
The holy stranger to these dismal walls:
And doth not he, the pious man, appear,
He, 'passing rich with forty pounds a year'?
Ah! no: a shepherd of a different stock,
And far unlike him, feeds this little flock:
A jovial youth, who thinks his Sunday's task
As much as God of man can fairly ask ;
The rest he gives to loves and labours light,
To fields the morning, and to feasts the night;
None better skill'd the noisy pack to guide,
To urge the chase, to cheer them or to chide.
A sportsman keen, he shoots through half the day,
And skill'd at whist, devotes the night to play:
Then, while such honours bloom around his head,
Shall he sit sadly by the sick, man's bed,
To raise the hope he feels not. or with zeal
To combat fears which e'en the pious feel?"

Even when the pauper dies, the slothful rector will not put off his week-day amusement, and the funeral must wait till Sunday:—

"The busy priest, detained by weightier care,
Defers his duty till the day of prayer ;
And, waiting long, the crowd retire distress'd,
To think a poor man's bones should lie unbless'd."

III

Crabbe was given to exaggeration, but he could hardly pen such mordant lines (even after the centuries they almost move a reader to tears) without facts to justify his picture. No doubt in the eighteenth century such neglect, especially on the spiritual side, was sometimes the lot of the parish pauper, and, indeed, not altogether confined to those who found their abode in the poor-house. Unfortunately the parochial account-book which we are comparing with Crabbe gives us but few data by which to gauge how the pauper was treated in religious matters. Christenings, weddings and burials are, of course, mentioned formally as they occur ; and, in addition, a fee of 6d. is regularly paid for churching. But the evidence, such as it is, stops there.

In the matter of quack-doctoring, we have more information to go upon. And the local account-book hardly bears out Crabbe's criticism. The herbwoman, it is true, is occasionally called in ; but far commoner than her visits are those of the doctor. He is paid amounts varying from 6d. for "leting blood" (a fairly frequent occurrence) or for "drawing 2 teeth from jno constance" to 9s. 11d. for more serious attendance. One one occasion he is paid "for coming to bety chace when she was bad & we thought with ye smal pox." As a rule, the workhouse authorities did their own prescribing for the sick (such treatment may well have been more fearsome than that of the herbwoman!) Entries like the following continually occur:

"Bought things to make metson ... ... 9½d.
Things for ye childrens coughs ... ... 6½d.
1 qrt of stuf for mary smith when she was bad ... 1s. 6d."

("Stuf" is delightfully vague for medicinal ingredients!). An old friend of our childhood my older readers will recognise in

"Brimstone & treacle for cousens children ... 3d."

Teetotal principles had not yet gained the vogue that they later enjoyed. Often we find such entries as these:

"Half a pint of red wine & 1 of cinamon for goody hall ... ... 7d.
1 pint of mead for goody porter ... ... 6d."

A woman after her confinement is granted a pint of "brandey," two quarts of beer, and two ounces of tea. "Biscakes and roles" are often bought for sick children and old women.

Fairly often a tramp was thrown upon the parish's hands. He seems to have been treated well enough—even to the extent of God-parents being supplied for her infant (God-sib or gossip is the old English name for God-parent):

"Paid for a neck of mutton for the travelling woman ... ... 1s. 2d.
Paid for 2 half gallon loaves for the travelling woman ... ... 6d.
Paid for 3 quarts of beer for the same woman ... 1s. 0d.
Paid for 3 Gossups for the woman child ... ... 1s. 6d."

However, no encouragement was given to "travellers" to stay in the village, and they were sometimes granted a florin "to set them off." Occasionally a parishioner is helped who has had misfortune. Here is such an occasion—the record is somewhat dubiously worded! :

"Paid to william norman when his jaw Bone was broke by order of the oficers £1 10s. 0d."

A parishioner was sometimes sent to the hospital at the parish's expense, When all medical help has failed, the final entry is always made in much the same terms:

"paid for laying out Jno Been & affidavit ... 1s. 6d.
one dozen of Beer for them that carried him to church ... ... 1s. 0d.
half a pint of Lickour for ye people that laid him out and put him in ye cofin ... ... 6d."

As regards the poet's dismal picture of the workhouse buildings, they were doubtless cramped enough, and often unsanitary, though the inmates would probably prefer small stuffy rooms to the large airy ones so disliked by the poor in modern workhouses. Crabbe, though he complains of the limited quarters, tells us how the villagers hated the larger type of poor-house:

"Your plan I love not ;—with a number you
Have placed your poor, your pitiable few ;
There, in one house, throughout their lives to be,
The pauper-palace which they hate to see:
Those ware-born walks, that lofty thund'ring hall!
That large loud clock, which tolls each dreaded hour,
Those gates and locks, and all those signs of power:
It is a prison, with a milder name,
Which few inhabit without dread or shame."

If village quarters were cramped, they still offered the compensation of the familiar surroundings of childhood, set among familiar faces—far better than the neighbouring town:

"Who can, when here, the social neighbour meet?
Who learn the story current in the street?
Who to the long-known intimate impart
Facts they have learn d or feelings of the heart?—
They talk indeed, but who can choose a friend,
Or seek companions at their journey's end?

IV

One feature of the eighteenth century workhouse was the work done by its inhabitants. As the name implies, the original idea of such an institution was that it should pay its way by the labour of the inmates. The overseers kept a "stock" of material for knitting or spinning (the purchase of "blue yarn" figures frequently in these accounts), and the women were expected to work upon this (hence Crabbe's reference to the "dull wheel" which "hums doleful through the day"), and also to act as charwomen if needed. The men were to go out harvesting or threshing or hoeing for local farmers who, disgracefully enough, were thus enabled to pay their labourers starvation wages. The money thus earned was paid over to the authorities, who kept it for the maintenance of the house, giving back a trifle as pocket-money to the workers. Thus in one week's receipts we find:

"Recd of mr. Balden for spining work ... ... 11s. 0d.
Recd of mr. Cole for goody Boyses work ... 1s. 0d."

whilst on the debit side we read

"paid to our peopel out of the spining work ... 1s. 10d.
paid out of goody Boyses work ... ... 2d."

Similar entries record money received from local farmers, and a due proportion paid out of it to the workhouse labourers.

Part of the Poor Law authority's work at this time was to apprentice orphan children—among them, many illegitimates. If Crabbe's account of the cruelties practised by Peter Grimes was true of even some masters, then the lot of these poor children, bereft of all their natural protectors, must have been pitiable indeed. In the particular accounts which we are considering, this apprenticing is not often mentioned, though in 1743 we find the following minute, given without further detail of any kind:

"A Vestry held on account of Prentising out of Parishi(oners) childring that are now chargable Agreed upon by us whose hands are here unto set."

Then follow the names of ten signatories, of which names seven still survive in the parish. No doubt the little girls were duly sent out to service, as the boys to their apprenticeships—as this item testifies:

"paid for 1 yrd of Linen Cloath for caps for ye girls that went out ... ... 2s. 4d."

We have, of course, no means of testing whether the workhouse inmates were well fed or not, since we do not know the number of them. Fresh meat was bought very sparingly. But bacon and cheese were purchased in large quantities. One week's accounts are charged with

"4 sides 330 pound at 4d. a pound
400 of cheese at 13s. & 5d. a hundred"

and a month later another purchase of almost exactly the same amount is recorded (nowadays it makes a reader's mouth water even to think of such quantities in part of a single village!).

The frequent occurrence of the same names in these accounts make it possible—without overstretching the imagination—to build up something of the life-story of some of the inmates.

Here, for instance—to take two examples—in the workhouse is one Peter Stigans (or Stigants or Stigands, since the name thus differs on a single page). Peter has been a village carpenter, and is a handy man with tools. He is not old, as villagers go, but is handicapped with a game leg, which has ended by sending him to "the House." He is a useful man to have about the place, for he not only does such repairs to the premises as are necessary, but also makes the coffins for all the workhouse funerals. The death of an inmate always brought several small orders or perquisites for small tradesmen or fellow-paupers. And amongst these charges for beer for the bearers and those that "lay him out," and sums paid to local tradesmen for "coffin boards," lamb-black and glew," there is always one more item—"6d. to Peter Stigans for making ye coffin." Peter's sore leg is therefore worth a little attention at the public expense. At first only an occasional item appears for "ointment for peter stigands leg" ; but the amount increases with growing age until there is a regular fortnightly charge of fourpence for two ounces. Occasionally, too, the old fellow is allowed money for "metson" or "phisick."

A less useful, but quainter, personality is found in Betty Guy (or "bety guy," as she is generally called). She is one of the old village "standards," and received outdoor relief long before the "House" was opened. When she had her own bit of cottage, her neighbouring gossips loved to gather round her hearth, and listen to her ready tongue, while she, good lady, alternated mordant wit and puffs at a short black pipe. Now that an adverse fate has moved her to other quarters, those in authority have a kindly feeling for the old lady, and treat her with paternal care. Her ailments are constantly attended to, and even delicacies are bought for her from time to time:

"2d. for ointment for bety guys face
2d. for one white loaf 2 biscakes for bety guy
9d. for one blister plaister for bety guy."

And in October, 1732, sevenpence of public money was spent on "half a pound of tobacco for bety guy"! This was a wholesale allowance, of course ; but from that eventful day she (and no one else in the workhouse) is allowed half-an-ounce a week. The kindly tobacco is granted, without a break, for another five years, when it gives way to an ominous substitute thus recorded:

9d. bought things for bety guy when she was sick."

No more baccy for poor Betty! The very next week we read:

"paid for cofin boards for betty guy ... ... 3s. od.
paid for making ye cofin to peter Stigants ... 6d."

So that Peter outlived his old neighbour. Was he, I wonder, one of those who helped to carry her to the old grey church below the hill? He, no doubt, was glad—and we may share his satisfaction—that Betty's last illness was not a long one, and that she was able to enjoy her pipe till within a week of her death.

Editor's Notes

THIS issue of HAMPSHIRE REVIEW marks the first anniversary of the magazine's birth. The contents of the first four issues of the magazine are listed on the outside of the back cover of this issue. A few copies of each of these are still available, and I shall be pleased to send them to new readers who would like to complete their collection of all the issues of the magazine. The price is 2/6d. each, post free.

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In my notes for the second issue of HAMPSHIRE REVIEW I wrote, "It is already safe to say that if the circulation can be raised to ten times the number already sold, HAMPSHIRE REVIEW will be firmly established. It is a great tribute to my helpers that at least one-tenth of the journey should have been covered at the first step." Since then, great progress has been made, and it is now "safe to say" that, if the circulation can be raised to five times its present figure, the magazine will be firmly established. The great progress which has been made is largely due to the enthusiastic help of the first few subscribers, who very kindly took the trouble to send me lists of the names and addresses of persons likely to be interested, and willing to support the magazine. May I now appeal to more recent subscribers who consider that the magazine deserves such help to do the same, and also to consider whether they have any friends for whom a present of a year's subscription would make a suitable and acceptable gift at birthday or at Christmas time. The work of editing and publishing HAMPSHIRE REVIEW—in my spare time—has afforded me very great pleasure, and nothing is more encouraging than to find that readers are also willing to devote some time and thought to helping to make the venture a success. Will you help?

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Approval and sanction for the reprinting for private circulation of the article by Canon Edward Moor on "Freemasonry in Hampshire" (published in HAMPSHIRE REVIEW No. 4) has been granted by the Deputy Provincial Grand Master-in-Charge of the province of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. The article will be reprinted in pamphlet form and can be supplied to Secretaries of Masonic Lodges at the price of sixpence.

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