

Clophill through the years

The Dreaded Workhouse

Since Elizabethan times there have been laws (known as the Old Poor Laws) requiring parishes to supply relief to parishioners who were destitute.

There were two types of relief, outdoor relief and indoor relief. With outdoor relief the poor lived in their own homes and were given either money or food and clothes. In contrast, recipients of indoor relief were required to enter a workhouse or poorhouse where they could be fed and clothed.

The law required each parish to elect two Overseers of the Poor. The post holders were unpaid and acted under the supervision of local JPs.

Their duties included setting the Poor Rate and collecting it from property owners (rate payers). They then used the money to relieve the poor by giving them either money or food or admitting them to a suitable institution (Indoor relief).

The Deserving Poor, who were unable to work due to infirmity, injury or old age, would be taken into the local almshouse or the parish workhouse. The ill would be admitted to the hospital and orphans would be taken into an orphanage if available.

The Undeserving Poor, who were fit for work but wouldn't, would be taken into the workhouse where they would be set to work on hard tasks such as breaking stones or picking oakum. Oakum-picking was the teasing out of fibres from old ropes and was very hard on the fingers. The loose fibres were then sold to ship-builders for caulking or packing the joints of timbers in wooden vessels. This treatment was to encourage them back to paid employment.

In Clophill, according to Mary Phillips¹, "*the old workhouse stood next to the house which up till some thirty years ago was the New Inn.*" (The New Inn was at 120 High Street.)

In 1777 a government report, "Abstracts of the Returns Made by the Overseers of the Poor", counted twenty paupers in the Clophill Workhouse.

In 1832 a Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws found that the old system was badly and expensively run and so the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed in 1834 (known as the New Poor Law). The Act was intended to impose both order and conformity and reduce the costs of poor relief. Parishes were grouped together in Unions and a central workhouse was built to serve the union.

The Cedars in Dunstable Street, Ampthill, was built as the Ampthill Union Workhouse in 1836 to house the 469 paupers from 19 parishes, including Clophill. The architect was James Clephane who was also the architect of the new Wrest Park House built during the same period. The censuses



You can see the old workhouse from the car park at the Oliver street Surgery in Ampthill

¹ Mary Phillips. "The Clophill Story" 1988 p 91

show that there were less than a hundred inmates until 1911 when the number rose to 147, possibly because the Woburn workhouse was closed and its inmates moved to Ampthill. Why such an oversized workhouse was built is not known.

With the new act, outdoor relief was stopped and the destitute had to enter the workhouse to get relief. It was felt that outdoor relief was abused by the able bodied.

People entered the workhouse for many reasons including old age, illness, extreme poverty, pregnancy and, in the case of children, becoming orphaned.

Husbands, wives and older children were separated as soon as they entered the workhouse and lived in

separate areas. The Undeserving Poor (the idlers who wouldn't work) were kept away from the Deserving Poor as it was thought that they would corrupt them.

The standard of living was kept below that of the poorest independent labourer to encourage the able bodied to leave and start work. The intention was that only the truly destitute would seek relief.

The stopping of Outdoor Relief was widely opposed and led to riots, including one in the Ampthill area in May 1835.

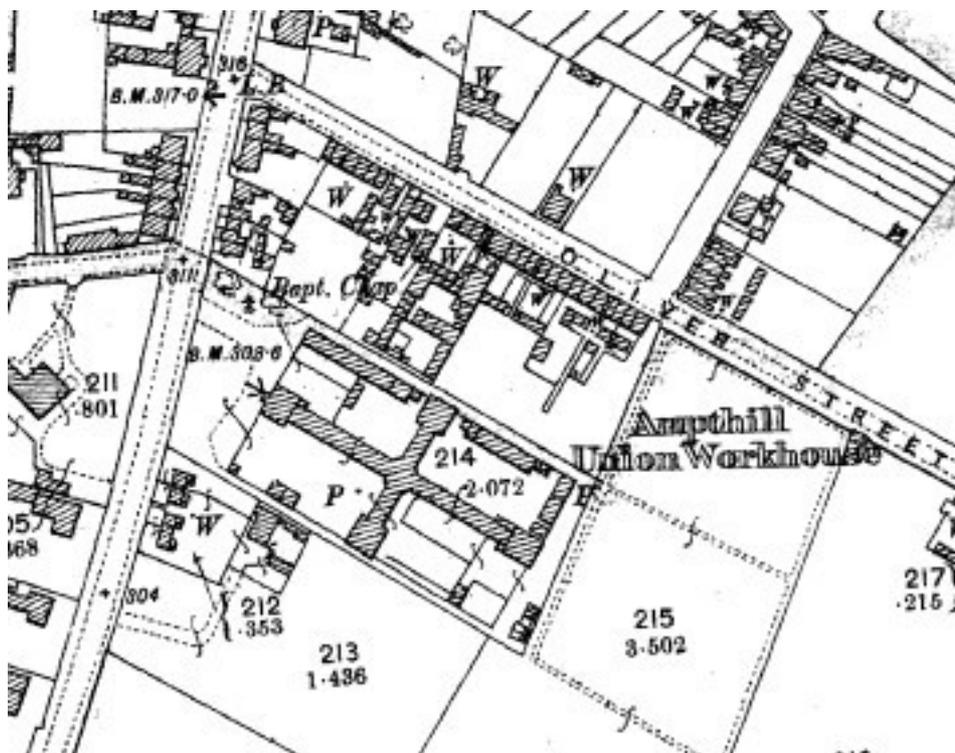
Although the Workhouse was feared it did provide better accommodation than most agricultural labourers' cottages and a slightly better diet but still very basic and monotonous (gruel). The inmates received free health care and the children were found work, often apprenticeships.

For example, the following appears in the Ampthill Union records for 14th September 1871

“David GUDGIN lately an inmate of the Workhouse of the Ampthill Union, a poor child of the parish of Clophill, aged 13 years, apprenticed to George TUCKLEY of Lane Head near Wolverhampton, co. Stafford, lock manufacturer, for the term of 8 years. Premium - the said child being provided with an outfit. The father of the above named apprentice has deserted him and his mother is dead.”

Tracing his history in the censuses it can be seen that in 1861 he lived with his parents and four older siblings at 54 Back street, Clophill. In 1871 he was a pauper inmate at Ampthill Union workhouse. Having taken up the apprenticeship, in 1881, aged 22, he is boarding at Lane Head and his occupation is given as Locksmith. In 1891 he is married with three children and is still a locksmith. By 1901, his family has increased to six children and one of his sons also has the occupation of lock maker. In the last census of 1911 he has seven living children (one died) most of them working in the lock smith industry.

So for David Gudgin (Gudgeon) going to the workhouse changed his life for the better.



The 1901 OS map showing the cruciform plan of the Ampthill Union workhouse