THE AMESBURY UNION WORKHOUSE; a true asylum for the young, old, destitute and infirm.

The Victorian workhouse has had a very bad press. Dickens assisted greatly in its vilification via *Oliver Twist*, and some newspapers, notably *The Times*, relished publishing stories of misery and deprivation, cruelty and abuse by workhouse governors. The owner of *The Times*, John Walter, MP, was particularly incensed that 'outdoor relief' had been largely abolished by the new Poor Law Act of 1834. Henceforth, it was required for a person to enter a union workhouse in order to receive food, shelter etc. The editor of the newspaper was encouraged to publish stories of misery among the poor who had subsequently died from starvation, exposure, or illness because they refused to enter a workhouse. Even so, a letter to the editor in 1836—no doubt from an unsympathetic ratepayer—stated that the workhouse should be 'held "in terrorem" over the idle and the dissipated'.

The workhouse was the resource of last resort for the young, old, infirm, and destitute. Nevertheless, the inmates of all workhouses were clothed, fed, housed, and the children educated in 'reading, writing, arithmetic and the principles of the Christian Religion'. The sexes were segregated, intoxicating liquors, cards, and dice were forbidden. Tobacco was not forbidden, although smoking inside was not allowed and paupers were not allowed matches. Surprisingly though, at the discretion of the governor, older married couples could be allowed a private room.

The Amesbury Union was established in September 1835, when Colonel a'Court wrote to the Poor Law Commissioners in London to inform them of his plan. He was the assistant Poor Law Commissioner with responsibility for Wiltshire. Twenty-three parishes around Amesbury had been subsumed into a new union with a new workhouse to be built in Amesbury. This would be managed by a board of guardians, one from each parish—elected by the ratepayers—with one extra for Amesbury on account of its size. The new Act also allowed that any magistrate resident within the union, if he wished, could be an *ex officio* guardian. Until then, the Poor Laws had been administered entirely at parish level usually via the 'select vestry', a body of parish officials, ratepayers, and the rector or vicar of the parish. They decided who got what relief and under what circumstances. The ultimate authority for this activity was the local magistrate, and any pauper unhappy with the relief granted could lodge an appeal with a magistrate. The first meeting of the new union took place on 12 October 1835 at the George Inn, Amesbury. Apart from those elected and Colonel a'Court, there were three ex officio guardians: Gorges Paulin Lowther, the rector of Orcheston St George, Sir Alexander Malet, a career diplomat, and

the Reverend Edward Duke, a local landowner, antiquarian, and JP living in Lake House, in Wilsford-cum-Lake, a couple of miles from Amesbury.

Edward Duke was to be a thorn in the side of the Amesbury Union for the next nine years or so, and his activities will be the subject of a future article. Suffice it to say that in 1844, he wrote to the Home Secretary accusing the workhouse governor, Charles Ralfs, of the assault of a crippled orphan boy, George Wheeler. He alleged that Wheeler had died as a result of Ralfs' rough treatment. Charles Ralfs was a retired master sail-maker who had served in the Royal Navy. He had been appointed governor of the new Amesbury Union Workhouse at its opening in 1837. From 1842 or thereabouts, Duke had conducted a relentless campaign against the governor and his wife, and this culminated in an enquiry being held into Duke's charges.

Mr Duke's charges were investigated in the spring of 1844 by Henry Walter Parker. He was an assistant Poor Law Commissioner who had replaced Colonel a'Court. He spent four days at Amesbury conducting the most detailed enquiry into Duke's allegations against the governor. As well his treatment of George Wheeler, Ralfs was accused beating a boy and two little girls with a rope. The boy received a cut under his eye as a result. There was also a charge of locking an old woman up for 24 hours in a cell on bread and water with no straw to sleep on.

In all forty-six witnesses were called, and their detailed evidence, the build-up to it, and background on Mr Duke's other activities as a magistrate and antiquarian, are the subject of my book *Reverend Duke and the Amesbury Oliver*. But what was fascinating in the evidence presented, was that witness after witness—paupers and ex-paupers, the surgeon, chaplain, and several guardians—attested to the kindness and generosity of the governor and his wife, particularly towards the children.

Jane Conduit, resident pauper, was asked by the governor to take some 'tea and buttered toast' from his own table to 'poor George Wheeler'. Jane had worked in the kitchen for five years, and had repeatedly been instructed to take food from the kitchen to paupers who were ill. Many inmates, she said, after having been discharged from the workhouse, would return to visit the governor and his wife. Mary Dyer was an ex-pauper living in Salisbury. She declared: 'The Governor's conduct was civility and kindness to the inmates … I never knew him to act cruelly to any of [them] … [or] heard a report of his having acted cruelly. Since I left the Workhouse I have called on the Governor many times'. The governor and his wife had also visited her and her family several times. Regarding the workhouse children: 'The children used to go to the [governor] every night and shake hands with him and wish him good night and the same to

Mrs. … The children always appear cheerful and I don't believe any of them ever went to bed without kissing the Mrs.'

Sarah North had spent two years in the workhouse and her husband had died there: 'He received attention and kindness in the Workhouse. He had everything that was needed for him by the Governor … Whilst he was able to do it, he spoke of the master's kindness.' Deborah Plummer's father died in the workhouse: 'He was ill for 12 months. He was formerly paralytic and had no use of his limbs on one side. I waited on him constantly during his illness. The Governor and Matron behaved very kindly to him indeed all the time he was ill up to the time he died. He sometimes had food sent to him from the Governor's table. Father was very pleased and very grateful for the kindness and said so to me'. She went on: '[The dead] are never slighted and neglected by the Governor. [He puts] all sorts of flowers that he can get … round the corpse in the coffin … when there are none in the Workhouse garden, the Governor sends for them up into the town.' Ann Perry, another ex-pauper, related that: 'The master once gave all the children and nurses a gypsy party on the Downs … we spent the day very joyfully indeed … We had plenty to eat and drink'.

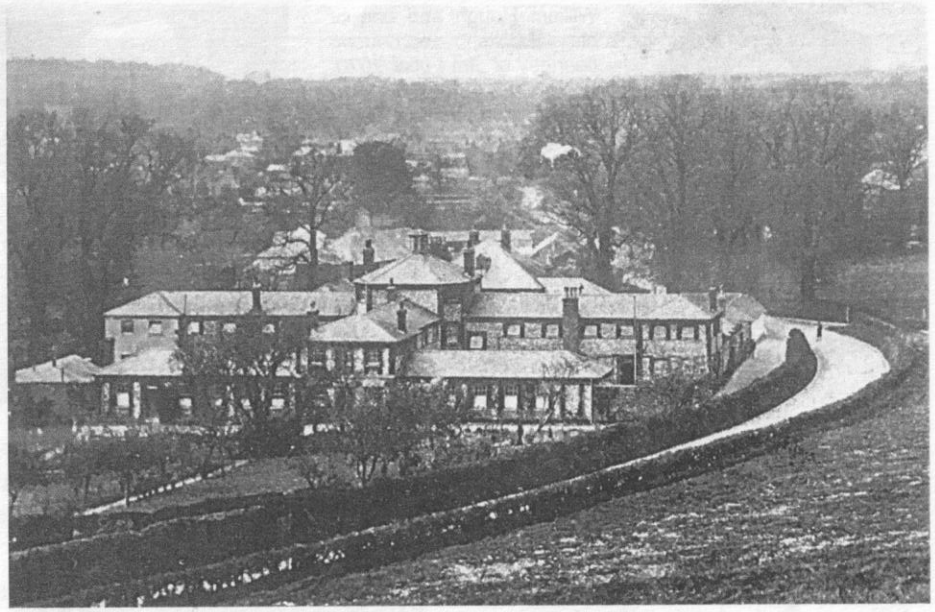
The workhouse chaplain, Reverend Fulwar William Fowle, made a long statement. He started: 'During the time I have been the Chaplain … the conduct of the Governor and matron has been exemplary. Their behaviour to the inmates has been perfectly kind and humane. In no instance have I known them guilty of ill-treating or improperly chastising the pauper inmates … I never knew any instance of unjustifiable severity on the part of the Governor or the matron. I am much about the country and visit all the villages in the neighbourhood – I am particularly called to many of them for being Rural Dean. In no instance have I heard of the paupers having been ill-treated or their children chastised improperly by the governor.' He observed: 'From the unrestrained way in which ill and dying persons unburden themselves to Clergymen I am confident I should have heard if any ill-treatment had been [taking place] in the Workhouse.'

He described being out driving with his wife: 'we met a great many children out walking who looked so remarkably clean, happy and healthy … she … asked me what children they could be – I answered they are the children of the lowest genders of 23 parishes'. Rev Fowle had been in attendance during the entire four days of the enquiry: 'nothing that has transpired has shaken my confidence in the master and matron – that confidence has been confirmed though it did not want that confirmation, for I knew everything that has transpired as well before the investigation as now.'

I dare say that the Amesbury Workhouse was not representative of the norm, but the evidence presented in the 1844 enquiry does give the lie to the generally held

cliché about the brutality of life in the workhouse. Perhaps there ought to be some sort of permanent memorial in the town to record that.

Peter Maggs



Photograph of the Amesbury Union Workhouse, probably early twentieth century, looking north west, with Amesbury in the background. A gloomy and foreboding aspect, evidently taken in winter.

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Peter Maggs' article is the first of two, and is extracted from his latest book 'Reverend Duke and the Amesbury Oliver'. Peter's interest in our workhouse was inspired by his father's research into Rev Duke, one of the Guardians. His wider interest in Amesbury and its environs stems from an interest in his great grandfather who was the son of a shepherd on Salisbury Plain.

Peter's second contribution will lead us into the detail and outcome of the investigations into Duke's activities when he crossed swords with the Guardians and other local Union dignitaries.

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