

Philanthropy in the Workhouse

How were local people treated when they got to Berkhamsted Workhouse? Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* depicts self-satisfied governors enjoying sumptuous meals while the inmates survived on meagre portions of gruel. In contrast, "Tramps' Paradise" was the name given to our workhouse "on account of the easy duties imposed, and detention for one night only."¹

What was on the menu at Berkhamsted workhouse? Bread (14oz) and gruel (1.5 pints) for breakfast every day except Friday when the bread allowance was only 8oz, presumably because dinner was a 14oz suet pud! On Mon, Wed and Sat, inmates could look forward to 5oz beef and 1lb of potatoes for dinner; on Tues, Thurs and Sun, 1.5 pints of soup. Supper on beef days was 1.5 pints of broth and 2oz cheese on other days. Smaller rations were given to the aged, infirm and the sick. Women had tea made for them by the Matron in lieu of gruel or broth.²

Christmas was a special occasion in the workhouse, like this one in 1892:

As usual on Christmas Day the inmates, sixty-six in number, were treated to a good dinner of beef and plum pudding by the kindness of the guardians, and under the direction of Mr. and Mrs. Jesty, the master and matron. Mrs. Dudley Ryder again sent tea and sugar, oranges, and Christmas cards. The Rev. A. Johnson, one of the guardians, sent 6lbs. of tea and 2lbs. of tobacco; Miss Proctor, cake, tobacco, and Christmas cards for the sick; Mr. Harding, nuts and oranges; Mr. C. Tompkins, oranges and apples; Mr. F.Q. Lane (a guardian), six bottles of wine and evergreens; Mr. Dickman (another old friend of the inmates), a quantity of oranges, fruits, &c.; Mr. D. Clarke and Mr. D. Pike, fruit.³

This looks like a patronizing attitude to us; generosity made known in the local press, but "it would not have seemed so to the contemporary audience." This was "charitable concern rather than social awareness. Noblesse oblige."⁴

Linda Rollitt

¹ BNA, *Luton Times and Advertiser*, (Sep 1900)

² May, T., *Victorian Workhouse* (1997) p.23

³ BNA, *Bucks Herald* (Jan 1892)

⁴ Adie, K., *Fighting on the Home Front: The Legacy of Women in World War One* (2013), p.71