The Emsworth Poorhouse

The Poorhouse in North Street was built in 1776, on a piece of ground given by Thomas Panton, the Lord of the Manor. The building still exists, converted into a row of white-painted cottages near the North Street entrance to St. James's Church. Mrs Jewell in her memoirs remarks on the deep sloping roof at the back:

> The doors were fastened with wooden latches raised by a bobbin, like those in the story of Red Ridinghood when the wolf says "Pull the bobbin and the latch will go up". The [...] owner says that the front room of No. 20 was the Board Room and that it had a spiral staircase in the corner to reach the upper stories. He found the door thickly studied with iron nails and it had a small square opening at the top, probably this was the door of the dark cell used for imprisonment of refractory tramps.

In 1772 an Act was passed authorising parishes to provide houses in which the poor could be maintained. A statutory system for the maintenance of the poor had been in existence since the reign of Elizabeth I. The dissolution of the monasteries in the reign of Henry VIII had left the poor and destitute with no regular means of support, and various attempts had been made to replace the part played by the church by Acts such as that passed in 1530, directing Justices of the Peace to licence poor, aged and impotent persons to beg within a certain area, and another Act of 1536 providing for the maintenance of the poor by the 'voluntary and charitable alms of good Christian people'. Perhaps too few good Christian people were willing to provide alms: early in the reign of Elizabeth I power was given to the Justices to tax or commit to prison those who would not contribute for the relief of the poor, and, later in the reign, official Overseers of the Poor were appointed to take over the task of caring for paupers. The Overseers were to be a Church Warden plus 'four substantial men' of each parish, charged with the double duty of levying the Poor Rate, and buying material to provide work for the unemployed.

The Poor Law was strictly enforced, and, to an extent, it worked well, especially in small rural communities with not too many resident paupers. Until the 1834 Poor Law Reform Act, poor families were not compelled to enter the parish poorhouse, but could be given 'Out Relief'. Mrs Jewell remembered that, in Emsworth,

> My old gardener, who would have been far above ninety, remembered coming to the poorhouse for a weekly 1/6d. because his mother had more than 6 children. This was a special allowance granted in such cases. A working man's wage as a farm labourer was probably 10/- a week, and the cost of a large loaf of bread was 1/10d.

However, the regular levying of the Poor Rate could become a great burden to individual parishes, especially in times of high unemployment and high food prices. Walter Butler, in his *Topographical Account of the Hundred of Bosmere in Hampshire, comprising the Parishes of Havant, Warblington and Hayling,* published in 1817, writes in a somewhat aggrieved tone of the heavy burden of supporting the poor on the parish rate 'according to the number of children, their wants, infirmities and age', estimating that the annual expense for Havant was nearly £1,700, 'being ten rates at £168 each'. He felt that this 'heavy expenditure might be lessened, if the paupers were properly employed'.

In the parish of Warblington, the poor were 'properly employed', because as Walter Butler points out, in the Emsworth poorhouse the labour of the poor was farmed. An Agreement signed on 14th September 1795 stated that William Young, Baker and Grocer of Emsworth,

> ... at the Vestry or Public Meeting of the Parishioners of the said Parish of Warblington at the Parish Church assembled upon the usual Notice thereof first given the said William Young did for the Consideration hereinafter mentioned Contract and agree to and with the above named Churchwardens and Overseers and their Successors at his own Costs and Charges to supply such of the Poor Persons as should be lawfully entitled to Relief and Maintenance from the said Parish and who from time to time by the direction of the said Churchwardens and Overseers or their Successors any or either of them may reside in the Poorhouse used for the Parish with good wholesome and a sufficient Quantity of Meat Drink Cloathing (sic) Fuel and Washing Which are to be the like Nature Quantity and Quality which the persons resident in the said Poorhouse have each of late been usually supplied with for and during the Term of Three Years ..,

In return for such provisions

> ... William Young his Executors or Administrators shall take unto himself or themselves the benefit of the said Poor People's Work and Labour during the said Term who shall so reside in the Poorhouse BUT the said Churchwardens and Overseers doth agree not to take from the said Poorhouse any Child or Children who may be capable of working at the Weaving business (which is now and for some time past hath been carried on in the said Poorhouse) so as to injure the said William Young from the service of such Child Unless he she or they may be desirous of leaving the said Poorhouse or any thing may offer which the said Churchwardens and Overseers may think to the advantage of placing the said Child or children Out in the World.

This arrangement for farming the labour of the poor was not as heartless as it might seem, and would undoubtedly have been popular with the ratepayers in the parishes by which it was adopted. The Agreement made with William Young makes strict provisions for inspections by the Churchwardens and Overseers to ensure that standards were kept up in the provision of food and clothing for the residents of the Poorhouse. The diet was far from luxurious: adults had three hot meat dinners, one soup dinner, two cold meat dinners, and one bread and cheese dinner. Breakfast consisted of bread and butter for the adults and gruel for the children, while supper was more bread and cheese and beer. As far as clothing was concerned, the Churchwardens and Overseers had to supply each person entering the poorhouse with 'the first usual suit of clothing'.

> Viz: for every Man and Boy Three Shirts, two pair of Stockings, one Pair of Breeches, one Hat, one Waistcoat and two round Frocks, One Pair of Shoes and Buckles. And for every Women or Girl Three Shifts, Two Petticoats, Two Pair of Stockings, One Pair Stays [?obscured by stain on document], one Jacket, One Gown, One Pair Shoes, Two Caps and One Hat or Bonnet ...

This was the standard that William Young was expected to keep up for however long each inmate resided in the Poorhouse. It is difficult to assess how much profit the 'farmer' could

have made from the labour or the poor in Emsworth. In March 1814, the poorhouse contained 5 men, 7 women, 10 boys and girls. According to Walter Butler,

> The men in mild weather, being old and infirm, picked oakham [oakum]; the women are employed in needle work and household affairs: boys ten years of age work in the sail manufactory, those under that age go to the parish school.

This parish school, opened on 25th June 1812 'by the zeal of the inhabitants', is one proof that the people of Emsworth were in no way ungenerous in their provision for the poor. The school was under the control of the Guardians of the Poor, and was run on Doctor Bell's System, whereby one master or mistress could teach a large number of children, the older children, or monitors, passing on their own skills to the younger ones. The school occupied workshops adjoining the poorhouse, and was divided into two apartments for boys and girls. Children were able to attend from the age of five until they were twelve – except for the poorhouse boys, who left at ten years old. The children were taught English, writing and accounts.

The end came for the Emsworth Poorhouse after the passing of the Poor Law Reform Act of 1834. This Act put the responsibility for the relief of the poor on to Unions of parishes rather than individual parishes: Emsworth became part of the Union which consisted of Havant, Hayling and Warblington, and when the Union workhouse in West Street, Havant, was extended, the Emsworth Poorhouse was no longer needed.

Christine Normand