

## THE WORKHOUSE IN BIRCHINGTON

Birchington has always done its best to relieve the poor of the parish, the widow, the aged, the disabled and the orphans. The amount of time, attention and money spent upon matters relating to the poor seems to have been quite as great as that devoted to all other matters of local concern together. In **1601** the great Poor Law of Queen Elizabeth I was passed, and this act formed the very foundation of local poor law administration for over two centuries.

The most important sections of this act ordered the churchwardens and two, three or four substantial householders to be nominated each year as overseers of the poor, imposing on them the duty of maintaining and setting to work the poor, the funds being provided by the taxation of "every inhabitant - - and every occupier of lands, houses - - ". So begins the Assessments for the Poor as recorded in the Poor Books of Birchington, and also those of the Vill of Wood (Acol).

At first the poor were relieved in their homes or in the Poor's House by the Churchyard wall. Then in **1761** the "Workhouse" made its appearance. In **1722/3** an Act was passed which stated that the Overseers and Churchwardens with the consent of the majority of the inhabitants of the parish might purchase or hire buildings, and contract with any person for lodging, keeping, maintaining and employing the poor. The Act also stated that the officers of a parish could contract with those of another parish for the management of the poor. After some years this is what Birchington did.

In **1761** the Churchwardens and Overseers of Birchington made a Contract and Agreement with the Churchwardens and Overseers of St. Peters at Broadstairs for the poor of Birchington to be provided for in the Workhouse at St. Peters. The Contract and Agreement for this is in our records.

From this year to the time that Birchington had its own Workhouse, the poor adults and poor children were sent to St. Peters Workhouse and in the Birchington Poor Books are entries for payments made for sending the poor to St. Peters and for the charges of keeping them there. At the same time many of the poor were still relieved in their own homes in Birchington or in the Birchington's own Poor's House by the churchyard.

Here are some entries from the Poor Book relating to St. Peters –

1761	Mary Pinters sent to St. Peters – charges	£3 1s 2d.
1762/3	Thos Gore's children at St. Peters at 4s per week.	
1763	The Overseers charged for making several visits to St. Peters where children are kept. It came to	£5 5s 6d.

It appears that frequent visits were made to St. Peters to see the poor of Birchington there and to pay the charges.

But it seems that most of the poor were relieved at home in Birchington where they were given a weekly allowance of amount from 1s to 4s a week according to circumstances and also given spinning or weaving work to do for which they were paid.

In **1794** Birchington built its own Workhouse, built in Park Lane. It was established under what is known as Gilbert's Act of 1781/2, during the time of George III. Gilbert was a Member of Parliament for Lichfield and had a genuine concern and love of the poor. His Act was an adoptive one requiring the consent of two-thirds of the ratepayers in number and value.

This was obtained in Birchington, the Vill of Wood, Monkton, and Vill of Sarr at meetings. Parishes were allowed to unite for carrying out the provision of the Act. The establishment in which the poor were to be maintained was to

be a 'poorhouse' and not a 'workhouse', where the sick, infirm, aged and young were to be its occupants.

An Agreement was signed **20<sup>th</sup> May 1794** uniting the parishes of Birchington, Vill of Wood, Parish of Monkton, and Vill of Sarr according to this Act for the better maintaining and employing their poor, to purchase a piece of land in Birchington and to erect buildings thereon for the reception and accommodation of the poor etc. This agreement was signed by James Neame, (he farmed Street Farm)<sup>1</sup> and Gilbert Stringer (he was for 33 years master of the Charity School, and for 37 years Parish Officer and Treasurer of the Union Workhouse. He is buried in the east end of the Churchyard near the Quex Chapel where his tomb stone can be seen). These signed for Birchington.

In **August 1794** a piece of church land comprising one half and an acre was conveyed from churchwardens, Mr John Friend of Birchington Hall, and Mr. Thomas Simmonds, 'to the Guardians of the Poor for the purpose of building a poor house for the sum of £18.'

In the Churchwardens Account Book is the entry under **1794/5** – "Recd for the sale of one acre of church lands to build a Workhouse thereon £18". This piece of land was in Park Lane, adjoining the present school site. The total amount paid in building and furnishing the Workhouse amounted to £600. The amount was raised by loans at 4½ % from about 7 local prominent people. These included three Stringers and two members of the Friend family. The £600 was used for building the Workhouse, the brickwork, tiling, and chimneys, for digging a well, and a cellar, and for furnishings, such as frying pan, pails, fire ranges, fire irons, spinning wheel, pewter dishes, a bell etc. Soon after it was built it was enlarged at a cost of £300 to take in the poor of Monkton and Sarre.

The building seemed to consist of –

- A small garret with beds
- A long garret with beds
- A men's room with beds and chests
- A women's room with beds
- The Mistress's room
- At least one other small room
- A kitchen
- A cellar
- A garden



<sup>1</sup> Street Farmhouse is now 230-238 Canterbury Road, first built about 1450

There appeared to be at least 30 beds, chest of drawers, kneading trough, carpenters bench, boiler, warming pan, chairs and tables. The house was insured with the Sun Fire Office for a premium of £1 9s 6d per year. There was a Bible and spelling books for the children. The cost was paid by the parishes concerned in proportion to the number of poor in the Workhouse. The first Governess of the Workhouse was a Mrs. Wootton who was paid a salary of £21 per year.

The Treasurer, Mr. Gilbert Stringer was paid £5 5s 0d per year. There were two "necessary" houses, those were bought at the Camp, (at Minnis) for £3 13s 6d.

It seems that the inmates were taught, where possible, weaving and spinning. Looms and spinning wheels were bought and a Weaver engaged to teach the inmates. He was paid 6s per week. The Weaver was Peter Petts. The food given was according to our standards very poor. The cost varied according to the cost of wheat and the number in the Workhouse.

At the end of the **1700s** and the beginning of the **1800s** wheat was scarce and costly, as there was a famine and well to do people were urged not to eat wheat in order to leave more for the poor people. In **1797** the Archbishop sent a letter to the clergy of his diocese to reduce the consumption of wheat so that a larger quantity will be left for those of the indigent and laborious classes. This letter is still in our archives.

In **1810** there were 20 paupers in the Workhouse and the cost of "victualling" these was for 5 weeks £14 3s 0d. The next year when a pauper died in the Workhouse all the inmates had a little beer – to cheer them up I expect!

The cost of running the Workhouse for the year **1816/7**, victualling, clothing, salaries and interest on loans came to £290 5s 10d. It appears that those able were given work to do and the girls were paid for their spinning and often the men were sent out to repair the roads.

In **1822** an Edward Young agreed to victual, lodge, wash and clothe the poor in the Workhouse at Birchington and to find them every necessity for 2s 6d per week. At that time there were 31 paupers in the Workhouse.

This is the diet he supplied –

Day	Breakfast	Dinner	Supper
Sunday	Spoon victuals	Meat	Spoon victuals
Monday	Do or Butter	Suet pudding	Do or Butter
Tuesday	Do or Do	Meat	Do or Do
Wednesday	Do or Do	Suet pudding	Do occasionally
Thursday	Do or Do	Meat or suet pudding	Do or Do
Friday	Broth or butter	Soup	Broth or Butter
Saturday	not given in the Poor Book.		

This arrangement lasted until **1826** when Edward Young was given notice that it was the intention of the Parish to discontinue the farming of the poor in the Workhouse, on the present system, but Mr. Young was paid for feeding the poor and clothing them in **1831**.

In **1803** the Master of the Wingham Workhouse was paid for carriage of materials and instructing the people in the Workhouse to make Ropes. Rope tackle, iron work and wood work for rope making were purchased.

Often spinning wheels were purchased for use in the house. In **1813** six were bought at Canterbury for 10s 6d each.

It was not easy to obtain the services of a suitable Governor. In **1819** after an advertisement and several candidates were interviewed a William Philmer was appointed.

In **1822** the children in the house were given 4s in lieu of a Christmas box. And a Richard Dawson was paid for teaching the children in the House 2s 6d. It appears that Dawson was paid 10s per year for instructing the children. At his time there was only the Charity School in Birchington taking about 24 children.

It was in that Edward Young was given notice that his contract for feeding, clothing etc the paupers was to be ended. The Workhouse was to be closed on the building of the Union Workhouse at Minster.

In **1837** it was agreed to sell the building and effects.

**In 1835 the Poor Law Commissioners dissolved the Union of Birchington, Wood, Monkton and Sarr. The Declaration is in our records.**

The building and land were sold to John Powell Powell Esq., of Quex for £225. The conveyance shows there were 1 rood 38 perches of land. The plan shows the Workhouse on the west side of the road leading from Birchington to Acol.

The building is now used as a cottage and a barn.



There were also Alms Houses in the village, provided by the Church and the Overseers of the Poor. They were originally the building beside the churchyard wall, but when these were too dilapidated to be worth repairing, a new set of 4 was erected in Gas Alley across the road from the church in Church Street. These were in constant use until they were also finally condemned in the mid 1920s, but the last resident did not leave until 1934. There was another small terrace of four flint houses behind the Alms cottages which were also used to house the very poorest members of the community.

In the photo on the left, you can see the roof and chimney of the flint terrace behind thatched roof of the alms cottages. This photo was taken in c. 1929-1930

