

# Mike Royden's History Pages

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## The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Poor Law in Liverpool and its Hinterland: Towards the Origins of the Workhouse Infirmary

M.W. Royden (B.A. Hons., Cert. Ed.)

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**The Poor Law and After: Workhouse Hospitals and Public Welfare**

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*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!  
Heart-broken 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.  
Here too the sick their final doom receive  
Here brought, amid the scenes of grief, to grieve,*

*The Village* George Crabbe 1773

During the early 19th century, the Poor Law was often heavily criticised for its leniency and was said to discourage the unemployed from seeking work, while at the same time placing an enormous burden upon the ratepayer. This study encompasses the difficult period of transition between the Old and New Poor Law which took place in the 1830-40s and the contrasting demands placed upon it by the urban expansion of the port and the surrounding rural hinterlands. The origins of the Workhouse Infirmary were rooted in the changes brought in by the New Poor Law and by the 20<sup>th</sup> century these institutions had become the foundation for many of the nation's general hospitals.

The seeds of the Poor Law are in the Elizabethan desire to remove vagrants and beggars from the streets and to introduce an legislative framework to deal with the growing problem of the poor. In 1601, during the reign of Elizabeth I, an Act of Relief of the Poor was passed which was to be the basis of Poor Law administration for the next two centuries. It divided the poor receiving relief into three categories -

*(i) the able-bodied who were to have work provided for them.*

*(ii) the rogues, vagabonds, and beggars, who were to be whipped or otherwise punished for their unwillingness to work.*

*(iii) the 'impotent' poor (the old, the sick and the handicapped), who were to be relieved in almshouses.*

By the provisions of the Act, each parish was made responsible for its poor. It would appoint its own Overseers of the Poor (usually the church wardens and a couple of large landowners) who would collect the poor rate. The money would then be spent in four main ways:

*(i) 'for setting to work the children of all such whose parents shall not be thought able to maintain them.'*

*(ii) 'for setting to work all such persons married or unmarried, having no means to maintain them,*

*and who use no ordinary or daily trade of life to get their living by' (that is, the able-bodied pauper).*

*(iii) 'for providing a convenient stock of flax, hemp, wood, thread, iron, and other ware, and stuff to set the poor on work'.*

*(iv) 'for the necessary relief of the lame, impotent, old, blind and such other among them being poor and not able to work'.<sup>(1)</sup>*

The Act also made it legal 'to erect, build and set up convenient houses or dwellings for the said impotent poor and also place inmates or more families than one in one cottage or house', which appears to be the initial authority for the erection of buildings later to become known as workhouses. A number of parishes took up this option realising there was a considerable saving to be made compared with supporting paupers within their own homes or as vagrants.

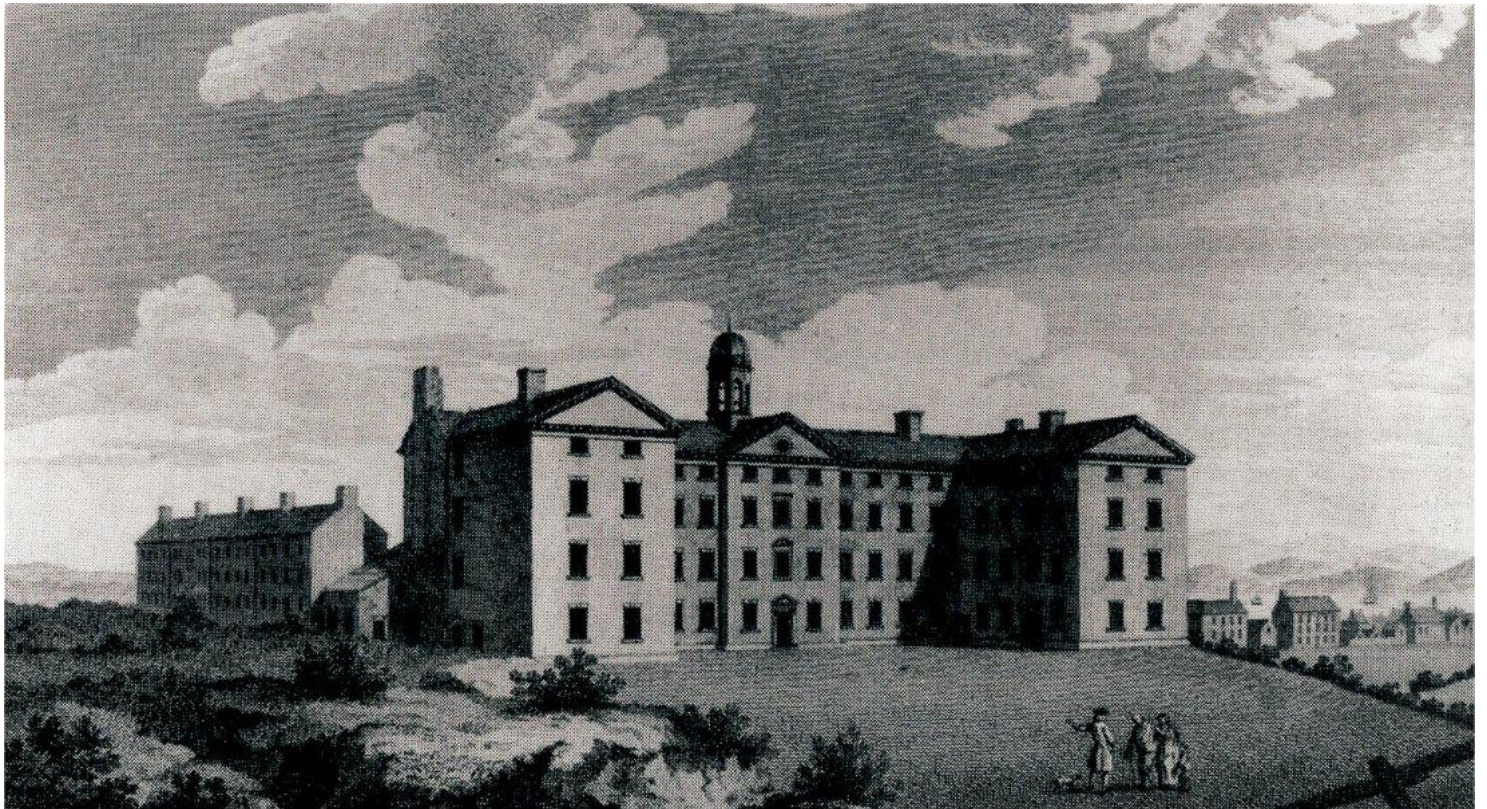
Further Acts were passed over the next two centuries to extend the administration or to prevent abuse of the system. However, there was a disparity between the size of parishes in the north of the country compared with those in the south, which was ignored in the initial implementation of the 1601 Act. Childwall, for example, comprised 9 townships, each of which were of similar size to parishes in the south<sup>(2)</sup>. This anomaly was largely addressed by the settlement Act of 1662, which made each township responsible for its own poor, especially if they had resettled elsewhere.<sup>(3)</sup> Parishes were permitted to send paupers back to their own parish to receive relief if they became a burden. (This stayed in place until 1945). In Liverpool, following the devastation of the Civil War (1648), displaced '*yong Children and Beggars wch...are found Wandring and begging contrarie to Lawe...*' shall be '*shipt for the Barbadoes or otherwise to be put apprentices if ye belong to this Towne*'.<sup>(4)</sup> The New World were now receiving the poor of Liverpool - this was the earliest known reference to emigrants from the town. Numbers steadily increased as paupers were transported over the next century, many of whom were apprenticed for 4-11 years on plantations.

Liverpool was already acting independently of the parish of Walton-on-the-Hill (of which it was a part) in administering its own poor relief. In 1656 it was "*ordered that hereafter this towne shall keep and maintaine their own poore, and that the poor of all other places shalbe kept out from begging here*". To further reduce expenditure a Beadle was appointed to keep out the beggars, with a bonus of 6d for every rogue whipped.<sup>(5)</sup>

A second key development in poor law legislation was Knatchbull's General Workhouse Act of 1723, which enabled single parishes to erect a workhouse if they wished, so that they could enforce labour on the able-bodied poor in return for relief.<sup>(6)</sup> This 'workhouse test' would

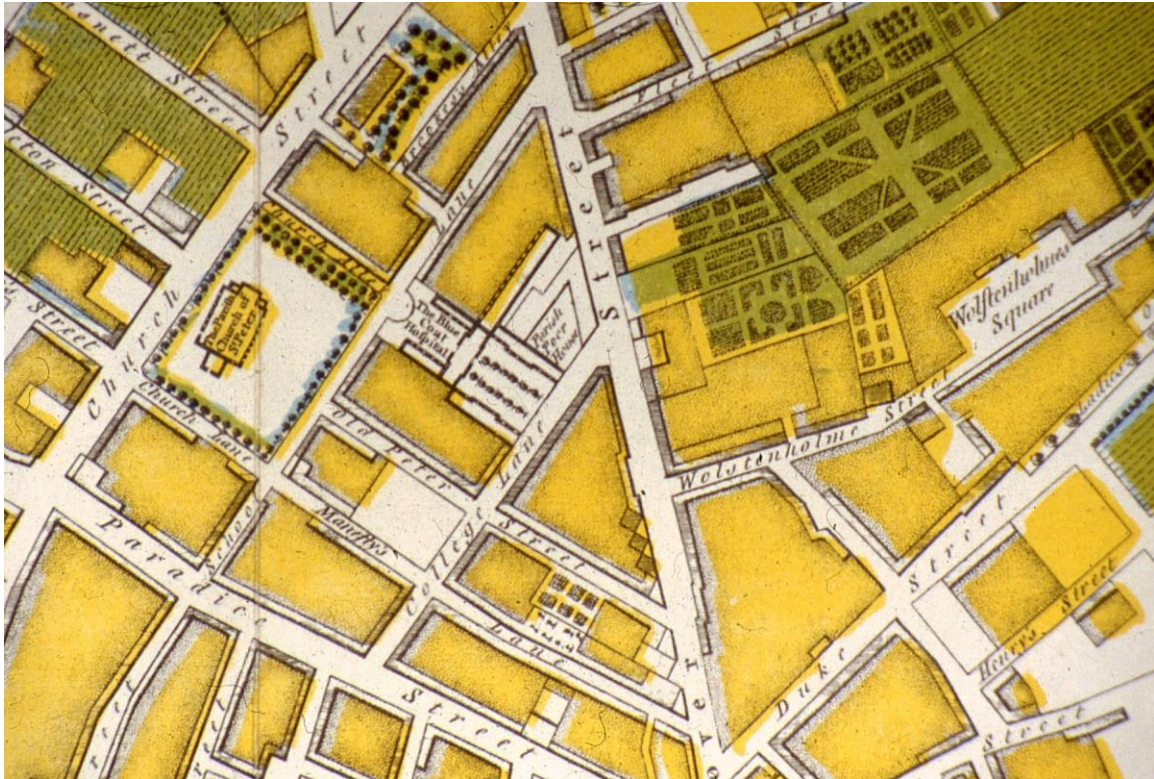


— The Old Workhouse Yard, Hanover Street, —  
— 1858 —



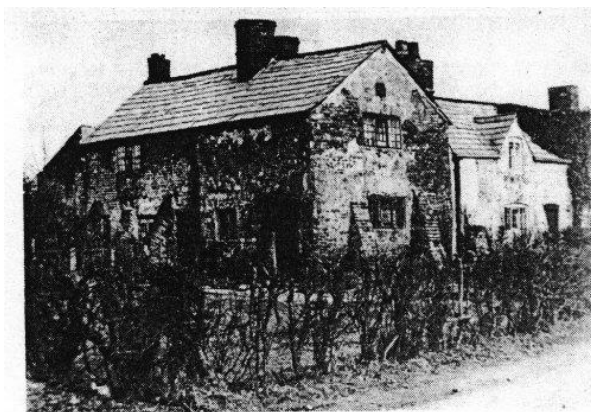
Liverpool Brownlow Hill Workhouse

enable parishes to refuse relief to those paupers who would not enter them. Nationally, the building of workhouses increased considerably under this Act, and by the end of the century their number had increased to almost 2,000, most holding between 20 to 50 inmates. In Liverpool, a small workhouse was used in Pool Lane, South Castle Street from 1723, but as the system became more complicated and expensive, a building was erected on a plot of land behind the Bluecoat Hospital on the corner of College Lane and Hanover Street in 1732.<sup>(7)</sup> The poor rate was reduced by a third, especially now that the poor were suffering the workhouse test and there was strict application of the law; - for example, there would be no relief for the outdoor poor, unless a written order was given by the mayor or a Justice of the Peace.



In the surrounding parishes and townships, if a workhouse existed it was usually a small cottage rented for the purpose. Records in many cases appear to no longer exist and although certain references have been found, the existence of the building itself is often still dubious.<sup>(8)</sup> In West Derby however, we can be more certain; the parish workhouse known as the Old Poor House, is known to have stood since 1731 on the northern side of Low Hill, near to the present site of the Coach and Horses and was in use until the late 1830's.<sup>(9)</sup> Other rural workhouses were known at Halewood (1723-1837), Huyton (1732), Prescot (1732-50), Speke (1742-76), and Woolton (1834-37). Others may have existed, probably for a short period, at Allerton (1776), Childwall (1776), Ditton (1776), Hale (1776), Cronton (1770-89), and Wavertree (1776) (where a local parishioner was paid to marry a woman and take her off the poor relief!).<sup>(10)</sup>

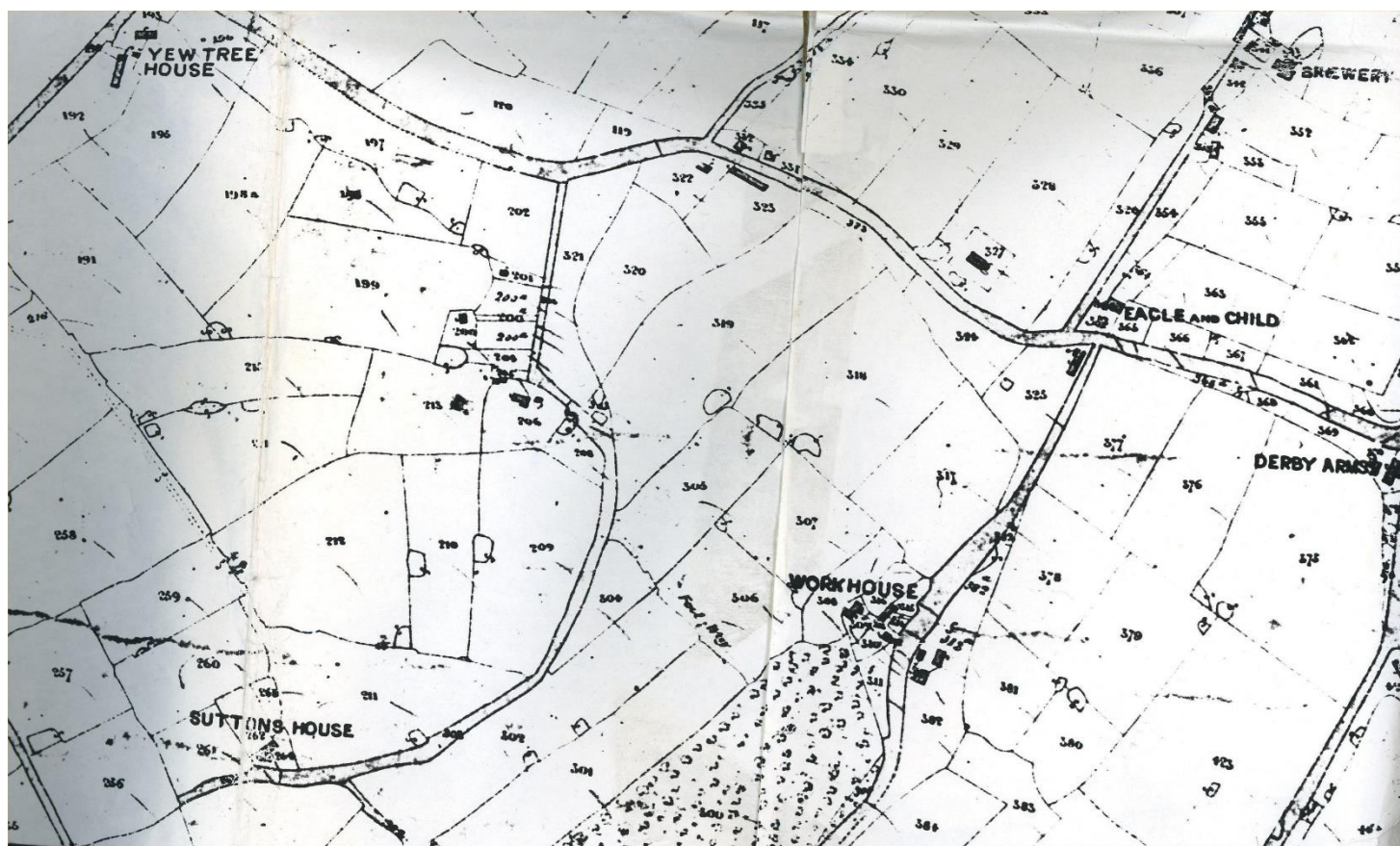
*Cronton workhouse*



Work House

Halewood is a typical example where local townships largely dealt with their own poor. Records show that overseers spent money on outdoor relief, mainly to the sick and unemployed on a short-term basis, and more permanently on orphans and the elderly. Paupers were boarded out for a year at a time in the community, while others received money for board, clothes, shoes, coal and services of a doctor. A copy of the new Act was purchased for 7d in 1722, following which a cottage was rented from Earl of Derby at 6d per year. Most of the overseer's time and expense was spent dealing with the problem of policing the settlement issue. Inevitably, much of what is written about this period reveals the grim face of the poor law administration. Attitudes in the local townships were probably more informal and more sympathetic than those of the hard-pressed overseers of the Liverpool Vestry constantly battling against the huge demand placed upon them. As Janet Hollinshead observed in her study of 18<sup>th</sup>C Halewood,

*'When the Overseers of the Poor could provide Hannah Hitchmough, an elderly lady, with not only her board and clothes, but also with tobacco to smoke, and when they also gathered flowers for a pauper, Samuel Stevenson's funeral, it does suggest that they knew the people concerned and that they cared'.<sup>(11)</sup>*



*Halewood workhouse cottage, Wood Lane (now Hollies road), shown on this Tithe Map of 1843*

In Liverpool it was inevitable that given the expanding size of the town and poor, the impracticalities of the 1723 law would be revealed. Consequently, following an unacceptably high level in the poor rate, outdoor relief was reintroduced as the workhouse could not cope with the numbers. In 1771 a new purpose-built workhouse was opened on the outskirts of the town, high up on Brownlow Hill. Despite several alterations and additions to the building, it soon became inadequate at coping with the rapidly expanding pauper population and the poor health suffered by so many of the inmates. In 1801 it became necessary to erect a Fever Hospital to the south of the main building (it was bigger than all the other Liverpool Hospitals put together) and a smallpox ward was added in 1823.

In Liverpool, where the committee of overseers had evolved into the 'Liverpool Select Vestry' in 1821, a more rigorous implementation of the poor law followed to combat the heavy operating cost. Abuses in relief were investigated; the labour test became more stringent; able-bodied men were put to work building roads, cultivating land, and breaking stones; while

pauper inmates whitewashed cellar dwellings in the town. Meanwhile, the facilities were made even grimmer to discourage high numbers of applicants. Not surprisingly there was a steep drop in expenditure.

Generally, management of the poor law across the country was inefficient and high costs of indoor relief had led to Gilbert's Act in 1782<sup>(12)</sup>, which provided rigid guidelines on how parishes could combine into 'unions'. The Act gave instructions on how to manage a workhouse and together with a recommended set of rules, the aim was to produce standardisation as far as possible. Now the unemployed able-bodied poor would be provided first with outdoor relief and then with employment, while indoor relief in poorhouses was confined to the care of the old, sick, infirm and their dependent children.

The later years of the century saw an economic depression, where during times of extreme hardship emergency measures were taken by parishes rather than expect the unlikely scenario of employers raising wages. The Speenhamland system introduced after 1795 was largely applied in the southern agrarian areas, where wages were brought up to subsistence level by the issue of a weekly dole. Farmers took advantage of this and lowered wages paid to their labourers, knowing that parishes would take the burden of the difference. The economic problems this caused over the following decades, attitudes to the pauper, and the demands for a right to a standardised system of relief, pressured the Government into setting up a Royal Commission in 1832 to investigate the Poor Law.

When the Commissioners concentrated their inquiry on the extra costs paid out by overseers, the replies from the of parish officials in the West Derby Hundred were either unhelpful or curt. Walton, Much Woolton and West Derby, for example, paid no extra money to able-bodied men in their parishes, Toxteth Park and Everton gave little detail in their replies, while Liverpool, Ormskirk and Prescot were more forthcoming, suggesting that demands increased during the winter and relief was largely unnecessary in the vicinity of an expanding prosperous port like Liverpool. The overall conclusion of the Commission was that most of the poor were aged, infirm or widows. In the rural villages further away from the town, handloom weavers were the only major group who required relief while still in full employment, but they were quite literally a dying breed as the shift towards factory production was expanding.<sup>(13)</sup>



*Liverpool Brownlow Hill Workhouse*



## **The New Poor Law**

Following the conclusions of the Commission, the government introduced a Bill which contained most of its recommendations and while there was great opposition to the proposals from many quarters there was too much disunity for it to be effective. Royal Assent was granted on 14 August 1834<sup>(14)</sup> and the Poor Law Amendment Act was placed on the Statute Book.

The new Act minimised the provision of outdoor relief and made confinement in a workhouse the central element of the new system. To qualify for relief, it was not sufficient for the able-bodied to be poor, they actually had to be destitute. The measure of this was their willingness to enter the workhouse, and it was originally planned that this was to be the only provision for relief. Only the truly deserving - in the opinion of the government - would be those 'desiring' to reside in such a repellent institution. To help them in their decision, the surroundings were made as unpleasant as possible as an obvious deterrent to those seeking relief.

Consequently, married couples were separated and children taken from their parents. Overall, inmates were segregated into seven groups according to age and sex; - aged or infirm men or women; able bodied men or women over 16; boys or girls aged 7-15; and children under seven. Each group was assigned its own day rooms, sleeping rooms and exercise yards. They could see each other, but not speak during communal meals or at chapel, and could only meet at infrequent intervals at the discretion of the guardians.

By the terms of the Act, a central administrative body was created - the Poor Law Commission, which in turn ordered that parishes were to be grouped together into poor law unions to provide the finance to build the workhouses. Each union was to be run by professional officers under the jurisdiction of an elected Board of Guardians.

In Liverpool, opposition to the changes was vehement, the Vestry believing they were already operating in the spirit of the Law. Indeed, when Gilbert Henderson was sent to investigate Liverpool on behalf of the Commissioners, he was most impressed with what he saw. For example, he witnessed the thorough investigation each poor relief applicant was subjected to by members of the Vestry. In one morning, he saw 250 cases dealt with, most of whom were refused relief. His report to the Commissioners was a favourable one - his only complaint was that the Thursday 'liberty hours' were being scandalously abused by the paupers. The poor rate was especially looked upon in favourable light by the investigator - the national average in 1832/3 it was 9s 9d, in Liverpool it was only 4s per head.<sup>(15)</sup>

Despite opposition to the New Poor Law in Liverpool, the changes finally took place in March 1841 when the Liverpool Poor Law Union<sup>(16)</sup> was established. The Select Vestry were duly replaced by a Board of Guardians, who planned in early 1842 to reconstruct the Brownlow Hill workhouse at a cost of £25,000 to house 1,800 inmates - a figure that would soon prove to be totally inadequate<sup>(17)</sup>. However, opposition was so vigorous that an Act was passed in June the following year to exempt Liverpool from the New Poor Law Act<sup>(18)</sup> and the Select Vestry were given legal authority to assume the role of the Board of Guardians.

In the surrounding rural areas, 23 parishes, stretching from Ince Blundell in the north, to Garston in the south, combined to form the West Derby Union, one of the largest in the country<sup>(19)</sup>. Formed in 1837, it was to be run by a Board of Guardians, the members of which were elected representatives from each parish. That same year the Poor Law Commissioners despatched its first order to the West Derby Union instructing them that under the terms of the new Act the united parishes should,

*'contribute and be assessed to a common fund for purchasing, building, hiring or providing, altering or enlarging any workhouse or other place for the reception and relief of the poor of such Parishes.'*<sup>(20)</sup>

The Guardians immediately declared that the old parish poor houses, now under their jurisdiction, were totally inadequate to cater for the demands of the new legislation. A search was begun to find a site suitable for the erection of a new workhouse, large enough to provide accommodation for the poor of the entire West Derby Union. Before the end of the decade, the Board had succeeded in purchasing land from Thomas Shaw, lying either side of Mill Lane (Kensington) among the local sandstone quarries and brick-fields.

By 1841, the workhouse was complete and the transfer of inmates from the Old Poor House on Low Hill took place during the summer of that year<sup>(21)</sup>. This was the first occupation of the Mill Road Institution, although it soon suffered a setback when the building caught fire in March 1843, damaging a considerable quantity of clothing and bedding.

No sooner had the occupants moved out of the Old Poor House, than the Liverpool Select Vestry applied in March 1842 to rent the building to alleviate the overcrowding at Brownlow Hill. The rent was payable quarterly at a rate of £80 per year, which seems to have been misappropriated by Mr Dolling, the Overseer of West Derby. A considerable sum considering he probably earned around the same figure each year.<sup>(22)</sup>

The new Mill Road Workhouse of the West Derby Union was barely complete before it was realised that it was already too small. The Guardians soon pressed the new Poor Law Board<sup>(23)</sup> for permission to extend the site. Their calls however, went unheeded until eventually, the Poor Law Board permitted a makeshift measure which entailed the erection of a new chapel and school (on the site later occupied by the Nurses' Home), thereby providing room for additional dormitories in the main block, which formerly housed such facilities. Further alterations were carried out after additional space was created following the Guardians' resolution to send all sick patients to the fever hospital in Netherfield Road. Such fated patients were occupying precious workhouse accommodation.

It was intended that the 'fever sheds' and 'any other spare rooms' were to be used as workshops, 'in which competent persons would be employed in the instruction of the boys in some useful trade or occupation'. The men were not to be left idle either, the Guardians added, 'further, that a quantity of land be taken in the neighbourhood for spade husbandry to employ adult and able-bodied paupers'.<sup>(24)</sup>



Problems caused by the lack of suitable accommodation for the sick came to a head in 1852, when it was decided to build a new hospital fronting West Derby Road (on a site now lying between Home Street and Hygeia Street). It would be known as West Derby Union Workhouse Hospital, arguably the true 'ancestor' of Mill Road Hospital.

No illustrations or views of Mill Road Workhouse (or the Hospital) appear to exist, and nothing survives regarding personal accounts. However, in the early 1860s, the Reverend John Jones, a congregational minister from Kirkdale, who was convinced that 99% of pauperism was due to the temptation of alcohol, set out on a mission to prove his case. In search of evidence, he inevitably toured the three workhouses of the locality; Liverpool (Brownlow Hill), Toxteth (now Sefton General) and West Derby (Mill Road). At last we have a first-hand account of what lay within;

*'We come first of all to the West Derby Union Workhouse. As we pass in through the gate, a building of moderate proportions stands before us. We have seen structures having a far more imposing aspect; but still how unlike it is to the "Parish Poor House" which the poet has revealed to us'.<sup>(25)</sup>*

After comparing what he saw with the image conjured up by Crabbe's description of the rural poor house, he moved inside and again noted the contrast:

*'How different the scene around us! Here we have commodious and amply lit apartments, made cheerful by blazing fires, while the floor, and tile walls, and the furniture, in point of cleanliness, must please the most fastidious, and be found to meet the requirements of the most stringent of sanitary officers.*

*And here, too, are the men and women with their uniform attire, some of them more or less decrepit, forming themselves into a circle around the fire; others more active, standing or moving about; and others darning stockings or sewing a garment.*

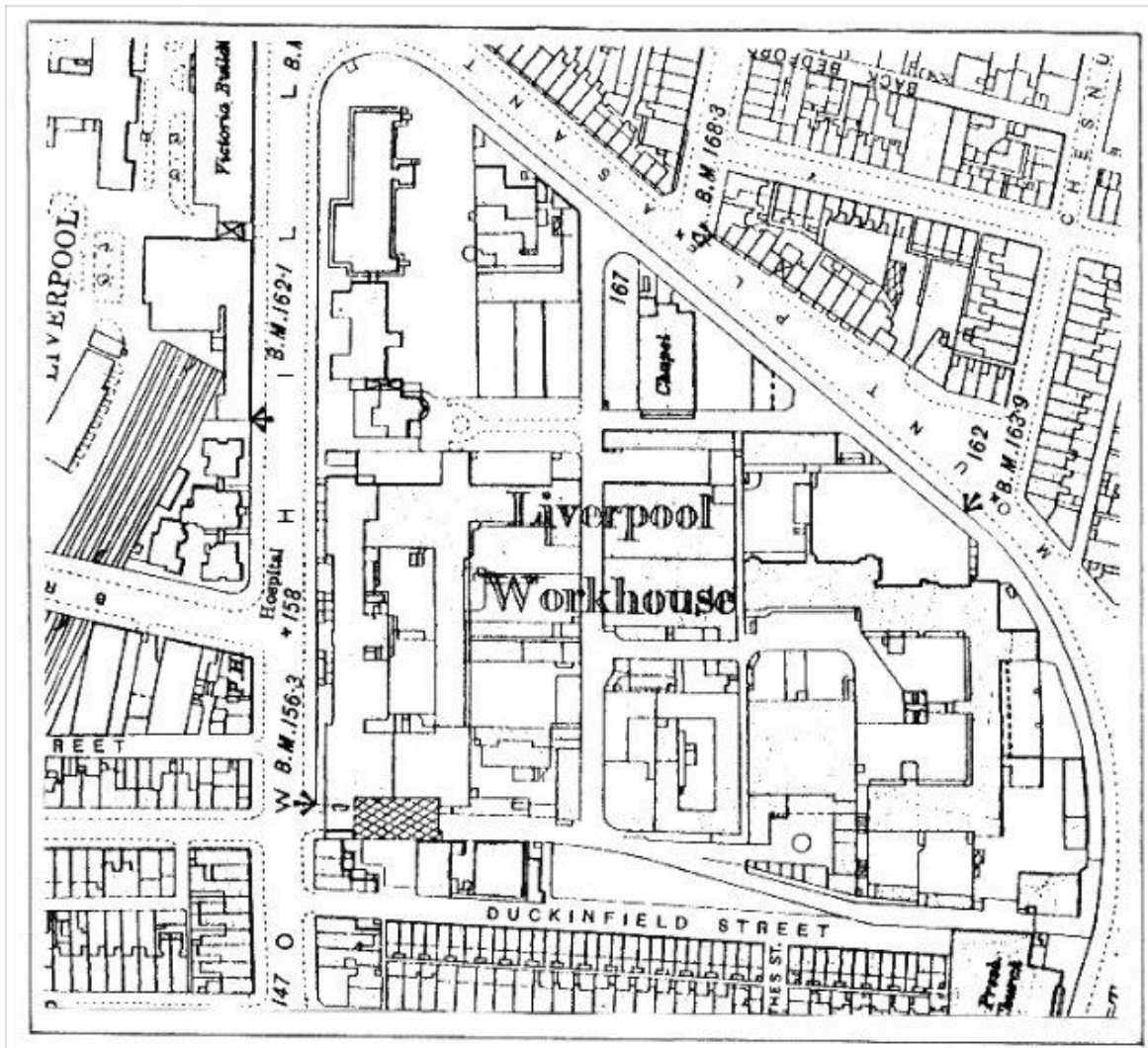
*But here is another class - these are bedridden most of them will probably rise up no more. How feeble does this one look, how wan the other; how distressing the cough of a third; they feel they have come to the workhouse to die, but they seem resigned to their fate and thankful for the care and attention bestowed upon them. But for such a provision they know it would fare badly with them, huddled up as they would be in some corner of a dark cellar on a heap of straw; but here they repose on a comfortable couch, attended to by the nurse, cared for by the doctor ministered by the chaplain, and often cheered by the kind look and word of the governor: Yes, they may well indeed feel thankful that their last days shall pass away under such circumstances, although a pauper's burial and a pauper's grave await them...*

A not too distressing account, compared to contemporary descriptions of the horrors witnessed at the notorious Brownlow Hill workhouse, and far removed from Dickensian imagery. (Especially those scenes described in *Oliver Twist* and his requests for more gruel.)

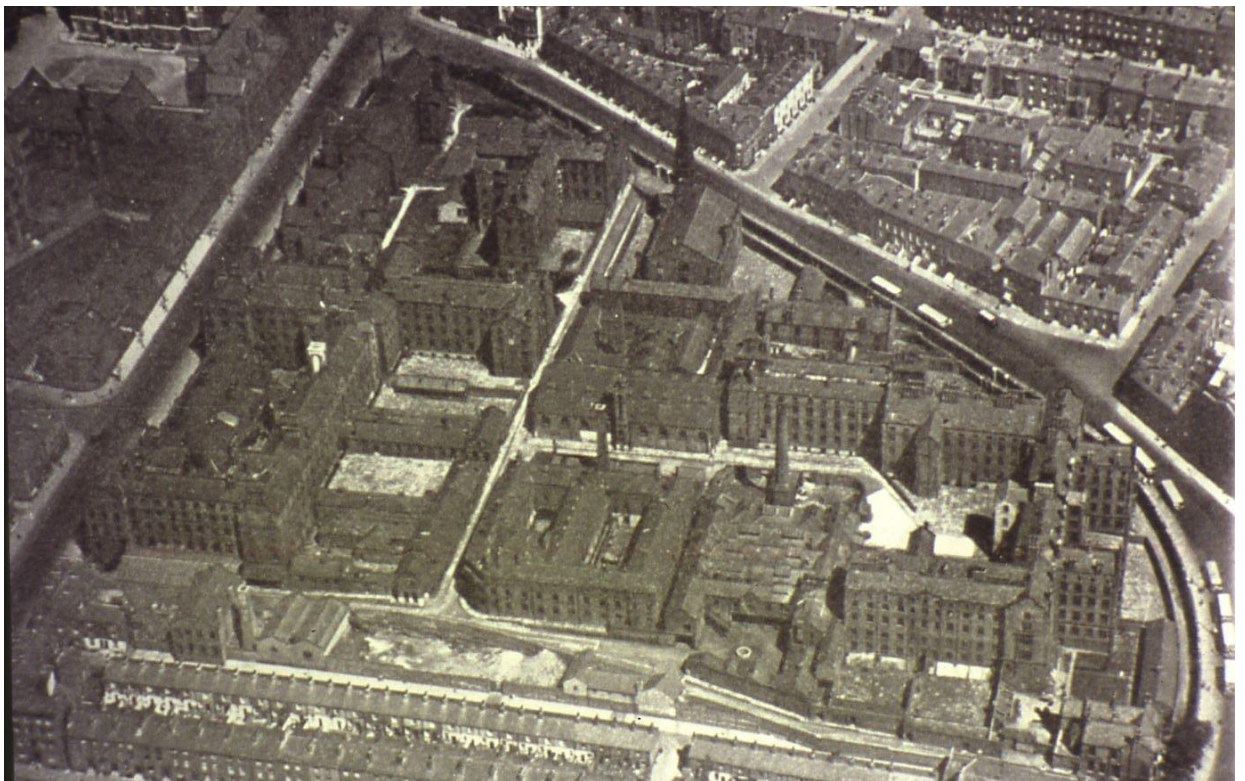
In Brownlow Hill, scores of sick persons in every stage of nearly every known illness (a large proportion of them incurable or very old and entirely helpless) were nursed, if it could be called nursing, by able-bodied pauper women selected from the adult wards of the Workhouse. Seldom of reliable or compassionate character, it is unlikely that any of the 'nurses' had received formal training.

In 1865, Agnes Jones, a Nightingale nurse who tried to improve the nursing at Liverpool Workhouse wrote:

*I am almost distracted between sickness and anxiety and drunkenness. I have one head nurse in great danger. These ex-pauper women whom we are training were paid their wages on Friday, and the next day five came in tips)!... How little I can do!' <sup>(26)</sup>*



(Below: Map of Brownlow Hill - OS 1905)



At Mill Road similar problems were encountered. Several times nurses were dismissed for drunkenness or fighting on the ward. In September 1863 for example, Elizabeth Hamilton, a nurse on the fever ward was finding the horrors of her job too much. The ward was already over capacity and patients were being turned away and sent to the Netherfield Road fever hospital. Temptation proved her undoing and she sought solace in the entire supply of wines and spirits which had been ordered for the patients under her care. Not surprisingly, she was found in an extreme state of drunkenness while on duty, whereupon she was given a month's notice to leave her £18 a year job.<sup>(27)</sup>

Within three years of her arrival in Liverpool, Agnes Jones had worked herself to death, dying from typhoid contracted from the victims under her care. Nevertheless, her work was carried on and Liverpool Select Vestry resolved to adopt her reforms in the Brownlow Hill workhouse.

Florence Nightingale said of her:

*'In less than three years she reduced one of the most disorderly populations in the world to something like Christian discipline. She converted the Liverpool Select Vestry to the conviction, as well as the humanity; of nursing the pauper sick by trained nurses, the first instance of its kind in England'*<sup>(28)</sup>

Close ties had been forged between the Boards and the Health Committee in the fight against the spread of disease. In 1853, the Health Committee of Liverpool contacted the West Derby Board of Guardians, requesting co-operation in taking precautionary measures to prevent the spread of Asiatic Cholera. Local medical officers were to notify the Liverpool Authorities of all cases of Diarrhoea and Cholera in the area and the relieving officers were to report similar instances and filthy housing conditions known to them. Two months later, the Guardians also appointed a Public Vaccinator who would receive 1/6d for every successful case of vaccination.<sup>(29)</sup> At this time, the disease seemed to be largely confined to Liverpool, but due to the close proximity of Mill Road all necessary steps were being taken to prevent it spreading. (By 1854, representatives of the Board were being asked to visit a house in Walton-on-the-Hill to investigate a reported case of Cholera).<sup>(30)</sup>

### Three Unions

It was clear that the West Derby Union was far too large to manage efficiently, therefore Toxteth Park Union was formed on 13<sup>th</sup> May 1857 to lift the increasing burden being placed upon the Mill Road Workhouse. A new workhouse for Toxteth was erected in Smithdown Road which could take 600 paupers plus a further 100 in its new Infirmary (later Sefton General). To further alleviate the cramped conditions at Mill Road, the Guardians placed an advertisement in the local press in May 1862, indicating their desire to secure land of not less than 20 acres, on which they intended to erect a new workhouse. It had been reported that:

*'...the present workhouse has long been inadequate to the requirements of a rapidly' increasing Union... the Guardians have for years been patching and adding to a building which was originally never contemplated to afford accommodation for a Union containing 156,000 inhabitants and provide accommodation for a rapidly increasing number of casual wayfarers which exceeded 4,000 during the last six months..'*<sup>(31)</sup>

Within a couple of months, 37 acres belonging to the Earl of Sefton situated at Walton-on-the-Hill, had been purchased at a cost of just over £11,000. The Guardians had already sold the West Derby Union Hospital on West Derby Road for the same figure and intended to raise a similar sum to cover the costs of the new building by the sale of Mill Road.<sup>(32)</sup>

The first stone of Walton Workhouse was laid on 29th March 1864, by Thomas Haigh, Chairman of the West Derby Union Board of Guardians. The work on the new building (later to become known as Walton Hospital) was expected to take four years.

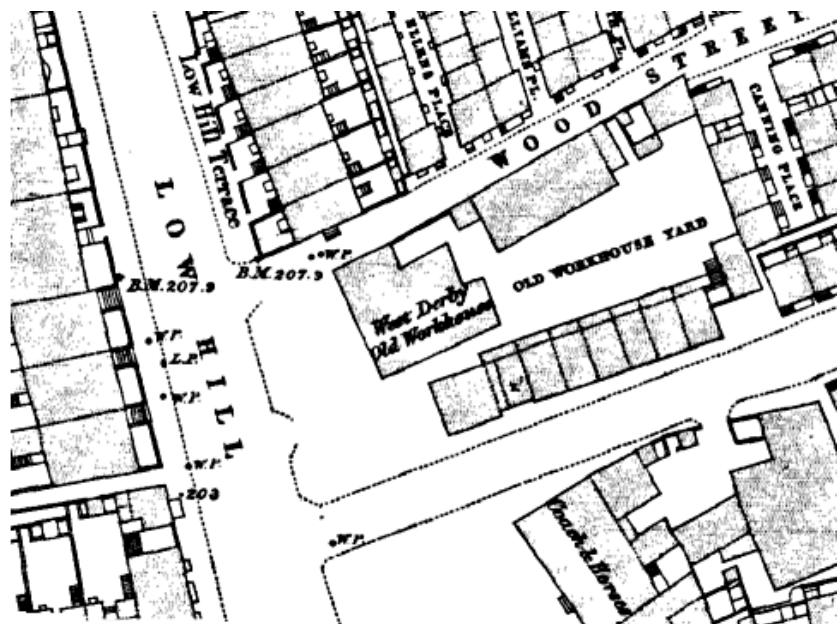
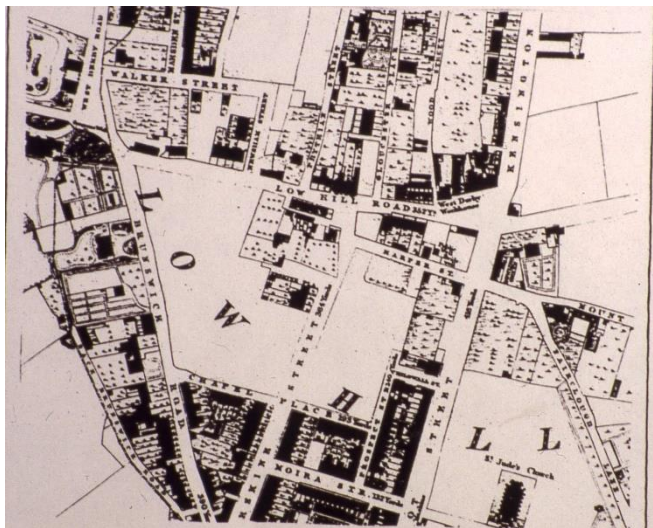


Printed on Stone by W. J. Hooper

Printed on Stone by W. J. Hooper

LOW HILL.

*The West Derby workhouse is the detached building centre right*



## WEST DERBY UNION.

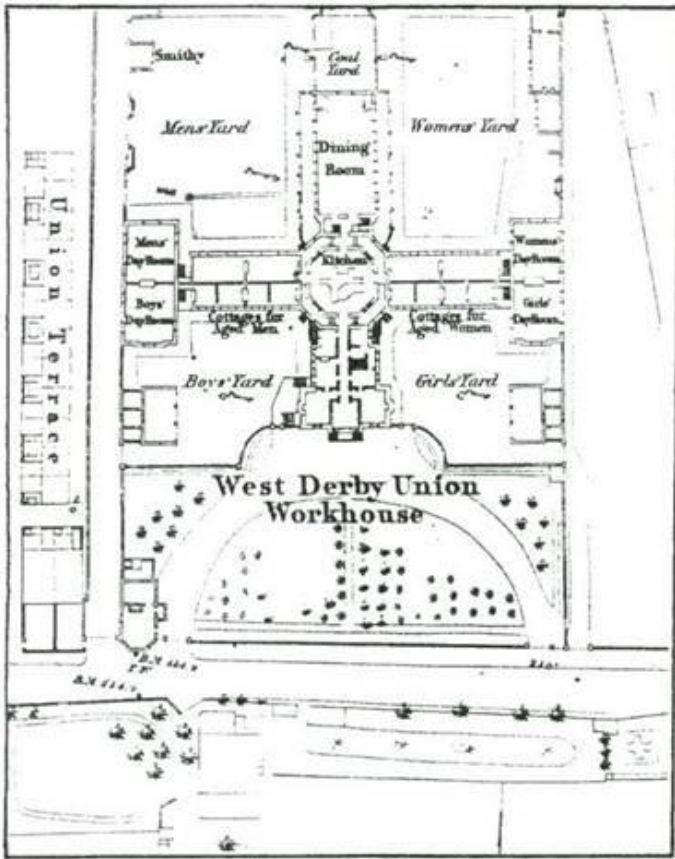


### In Pursuance of an Act

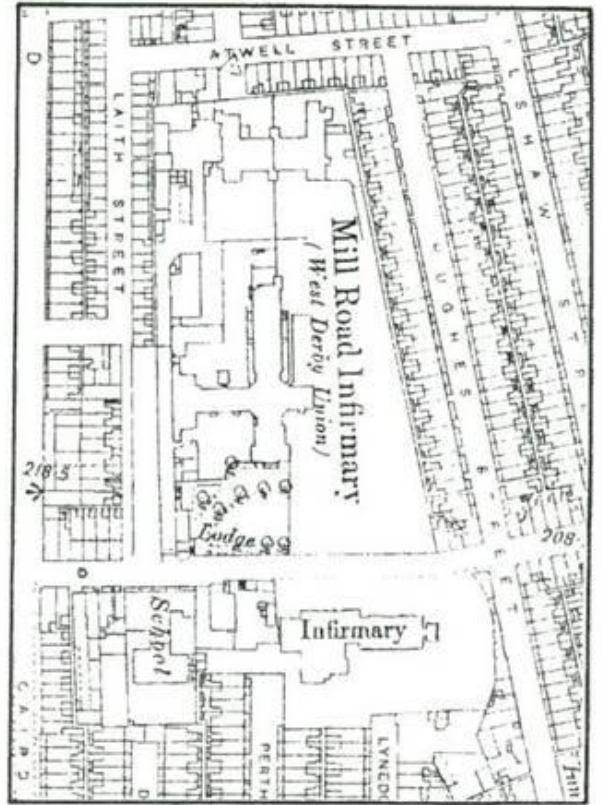
of Parliament passed in the 4th and 5th Years of the Reign of His present Majesty KING WILLIAM THE FOURTH, intituled "An Act for the Amendment and better Administration of the Laws relating to the Poor in England and Wales," WE THE POOR LAW COMMISSIONERS FOR ENGLAND AND WALES, Do hereby Order and Declare, That the Parishes, Townships, and Places, the names of which, and the City, County, or Counties wherein they are situate, are specified in the margin of this Order, together with all Hamlets, Tythings, Liberties, or other Subdivisions, lying within, or belonging or adjacent to, any of the said Parishes, Townships, and Places, shall on the thirty-first day of January instant be, and thenceforth shall remain united for the Administration of the Laws for the relief of the Poor, by the name of THE WEST DERBY UNION, and shall contribute and be assessed to a common fund for purchasing, building, hiring, or providing, altering, or enlarging, any workhouse or other place for the reception and relief of the poor of such Parishes, Townships, and Places, or for the purchase of any lands or tenements under and by virtue of the provisions of the said Act of or for such Union, and for the future upholding and maintaining of such workhouses or places aforesaid, and the payment or allowance of the Officers of such Union, and the providing of utensils and materials for setting the poor on work therein, and for any other expense to be incurred for the common use or benefit, or on the common account of such Parishes, Townships, and Places in the proportion of the several sums hereafter to be ascertained and declared by us the said Poor Law Commissioners to be the annual average expense incurred by each such Parish, Township, or Place for the relief of the poor belonging thereto for the three years ending on the twenty-fifth day of March next preceding the inquiry.

- In the County of Yorkshire of Lancaster.
1. West Derby.
  2. Boole cum Linacre.
  3. Everton.
  4. Fazakerley.
  5. Kirkby.
  6. Kirkdale.
  7. Wainon on the Hill.
  8. Aintree.
  9. Great Crossby.
  10. Little Crossby.
  11. Ince Blunell.
  12. Lakerland.
  13. Lunt.
  14. Netherton.
  15. Orrell and Ford.
  16. Sephton.
  17. Thornton.
  18. Toxteth Park.
  19. Childwall.
  20. Allerton.
  21. Garston.
  22. Wavertree.
  23. Croxson Park.

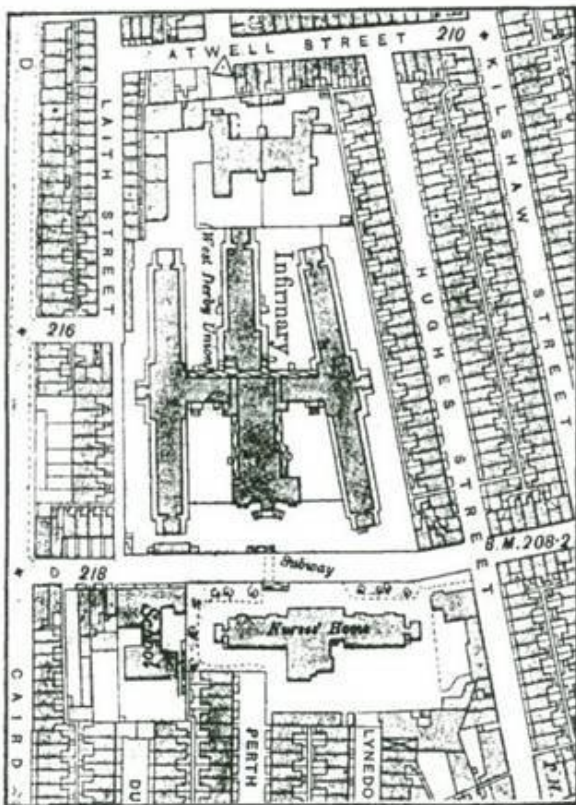
And we do hereby further Order and Declare, that a Board of Guardians of the poor of the said Union, shall be constituted and chosen according to the provisions of the Poor Law Amendment Act, and in manner hereinafter mentioned.



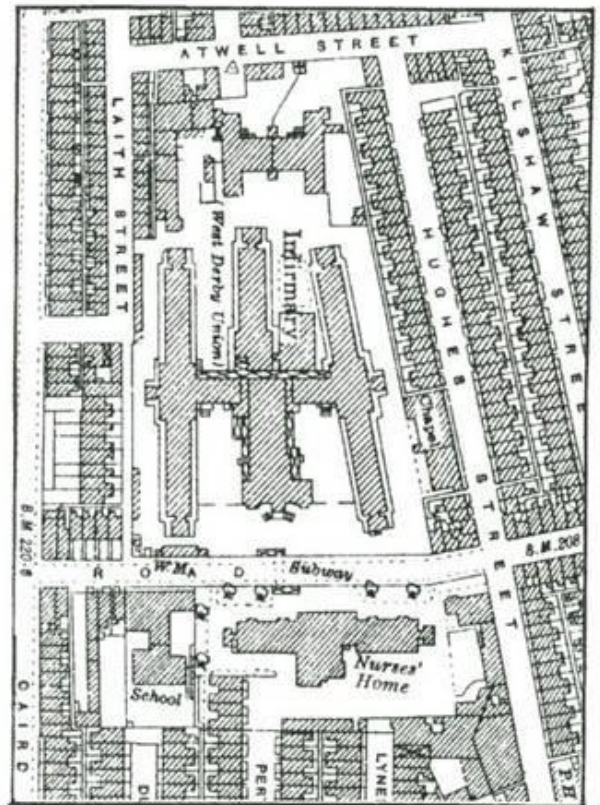
WEST DERBY UNION WORKHOUSE, MILL ROAD  
 SHOWING ORIGINAL CROSS-PLAN DESIGN AND  
 SEGREGATION OF INMATES.  
 (ORDNANCE SURVEY SCALE 5" TO 1 MILE SURVEYED 1848)



THE ORIGINAL WORKHOUSE IN THE  
 PROCESS OF DEMOLITION TO MAKE WAY  
 FOR THE NEW INFIRMARY.  
 (ORDNANCE SURVEY 25" TO 1 MILE  
 SURVEYED 1890-1, PUBLISHED 1893)



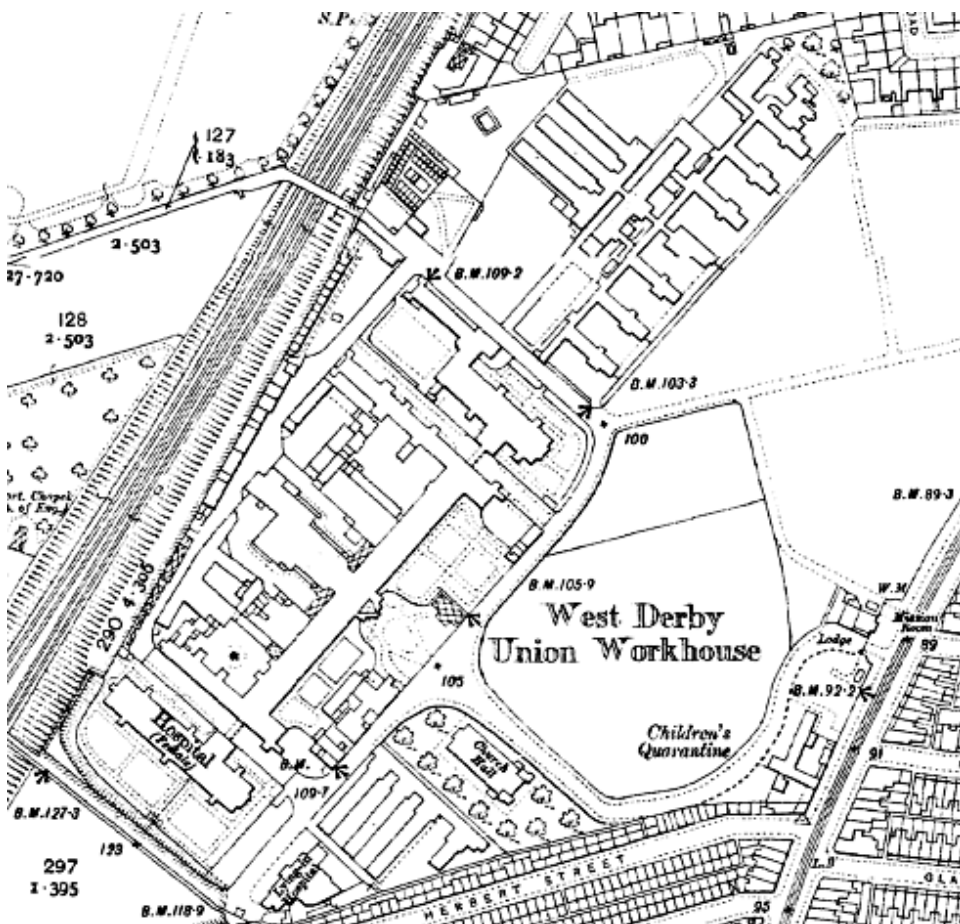
THE NEW MILL ROAD INFIRMARY  
 (FOUNDATION STONE LAID 1891)  
 (ORDNANCE SURVEY SURVEYED 1905  
 PUBLISHED 1908)



MILL ROAD INFIRMARY IN 1927  
 (ORDNANCE SURVEY)



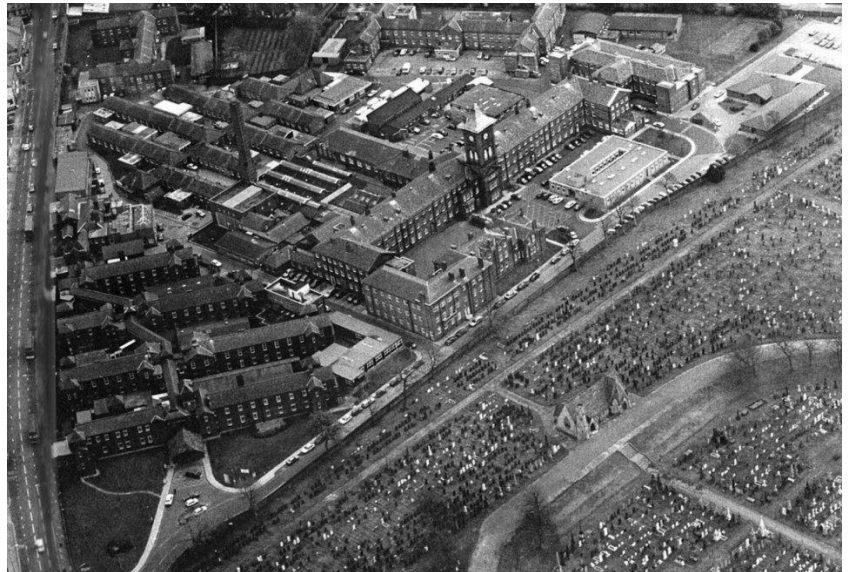
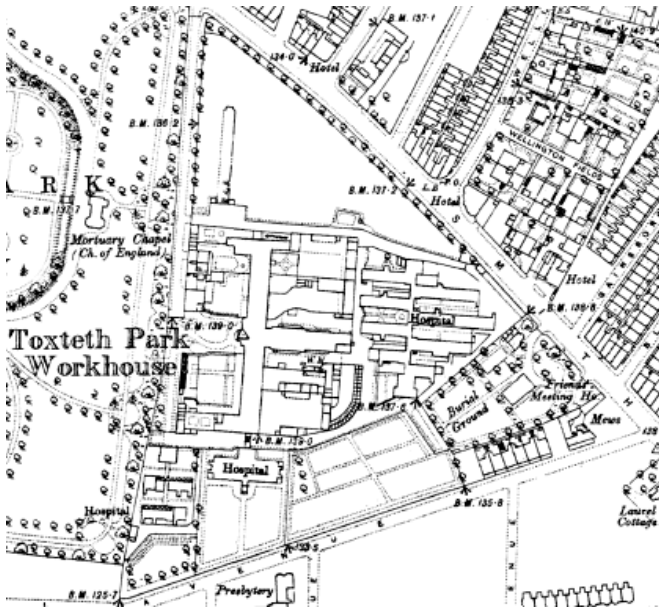
*The Mill Road Infirmary*



*Walton 1906*



*West Derby Union Workhouse (later Walton Hospital)*



*(left) 1893 - Toxteth Park Workhouse (later Sefton General Hospital)*



During October and November of 1867, Mr Crane, an Officer from the Poor Law Board, visited the local workhouses of Liverpool, Toxteth and West Derby, in order to report on their condition. His report on Mill Road Workhouse described the workings shortly before their transfer to Walton,

*'...the workhouse is wholly, insufficient for the wants of the Union. By the removal of the schools and by other means, it has been of the most part converted into a hospital and infirmary. Nevertheless, it is not large enough even for the sick and infirm poor. No detached infirmary seems to have been erected, nor is there any detached fever hospital. Contagious and infectious cases are placed in separate wards in the main building. At present there are 427 cases on the medical list. There is no resident medical officer, but 2 medical officers constantly attend. There are 15 resident nurses with salaries varying from £15-30 per year with rations etc. for each. Four of these act as cost night nurses. The Guardians provide all drugs at about £400 a year.<sup>(33)</sup> They have also appointed a dispenser who is in attendance during the whole of each day. The fever wards especially are too full. Great attention is evidently bestowed on ventilation, which is effectively kept up as far as possible: and the utmost cleanliness prevails throughout the establishment. It is only by such precautions that so large a number of cases have hitherto been congregated with safety in so limited a space.'<sup>(34)</sup>*

And, regarding Walton,

*'I visited the new workhouse which is in an advanced state. It is highly desirable that the new hospitals there should be completed with as little delay as possible, so that the sick may be removed from the old workhouse and placed under the care of a medical officer who should reside in the new workhouse and devote his whole time to the duties of his office'.*

Walton Workhouse was formally opened on 15th April 1868, at a final cost including the land purchase, of £65,000. It had accommodation for 1,000 'inmates' and was almost full by the opening day. The former Mill Road inmates enjoyed a 'good dinner and a half pint of ale each (oranges for the youngsters), and tobacco and snuff for the aged'.

During the afternoon, guests toured the building to the accompaniment of various airs played by the juvenile band of the workhouse. Later that night, dignitaries dined at the Adelphi Hotel where the Chairman of the Guardians praised the Union with an oratory of self-glorification, concluding:

*'No doubt in many of the metropolitan workhouses the poor were harshly and unfairly treated, but in the provinces, workhouses were as a rule, fairly and charitably conducted'<sup>(35)</sup>*

As we have seen in both Brownlow Hill and Mill Road, even before Walton opened it was realised that space would soon be short. Consequently, Mill Road Workhouse, originally due to be sold to help fund the new Walton institution, was reprieved. While the new workhouse was under construction, a programme of alteration was put into operation to turn Mill Road into a workhouse hospital for the sick poor to help prevent the anticipated strain on the hospital wards at Walton. After the transfer of inmates in 1868, the conversion plan was stepped up on the now vacated building.

The period of transition was difficult. Wards had to be opened at Mill Road earlier than expected when smallpox became rife at Walton in 1870. The Board of Guardians issued a directive in January 1871 ordering the Medical Officer to vaccinate all children in the Mill Road workhouse *'...as soon as practicable after admission or birth, and do give to the Master certificates stating the cause why any particular child cannot be vaccinated'*<sup>(36)</sup>

The following week the Guardians took a step further in an attempt to control the spread of infection, when a special sub-committee entitled 'the Smallpox and Infectious Diseases Committee' was formed, which was given full powers to act as they may deem most advisable in the present emergency.<sup>(37)</sup> (The emergency being described as an epidemic of smallpox and

relapsing fever'). Meanwhile, the board found time to send a petition to Parliament objecting to the Bill presently in the Commons which called for the prevention of the removal of poor persons to Ireland. The ramifications for workhouses would be considerable should such legislation be placed on the Statute Book. Greatly affected would be the Liverpool workhouses, which had witnessed a massive influx of Irish since the 1840s, the majority of whom were now consigned to poverty.

Boards of Guardians had the power to send paupers back to the parish from which they came, unless that parish paid for their upkeep in the workhouse of their new abode. Not a penny would be spent on those who did not qualify for relief within that Union. Nor were the Guardians averse to sending paupers abroad to the colonies. Canada was their usual choice. In April 1884, the Board decided that 'the several poor persons...being desirous of emigrating to Canada, the necessary steps to be immediately taken to effect the emigration and that a sum not exceeding £14 .3.0d be expended for each person upon the common fund of the Union...'.<sup>(38)</sup> The oldest of these poor persons was sixteen, and the youngest, a girl aged four and 'a boy just two. It begs the question how children aged two and four, without parents, could 'desire' to sail on a crowded boat halfway across the world into the unknown. This was not an isolated incident; several transportations were underwritten by the West Derby Board before the end of the century, in an effort to alleviate the 'burden' they placed on the Union.

One man in particular, however, was concerned about transportation. Harris P. Cleaver, Clerk to the West Derby Guardians and a man noted for his devotion to his work (his father had been the Clerk before him, from 1847 until his death in 1880), had deep reservations regarding the transportation of such young children. Fearing for their treatment, he travelled to Canada at his own expense to investigate their situation.

So distressed was he at what he observed regarding the condition under which many of the children were living, that upon his return he persuaded the Guardians to discontinue this policy and to find an alternative to keeping the children in the workhouse. A short while later, funding was made available and in the late 1880s the Cottage Homes were opened in Fazakerley to house school children. Liverpool Select Vestry followed suit and shortly afterwards a similar scheme was carried out to erect Olive Mount Children's Homes. The West Derby Union widened their facilities for children when a Children's Convalescent Home was opened in Heswall later to be renamed the Cleaver Sanatorium.

The spectre of incurable disease lay over the workhouse for a greater part of half a century following the opening of Mill Road. Due to widespread squalor, poverty, and poor sanitary conditions, smallpox, cholera and typhoid claimed thousands of victims. Even for those illness that could be treated, medicines were in short supply and cases would be referred to professional vaccinators', who had to provide their own drugs. Even the post of Medical Officer was hardly a position of autonomy. The final word on many decisions frequently lay with the Guardians - while action would rarely be determined until the following Board meeting. Consider the ludicrous situation caused by this procedure when such lay people (none of whom had a medical qualification between them), were required to give authorisation to the M.O. to amputate the foot of a woman named Smith, an inmate of Mill Road Workhouse'.<sup>(39)</sup>

Nevertheless, the latter years of the nineteenth century were a period of great medical progress and together with new attitudes within the nursing profession, foundations were being laid to take care for the sick and poor into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many new institutions, taking advantage of modern developments and techniques, were being opened in Liverpool - such as the Royal Southern (rebuilt in 1872), the Hospital for Women in Shaw Street (1883), the Homeopathic (1884), and the new Royal Infirmary (1890). Workhouse Infirmaries, however, were clearly not at the forefront of such developments, yet change was undoubtedly necessary.

Despite the fact that Mill Road had been reprieved and altered to take on a new roll in the early 1870s, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the building was inadequate, outdated, and above all, unhealthy. There was no alternative. It would have to be condemned. The old building had in the past been adapted where possible but it was generally agreed that they had gone as far as they could along that road and a completely new purpose-built establishment was necessary to provide modern hospital facilities.

The old building was pulled down in its entirety, leaving only the detached Lower Hospital for 'imbeciles' (built in the 1850s) at the rear of the main block close to Atwell Street.<sup>(40)</sup> The sick patients, meanwhile, were transferred to the Test House in Belmont Road, the vagrant workhouse of the West Derby Union (later known as Newsham General Hospital). The foundation stone for the new building was formally laid on 18<sup>th</sup> March 1891.

As work continued into the mid-1890s, Mr Jenner-Fust, the Local Government Board Inspector, told the West Derby Guardians at their weekly meeting in March 1893, that 'the Mill Road Infirmary when quite completed would be one of the best specimens of a workhouse infirmary in the country'.<sup>(41)</sup> 'Workhouse' was the crucial word. The new venture, although a modern building, was still not up to the standard of the voluntary hospitals, and it would be another 50 years before it came anywhere near losing the 'poor relation' tag among its regional counterparts.

Poverty in England throughout the Victorian period was largely equated with immorality, irreligion and intemperance. Furthermore, there was little chance of overturning a poor law which was outdated and based on a profound misconception of the causes of poverty at its introduction. It was ironic that when another local civil servant, Mr Holding commented,

*'...party politics are coming more and more to the one thing - to the idea of social reform - we are getting nearer and nearer every year to the idea that the young and the old who cannot work and cannot keep themselves have a right to be kept by the community...'*<sup>(42)</sup>

he was merely outlining the provision of the Old Poor Law, which had been so ruthlessly cast aside over fifty years earlier.

The initial care of the destitute fell largely on the shoulders of the parish doctor, who worked for a meagre salary in impossible conditions. They could admit serious cases to the Poor-Law hospitals but it was less easy to admit patients to the better equipped voluntary hospitals. Even as late as 1909, the stigma and fear attached to the workhouse infirmary showed no sign of abatement;

*'...the parish doctor is always available. But the poor do not like the parish doctor and they will adopt any device rather than summon him. They dread what they know to be too often the burden of his message: "You must go into the Workhouse Hospital". Of course, we know it is very silly of them to dread the workhouse hospital but that does not alter the fact that they do dread it and that they dread the parish doctor...'*<sup>(43)</sup>

The respectable poor preferred to endure almost any degree of neglect or misery at home rather than be sent to the workhouse.

Dissatisfaction with the Poor Law and disagreement over its objectives again led to the setting up of a Royal Commission in 1905. It concentrated on the relevance of the old Act within a modern urban industrial society, how far charity was funding areas originally covered by the Act, and to what extent new welfare agencies were undermining the provisions of the Poor Law.

The Commission found it impossible to find common ground as a united body, issuing conflicting Majority and Minority Reports in 1909. Both were ignored by the Liberal government, but the Local Government Board responded to them by tightening up its administration, especially regarding indoor relief, while Asquith prophesied, 'You will find that Boards of Guardians will die hard'.

Meanwhile, 'Lloyd George's Ambulance Wagon,' that vast programme of social reform which might eventually make the Poor Law unnecessary, gained momentum and an opportunity to finally bury the 1834 Act was squandered.

*(right) Excavating the foundations for the catholic cathedral while in the throes of demolishing the Workhouse (1931).*

Over the next three decades the Poor Law was gradually dismantled. Already in 1908, the Children's Act had given local authorities new powers to keep under privileged children out of the workhouse. On New Year's Day 1909 old-age pensions were introduced; in the same year labour exchanges were set up to help anyone without work find a job, and in 1911 the National Health Insurance Act was passed which provided state benefit for sickness and maternity. The term 'workhouse' was dropped in 1913 in favour of 'Poor Law Institution' and indoor relief was increasingly confined to the 'helpless poor'; children, old people and the sick.



In the West Derby Union, in an attempt to improve administration and financing of what was now three unions operating in the same city, the West Derby Union was enlarged by its amalgamation with the Select Vestry of Liverpool and the Township of Toxteth Park. This merger formally commenced on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1922 by the terms of the Liverpool Corporation Act passed the previous year. The new authority would operate under the retained name of the West Derby Union. Chamberlain's Local Government Act of 1929 was the death knell for the Poor Law. Unions and their Boards of Guardians were finally swept aside and responsibility for the destitute passed to the new Public Assistance Committees within County and Borough Councils. So began a difficult period of transition in the face of Local Government cuts and stringent economies in Liverpool, where demonstrations and riots against the tough measures occurred as early as 1931.

### **Mike Royden (1999)**



## Footnotes:

NB. For the purpose of this publication I have concentrated on only the key developments at Brownlow Hill which could not be ignored within the local context, as a more particular study of the Liverpool Workhouse by David King was covered at the conference and in the journal.

1. Act of Parl. 43 Eliz.I, c.2.

2. Childwall, Much and Little Woolton, Wavertree, Allerton, Garston, Speke, Halewood, Hale.

3. Act of Parl. 13 & 14 Charles II, c.12 s.21.

4. G. Chandler *Liverpool* (1957) Batsford. p. 382. (from *Liverpool Town Books* 17<sup>th</sup> Nov.1648)

One of the first captains to take emigrant servants was Bryan Blundell who was so moved by their plight that he founded the Bluecoat – the first charity school in Liverpool.

5. *ibid.* (from *Liverpool Town Books* Feb 1656)

6. Act of Parl. 9 George I, c.7,s.4.

7. Liverpool Vestry Books 11<sup>th</sup> April 1732, fo.102v.

8. Oxley,G.W., 'The Permanent Poor in South West Lancashire under the Old Poor Law' *Liverpool and Merseyside* ed. Harris, J.R., (pp.16-49), Frank Cass, London (1969) p.48.

Oxley,G.W., 'The Administration of the Poor Law in the West Derby Hundred of Lancashire 1601-1837', M.A. Thesis, Univ. of Liverpool, (1966) pp.425-427.

9. Royden, M.W. 'The People's Hospital - A History of Mill Road' (1993) Liverpool, p.2,3.

(map and illustration).

10. Oxley, *op.cit.*, Thesis.pp.425-427.

11. Hollinshead, J.E. Halewood Township: A Community in the Early Eighteenth Century' *T.H.S.L.C.* vol.130. (1981) pp.32-34.

12. 22 George III, c.83.

13. Oxley, 'Permanent Poor', *op.cit.* p.30.

14. 4 & 5 William IV, c.76.

15. Midwinter, E.C. 'Liverpool and the New Poor Law' in *Old Liverpool*, Devon, David & Charles (1971). p.74.

16. A misnomer - Liverpool 'Union' was the only union in the country to consist of one parish only - the largest Poor Law unit in the land - by now with 223,000 inhabitants.

17. Midwinter, *op.cit.* p.80.

18. 'An Act for the Administration of the Laws relating to the Poor in the Parish of Liverpool, 10 June 1842.

19. The parishes were: West Derby, Bootle cum Linacre, Everton, Fazakerley, Kirby, Kirkdale, Walton on the Hill, Aintree, Great Crosby, Little Crosby, Ince Blundell, Litherland, Lunt, Netherton, Orrell and Ford, Sefton, Thornton, Toxteth Park, Childwall, Allerton, Garston, Wavertree, Croxteth Park.

20. *'Orders of the Poor Law Commissioners' (1837-1848)*, Township of Toxteth Park Board of Guardians Archives. Liverpool Record Office.

21. Date of completion given as 1844 by such writers as Picton, J.A. (*Memorials*, vol III 875 p.424) is incorrect. A contemporary account gives the date as 1841 - Smith, T. *'Results of the Central Administration of the Poor Laws - Exhibited in some of its workings in the West Derby Union. but especially illustrated by its operation in the parochial affairs of the extensive Townshir of West Derby (1848)'* specifically states the completion as by the summer of 1841. Thomas Smith was a member of the W.D.U. Board of Guardians and a retired Overseer of the Township.

22. Smith, *ibid.* This is a scathing 76 page attack on the shortcomings of the 1834 Act especially regarding the inadequate accounting procedures of the clerks of the New West Derby Union, and Mr Dolling the Overseer, in particular. was accused of the misappropriation of funds.

23. The Commissioners were replaced by the Poor Law Board in 1847, who in turn were superseded by the Local Government Board in 1871.

24. WDU Min. Vol 1, Dec 26th 1849 Liverpool Record Office. (Hereafter WDU Min.)

25. Rev John Jones, (congregational minister, Kirkdale) *'The Slain in Liverpool during 1864 by Drink (including Social. Medical and Criminal Statistics of Drunkenness)'* reprinted from *Liverpool Mercury* (1865). Reverend Jones produced annual reports on the plight of the poor of Liverpool until his death.

26. Bickerton, T.H., *'A Medical History of Liverpool'*. Liverpool, (1936) p.209

27. WDU min Vol 7, 16th Sep 1863. Other wages paid by the Guardians at this time were; Master of the Workhouse £120-1 80 p.a., Matron £40 p.a. plus rations, and School Mistress £30 p.a.

28. Bickerton *op.cit* p.210

29. He was not paid for unsuccessful vaccinations.

30. WDU Min. Vol 2, various; 28th Sep 1853 - 13th Sep 1854.

31. WDU Min. Vol 7, 20th Aug 1862.

32. *ibid.*

33. Many Boards of Guardians would expect doctors to provide their own drugs.

34. *Liverpool Daily Post*, April 1st 1868 (referring to Nov.1867 report)

35. *Liverpool Daily Post*, April 16th 1868

36. WDU Min. Vol. 9, 25 Jan 1871

37. *ibid.* 1 Feb 1871

38. WDU Min. Vol.18, 30 Apr 1884.

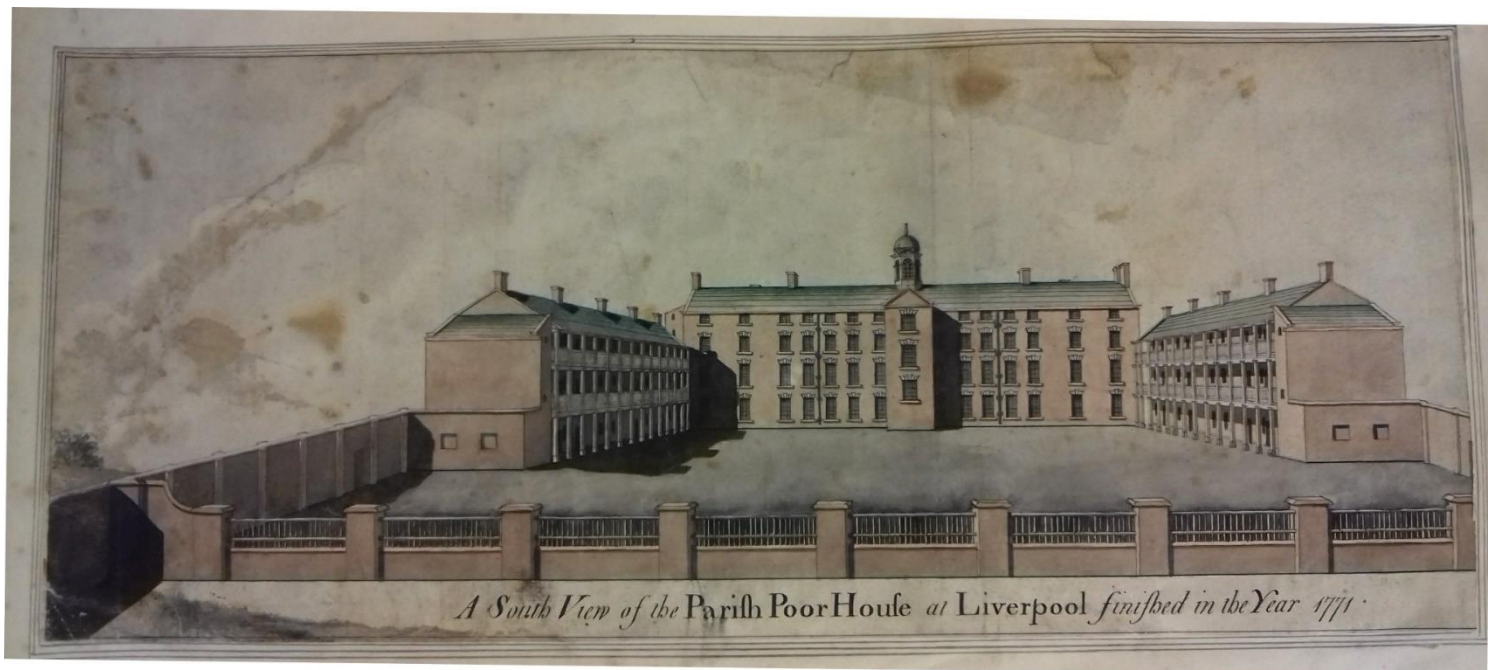
39. WDU Min. Vol. 10, 17 Jan 1872.

40. The Lower Hospital was destroyed in the Blitz of 1941.

41. Liverpool Daily Post, 23 March 1893

42. *Liverpool Review*, 9 Feb 1889, (Mr. Holding was the Master of the West Derby Union new Fazakerley Cottage Home for workhouse children).

43. 'The Sixpenny Doctor by a Town Parson', Liverpool Daily Post, 27th Dec 1909.



*A South View of the Parish Poor House at Liverpool finished in the Year 1771.*