

THE HUNDRED PARISHES SOCIETY

www.hundredparishes.org.uk

In these strange times we have seen people unable to attend their place of work. Many have been supported by a furlough scheme. Over the years, governments have taken various steps to care for the poor and those unable to work.

The Act for the Relief of the Poor of 1601 made parishes legally responsible for parishioners who could not work. Most assistance was given as “outdoor relief”, meaning financial help but with people able to remain in their own homes.

The Workhouse Test Act of 1723 obliged anyone seeking relief to enter a workhouse operated by the parish. Several of these buildings have survived including those at Ashdon, Clavering, Finchingfield, Newport and Stanstead Abbots.

Under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 individual parishes were grouped together in a Poor Law Union which was responsible for constructing and operating a central “Union” workhouse for the larger area. Many survive and have been re-purposed.

Great Dunmow’s Union workhouse has changed very little in appearance since it was built in 1838 at a cost of £8,000 to house 350 inmates. One of the architects, George Gilbert Scott was a prolific workhouse designer who later designed the Albert Memorial and St Pancras Station.

The Union workhouse at Buntingford was built in 1836 to house 160 people from 16 surrounding parishes. It closed in 1933 and was subsequently converted to private houses and apartments.

Linton built its workhouse in 1837 in Symonds Lane to accommodate 230 inmates. Today it is a retirement home.

Saffron Walden’s workhouse, built in 1836 for 340 inmates, became a hospital and is now apartments.

Life in the workhouse was hard; families were split, husbands separated from wives and parents from their children - a stark contrast to today’s benefits systems.

Ken McDonald, Secretary.

Photos:

Buntingford’s former Union workhouse

Great Dunmow’s former Union workhouse

Linton’s former Union workhouse

Ashdon’s former parish workhouse

Clavering’s former parish workhouse

Finchingfield’s former parish workhouse

Stanstead Abbott’s former parish workhouse