

Watercress Beds Website

The Dyson family and the workhouse

Teacher's background

When the Dyson family left West Ham Union Workhouse, their young son George was sorry. He had always had enough to eat there, and the teacher was kind. His baby brother Walter had been born in the workhouse infirmary - George had been allowed to visit his mother and the new baby. The worst things about living in the workhouse was only seeing his parents on Sundays. Now the family was returning to their Essex village, as the job their father had been promised in Walthamstow had only lasted a few weeks. The children's grandfather had a good job as a farm bailiff at Stambourne Hall, a local manor house and farm, and was able to get work for his son to tide him and his wife and children over until they were ready to try their luck in London again.

In the 1890s there was no unemployment pay and the only safety net for those whose friends and family could not help was still the workhouse. It was two generations since the Union Workhouse system had been set up with a remit to make life inside them so miserable that people would do anything rather than seek their shelter. Half a century on, the regimes were a little less harsh. It was now generally accepted that the elderly, the infirm and orphaned children should be cared for rather than blamed.

West Ham Union Workhouse



In Walthamstow and Leyton, the new union of local parishes, run by its Board of Guardians, had built the West Ham Union Workhouse. Work began in 1834, but it was to take until 1840 to transfer the inmates from the Vestry House near St Mary's Church to the new premises.

The new workhouse, in Leyton, was architect designed and well and expensively built in brick. It was designed to accommodate 500 people.

But events over-ran the area and its workhouse. The plans of the 1830s had not included the huge increase in population that was to take place in the area. And the pressure on workhouse services became even more intense – the number of inmates doubled in the ten years between 1895 and 1905.

In 1901, there were 2,091 people living in the workhouse, including 333 children. By this date the children had proper teaching, either in local schools or in a designated school within the workhouse. And things were beginning to change – in the 1860s a report by a group of doctors had brought about improvements in the care given to the ill and disabled. A change in the rules meant that boards had more discretion about allowing out relief to the old and the sick. At around the same time there began to be organised groups of workhouse visitors who pressed for better conditions, particularly for the elderly. And at the end of the century, women and working class people began to be elected to the local boards.

George Lansbury and Will Crooks, who had himself spent time in a workhouse as a boy, were elected to the board in Poplar. They set about improving conditions drastically, bringing in much more generous provisions for outdoor relief, unlimited tea, sugar and tobacco for elderly residents, and better clothes. They advocated bringing in a system whereby rate payers in the wealthier parts of London would subsidise the workhouses in the poorer areas – not a suggestion that gained favour in Belgravia.

Workhouse occupations

Many of the inmates of the workhouse were too old or too ill to work. At the time of the 1867 inspection, there were only three occupants of the ward for able-bodied men – and all of them had a disability of some kind.

Some effort was made to find occupations for those who were well and of working age. For men, this included working in “the field” – this was essentially a kitchen garden, where vegetables and fruit for the household were grown. There was also a water pumping system that needed people to work it. And, for those for whom nothing better could be found, there was oakum to pick and stones to break. Oakum was old rope, which was unpicked by hand so that it would be remade.

Women as well as men were expected to work for their keep – but, in West Ham as elsewhere, many of them were occupied as carers for other inmates, or as cleaners and helpers in the kitchen. Depending on how the workhouse was run, some of these tasks were not necessarily disagreeable. But for those who offended, picking oakum, which was hard and resulted in raw and cut hands, was always there as a threat

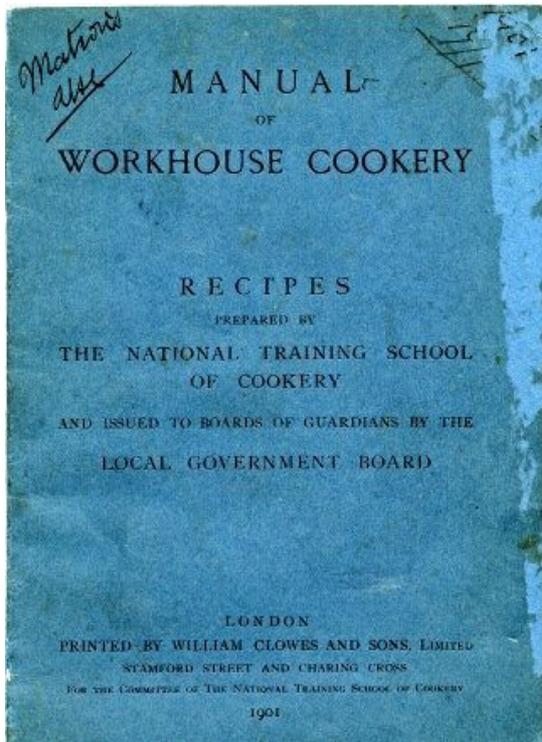
Workhouse Education

In theory, all children in the workhouse were supposed to be given some kind of education. However, this could vary hugely.

In an inspection of 1867, the visiting committee commended the master and matron for their “zealous kindness”, but made a series of recommendations about how the accommodation could be improved. In particular they criticised the “pitiable condition of the pauper boys” who were “dressed in the usual workhouse suits of corduroy, with untied boots and unkempt hair”. They spent most of every day in the same room, and were not sent to the local schools, the reason given being that these were full. Instead, an 80-year-old pauper “read them” twice a day. The inspectors were concerned about what would happen to the boys – “some effort should be made to break the chain of idleness and poverty”.

By the 1890s, most workhouse children were getting proper schooling. In some places they were sent out to schools roundabout; in others, there was a school for them in the workhouse itself. Even in the 1830s, the Guardians had usually been keen, at least in theory, to provide children with an opportunity of escaping poverty and of earning their own living.

Workhouse Food



The food to be served in workhouses was always regulated and the amounts and kinds of food specified.

In the 1850s, children under nine in the West Ham Union workhouse were entitled each day to: 4 oz bread and half a pint of milk for breakfast; 4 oz meat, 8 oz potatoes and 10 oz of greens (usually cabbage) for dinner every day except Friday when they had 10 oz pudding (this would have been steamed suet pudding); and 4 oz bread, $\frac{1}{4}$ oz butter and half a pint of milk for supper. The diet, although monotonous, was adequate, and indeed better than many poorer children would be likely to have had at home.

In most parts of the country, adults had bread and gruel for breakfast, with slightly more variety for dinner – possibilities

included broth and meat pudding. Quantities were specified to the nearest quarter ounce, and the inmate had the right to have their food weighed in front of them if there was any dispute.

On the face of it, the food does not sound too bad. However, in some places the master or mistress of the workhouse would collude with suppliers to send poor quality or sometimes adulterated food for the inmates, allowing extra money to be divided between master and supplier. Some inmates would complain, and, once the system of visitors came in, there were more opportunities for outsiders to see the food and talk to inmates about what they were being given.

In 1901 a Workhouse Manual containing suggested recipes for the whole country was issued. The recommendations are plain, but include such favourites as shepherd's pie, Cornish pasties, jam roly poly and an assortment of soups and pies.

By the turn of the twentieth century, at West Ham there was a variety of local charities and kindly people who provided treats for both the children and the elderly in the workhouse, particularly at Christmas – local papers included reports of meals of roast beef, plum pudding and beer, and summer outings for the children. The judicially enforced misery was lifting slightly.

The rules surrounding mealtimes were still strict, however. Men and women still ate in separate dining rooms, generally in rows all facing the same way, and in enforced silence. A number of photographs of the 1890s record cleanliness, tidiness and joylessness.

Workhouse clothes

When you were admitted to the workhouse, you had to hand in your own clothes, which were cleaned and stored away to be returned when you left. New arrivals had a bath and had their hair cut short in case of headlice.

All inmates had to wear the workhouse uniform, which was chosen for its durability. The clothes were made of the cheapest and toughest fabrics, and were neither fashionable nor becoming. Anyone choosing to leave the workhouse could do so, but had to give notice in order to return their uniform and reclaim their own clothes.

As the nineteenth century went on, in most workhouses a few kindnesses were allowed to the elderly, who were given extra clothes, such as a cloak, shawl or scarf, to keep them warm in winter.

Workhouse rules



Rules were very strict, partly designed to keep order, and partly, at least in the early years, designed to be punitive. Any infringement was usually punished with 24 hours on bread and water. Serious matters were reported to the courts.

Families were kept apart, meeting only at chapel. Small children under the age of seven stayed with their mothers, but over that age the boys went with the men and the girls with the women. At West Ham, men and women had separate buildings, including dining rooms, so separated families were unlikely to meet by chance.

Later in the century, in houses where there was enough space, married couples over the age of sixty could request a private bedroom.

The terminology of the workhouse - and the time

Some of the language used by the Victorians, especially that relating to illness and disability, needs explaining to modern children.

Anyone with a physical disability was generally referred to as being “crippled” or a “cripple”. This was not intended to be derogatory – it was merely a descriptive term at this time. There are, for example, reports in the local press of the day about a committee that was set up to raise funds for an annual “Cripples’ Tea Party”, which then took place and was reported on.

Mental disability had its own terminology. A child or adult with what would now be termed mild special needs was “feeble minded”, while someone with more severe disabilities was an “imbecile”. These, again, were regarded as being specific descriptive terms about a person’s abilities.

Children's information

George Dyson was born in Walthamstow in 1889. His father, Henry, came from a village in Essex where he, and his father before him, had been farm labourers. And Henry's first job was on the land. But there were not many jobs in the neighbourhood, so he took the decision to move away - he was still only sixteen when he left his family and his birthplace.

Henry found a labouring job at Chapel End, which was then still a village; there were farms and market gardens in the area, and he probably worked at one of these. Soon Henry met a local girl, Emma Rance, and they were married at St John's Church, Walthamstow in 1883 - the bride and groom were both nineteen years old. Soon the first of their nine children was born. The eldest, another Henry, was soon followed by Edith and then George - and, for a few years, all went well.

But by the 1890s Walthamstow was changing. Landowners were selling their farmland for development, and the workers were no longer needed. And Henry, like other farm labourers, lost his job. By now he and Emma had six children, and were expecting a seventh. After months of searching, and trying at one stage to make his living from a market stall, Henry admitted defeat. They had no money coming in, and could not pay the rent. They had run out of options.

The Dyson family had to apply to go into the West Ham Union Workhouse. At least there, they would all be fed. But they did not tell their neighbours where they were going. The family had to split up for the time being - the eldest son, Henry, now working as a carman, went to stay with an uncle and aunt in Leyton, and the eldest daughter, Edith, with Emma's mother and stepfather in Walthamstow. Whatever possessions had not been sold or pawned were stored with relatives too.

Emma, Henry, George and the younger children had to go through the process of applying for admission for "relief". They had to go their separate ways once in the workhouse, parting even with their own clothes as they became "pauper inmates" and were given a uniform with a badge to show the clothes were not theirs.

George was enrolled in the school that was part of the workhouse, given a corduroy suit and a rough shirt and a cap - his uniform for as long as he was in the "Union School". He had been dreading what would happen when he got there. But, for him, it was not so very bad. There was a good, hot dinner on offer - it was the first time he had felt full for weeks. There were plenty of other children for company, and there were several good teachers. He began to feel at home.

A few weeks later, Emma gave birth to another son, Walter. George was allowed to visit his mother and the baby - but there had been babies before, and he wasn't that interested.

George never quite discovered how it came about that they were all leaving London. Someone must have told his Dyson grandparents in Essex what was going on. And grandfather Dyson, now a farm bailiff at Sambourne, had been able to call in some favours and arrange a labouring job for his son at another farm a few miles away. George had visited his grandparents before – and wasn't sure if he was going to like life in the countryside. Edith felt differently – she had been lonely with just her grandparents for company, but she was old enough to leave school now, and was determined to work for her own living. Would her parents let her stay in London?



Task:

Imagine that you are either Edith Dyson, aged 13, or George Dyson, aged 11. Using the information above, write your diary for the week your parents tell you the family is splitting up. If you are Edith, you are going to stay with your grandparents, and won't see your parents again until they get out of the workhouse. If you are George, you are going to a boarding school that is part of the workhouse.