

# GRESSENHALL WORKHOUSE

## An Historical Introduction

The buildings that now house **Roots of Norfolk** and the **Archaeology and Environment Division** formerly served as a House of Industry and then the Union Workhouse for the parishes of the Mitford and Launditch Union.

### The House of Industry

In the second half of the 18th century, owing to the growth of the population and other economic and social changes, the problem of poverty increased. Under the 'old poor law', responsibility for the relief of the poor fell on individual parishes, but the increasing scale of the problem encouraged the local authorities to consider new approaches.

In the autumn of 1774 a group of magistrates in the 'hundreds' of Mitford and Launditch proposed that all of the parishes in those districts should combine to build one large 'house of industry' where the helpless could be properly looked after and those capable of work could be profitably employed. This, they argued, would guarantee more generous and humane treatment for the poor at a lower cost to the ratepayers. Opposition from those who argued that the house of industry would be like a prison and would lead to discontent among the poor, and from the inhabitants of East Dereham (thought to be the most likely site for the house of industry), was to no avail. The Act of Parliament establishing the Mitford and Launditch Incorporation was passed in May 1775.

In the spring of 1776 the directors of the incorporation purchased Chapel Farm, an estate of almost 62 acres in Gressenhall, and plans for the house of industry were approved. Construction began in the early summer and was completed in just over a year. The total expenditure of over £15,000 was financed by loans raised on the security of the poor rates.

The size and proportions of the buildings are testimony to the ideals of their promoters. They consisted of the large central block, H-shaped in plan, together with the two extensive wings which form an L-shaped extension to the east. Two western wings were planned but never built. The house of industry proved to be less profitable than had been hoped and this contributed to the decision to obtain a second Act of Parliament in 1801, under which East Dereham left the incorporation and new arrangements were made for meeting the expenses of the house.

The first governor of Gressenhall House of Industry was James Moore, formerly owner of the George Inn at Dereham. His wife was the matron. The number of

inmates averaged nearly 450 between 1777 and 1794 and reached 670, the highest total ever, in 1801. Married couples were able to live together in the 'cottages' or apartments into which the two eastern wings were divided. 'Women of bad character', however, were kept apart and had to wear distinctive clothing later referred to (when abolished in 1839) as 'ignominious dress'. The sick were looked after in the building which had formerly been Chapel Farm.

In the summer months the inmates started work at 6am, stopped for breakfast for half an hour at 8am, and then worked until noon. After a break of an hour and a half for dinner and recreation, work continued until supper time at 6pm. They were expected to be in bed by 9pm. In the winter the day began an hour later, the lunch break was shorter, and bedtime was an hour earlier. Some inmates worked in the fields. Others were employed in textile manufacturing, the men combing wool, dressing hemp and flax, and weaving the yarn to produce clothing and other articles for use in the house. Spinning was done by women, some of the woollen yarn being sold for weaving into worsted in Norwich.

In the 1800s the manufacture of sacks became the most significant source of employment and money earner. Many of the women and children worked at domestic tasks and the children received some education. In accordance with the provisions of the Act of 1775 adult inmates were allowed to retain a proportion of their earnings and children were given small rewards for their work.

Before 1836 the inmates' diet was comparatively generous, with regular meals, abundant vegetables, bread made with flour from a windmill erected in 1781 and beer which was brewed on the premises. Their beds were of flocks, which must have been more comfortable than the straw mattresses used later. Discipline seems to have been relatively relaxed, and the inmates were allowed to go out on Sundays after the morning service in the dining hall.

## The Workhouse

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 introduced the 'new poor law' under which parishes throughout England and Wales were formed into poor law unions controlled by boards of guardians. In the union workhouses inmates were 'classified' or divided into separate categories, a process which entailed the separation of husbands and wives. Conditions had to be sufficiently uninviting to act as a 'test' by deterring all but the utterly destitute from seeking admission. The work of the guardians was supervised by the Poor Law Commission whose local representatives, the assistant poor law commissioners, made regular visits to the workhouses.

In May 1836, following the dissolution of the incorporation, the Mitford and Launditch Poor Law Union was formed, covering a slightly larger area than its predecessor. Work had begun on alterations and additions to the buildings at

Gressenhall in the autumn of 1835 and continued through 1836. It was inadequately supervised by a clerk of the works who was alleged to have been a habitual drunkard and the bill, at over £4,000, was higher than expected. The appearance of the workhouse, however, had been transformed. There was now a high boundary wall, with other internal dividing walls creating a series of separate yards.

The married people's 'cottages' in the eastern wings had been replaced by dormitories and day rooms and a well-appointed board room had been created. The workhouse inmates were 'classified' without incident in the autumn of 1836, in the presence of four policemen. Dr James Kay, the assistant poor law commissioner who supervised the changes, seems to have had more difficulties with the guardians, some of whom disliked the new system. Their opposition, however, rapidly petered out as its effects in reducing the poor rates and changing the attitudes of the poor became apparent.

The immediate effect of the new regime at Gressenhall was a fall in the average number of inmates. During the 'hungry forties' numbers rose again, but after 1850 the workhouse, with room for 560, was often less than half full. Those admitted were largely the old, sick, physically and mentally disabled, unmarried mothers and deserted women, and orphaned or illegitimate children. There was also a shifting population of 'casuals' or tramps. The staff included the master and matron, a porter and assistant matron and a schoolmaster and schoolmistress, together with a non-resident chaplain and medical officer.

On the whole, Gressenhall workhouse was well served by its masters in the 1800s and was spared the excesses of punitive zeal and corruption which sometimes occurred elsewhere. Nevertheless, life for the inmates was hard and monotonous. Like their predecessors in the house of industry, they had to wear workhouse dress, which was drab and unflattering. Unmarried mothers were still distinguished, if more subtly than before, by being made to wear a 'jacket' made of the same material as the other workhouse clothes. This practice, which earned them the nickname of 'jacket women', continued until 1866.

The daily routine and hours of work were similar to those in the house of industry in the 1700s, but the inmates now received no payment for their work, except for a few who were rewarded for particular responsibilities with small gratuities. The sack factory had gone and the farmland was leased to a private tenant. The women worked in the kitchens, the infirmary, the laundry and at domestic tasks generally. Old men worked in the gardens. There were now very few able bodied men in the workhouse except for the casuals.

For the first few years of the new system casuals were made to break stones, pump water and cart gravel. In 1854, these tasks were replaced by oakum picking, which was particularly disliked.

It was in the treatment of children that the new system appears in a rather better light. The workhouse schools at Gressenhall were large and, by the standards of the time, progressive. Some of the boys were taught shoemaking and tailoring and between 1851 and 1874 most received some vocational training on an 'industrial farm' of 8 acres adjoining the workhouse. Girls were taught needlework and knitting. By the end of the 1800s the number of children in the workhouse had fallen considerably and they were sent to neighbouring village schools.

The inmates' diet after 1836 was meagre and monotonous. Meals were eaten in silence in the dining hall. The ingredients were now purchased from contractors (the windmill having been sold and removed in 1837), apart from the vegetables obtained from the workhouse garden and the industrial farm. In 1856 the children's diet was improved and towards the end of the 1800s that of the adults was as well, though without becoming anything other than minimal. The one culinary indulgence was on Christmas Day, when the inmates sat down to a special dinner of roast beef and plum pudding. Initially, the able-bodied men and the unmarried mothers were excluded but later in the 1800s this particularly vindictive prohibition seems to have been dropped.

Discipline in the union workhouse was strict. Confinement in a 'separate room' for periods up to 12 hours on a diet of bread and water was the normal punishment for minor offences. The 'refractory cell' which is now open to the public was created in 1836 on the instructions of Dr Kay and originally had a heavy iron door with gratings.

Further alterations and additions were made at Gressenhall on several occasions after 1835-6. In 1853, the building now called Cherry Tree Cottage was erected to provide accommodation for aged married couples - the first relaxation in the policy of segregation of the sexes. The chapel was erected with funds raised by private subscription and opened on 2nd December 1868.

In 1870-1, aware of a national campaign to improve the treatment of the sick in workhouses, the guardians decided that the various sick wards in different parts of the buildings should be concentrated in the south eastern wing, which became the infirmary. The erection of a separate fever ward and other new buildings raised the total expenditure to nearly £1,800.

Following pressure from poor law inspectors, there was a final phase of building in 1895-1902, involving improvements in the infirmary and kitchens, constructed of a proper system of drains, provision of a hot water supply and the building of steam laundry. These changes, which cost a total of £3,650, were made piecemeal and in the face of opposition from some guardians who resented spending 'such a large sum of money on such a trumpery old place'.

Although the initial harshness of the new poor law had softened considerably by the turn of the century, the workhouse was still hated and feared by the poor. In 1897 the Dereham and Fakenham Times carried a story about a disabled man in Dereham who had committed suicide rather than go to Gressenhall. When the Boards of Guardians were dissolved following an Act of Parliament passed in 1929, the changes were more nominal than real. In 1930 responsibility for the buildings, now known as the Gressenhall Poor Law Institution, passed to Norfolk County Council and a 'guardians committee' was created to superintend them. During the 1920s and 1930s the casual wards were much frequented by men 'on the tramp' from workhouse to workhouse, looking for casual or seasonal employment.

## Recent History

The passage of the National Assistance Act in 1948 finally brought an end to the poor law. The main buildings at Gressenhall continued to provide accommodation for old people until 1974 while the former casual wards offered emergency accommodation for homeless families. In order to provide a slightly more cheerful environment lawns and flower beds were laid out and shrubs were planted in what had formerly been gravelled exercise yards.

In 1975, the entire site was transferred to the then Norfolk Museums Service and the following year the **Norfolk Rural Life Museum** was opened, thereby offering the public access, not only to a range of displays on aspects of life and work in rural Norfolk over the last 200 years, but also to one of the most interesting historic buildings in the county.

Between 1998 and 2001 the museum underwent a £3.5 million re-development. The workhouse buildings were repaired and restored ensuring their survival into the 21st century. The new displays told the story of the workhouse and its inmates in depth for the first time, giving them the prominence within the museum that they deserved.

## Exploring Gressenhall Workhouse

**Two rooms to left of Main Hall.** These were the workhouse master and matron's quarters. There was a sitting room and a dining room on the ground floor. Upstairs were three bedrooms.

**The Engine Room.** These were the kitchens and stores. This part of the building originally had two storeys, but the first floor was removed, probably in 1902, and a new roof (with glass louvres, recently removed) constructed.

**Main and Back Halls.** The Main Hall with its 'Game of Life' display used to be the workhouse dining hall. The Back Hall occupies an area which used to be the north yard. The boiler house which provided the workhouse with hot water used to stand at the north end of the yard.

**Norfolk Art.** From 1836 onwards this room was the Board Room where the guardians held their meetings. Before the alterations of 1835-6, it was the workhouse laundry.

**The Workhouse Experience.** In 1930 these rooms provided accommodation for men, as they had probably done from 1836 onwards. The punishment cell dated from 1836. The men exercised in the yard behind. On the other side of the wall dividing the yard is the laundry building. Before the alterations of 1835-6 the whole of this wing was divided into 'cottages' for married people.

**The Motorcycle Room.** This area was occupied by the workhouse shoemaker and tailor. Most of this part of the building dates from the alterations of 1835-6, before which there was just a single storey corridor connecting the central block with the eastern wings.

**The Georgian Room.** In 1930 this was the day nursery but until the 1890s it served as the boys' schoolroom. Before the alterations of 1835-6 there were probably three separate 'cottages' for married people here.

**Mardlers' Rest Café.** This was erected in 1871 as a fever ward or 'itch' ward, for inmates with infectious diseases.

**Porter's Lodge.** Porter's Lodge next to the gateway was built in the late 19th century, replacing an earlier porter's lodge, which dated from 1835-6. It was here that new arrivals to the workhouse were received and made to have a bath. The porter also had quarters here.

**The front courtyard.** From 1835-6 onwards the gravelled area was completely surrounded by high walls. There is a well under the manhole cover near the front of the main building, above which there used to be a pump house.

**Education Area.** In 1930 these buildings were occupied by male and female 'casuals'. At the turn of the century they provided accommodation for the 'better class' of adult inmates who were allowed a slightly greater degree of freedom. The Early Years Centre probably dates from 1871 and the rest of the complex from 1835-6.

**Village Row.** Most of the row dates from 1835-6, but some sections were added later. Part of it was used as the unmarried mothers' ward in the 1840s. The present schoolroom may have been the girls', and later the infants', schoolroom. In the 20th century, the rest of the row consisted of wards for the male 'casuals'.

**Cherry Tree Cottage.** This small building was built in 1853 as a ward for respectable elderly married couples. The eastern end (the present parlour) became the master's office in the 1870s.

**The Chapel.** This was designed by R.M. Phipson and erected in 1868.

**Outside the walls.** There were gardens. The hollow beside the adventure playground, in which there was a pond in the 19th century, is probably where the clay was dug to make bricks for the building in 1776-7. The orchard was the workhouse burial ground and the small building next to it was the mortuary. Union Farm, to the south, is the original Chapel Farm.

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of Norfolk  
at  
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