

Faringdon Workhouse.

Andrew Edgington 1973

On the site in Ferndale Street where some houses are at present being constructed (now Brackendale sheltered accommodation), there used to stand the Faringdon Workhouse. Many will remember the rather grim building which stood there until fairly recently. This is a brief sketch of its history in the 19th century.

In 1800 the Faringdon Poor House Committee met for the first time to discuss the prospects of 'either hiring or purchasing a house for the maintenance and employment of the Poor'. The Committee resolved to erect a Workhouse in Ferndale Street (then called Back Street) and the six nominated Guardians of the Poor were asked to borrow £1500 for the purpose.

Unfortunately, information concerning the actual construction of the Workhouse is not available, but the Committee's minute books covering the period from 1835 onwards do exist, and there are enough details to form a clear picture of what the place was like at the time.

The Workhouse was built to accommodate, according to the records, 400 persons of both sexes. In 1847, however, there were only 241 inmates. It contained many rooms or 'wards'. There were separate dormitories for men, women, boys and girls, and all had barred windows to prevent anything being removed out of or taken into the wards, (it had been found that inmates would beg for food or money from passers-by, and the Governors considered this to be intolerable). There was a receiving room, strong room, dining room, meat room and a separate washroom with a lean-to scullery. By 1850 a bake house was built and there was a small hospital after 1870 (this had been extended by 1880, and in 1888 eight fever cases were admitted to it from outside the Workhouse, since it was, at the time, the only establishment in Faringdon which could take such cases. It was not until 1892 that the Cottage Hospital, Coxwell Road, was opened) All internal walls were painted 'drab'.

Outside the house, but within the eight-foot wall, which surrounded it, were two separate yards. One was for the able-bodied, and contained stone, which was broken in order to carry out repairs. The other was used by the children and aged paupers, and contained a small mill 'for the dressing, spinning and winding of hemp.'

The staff of the Workhouse comprised a governor, matron, teacher (chosen from among the inmates), porter and also a mistress in charge of the spinning. A full-time clerk and a chaplain (the vicar of Faringdon Parish) were also on the payroll.

Discipline, as laid down by a Rulebook, which the Poor Law Commission sent to Faringdon in 1835, was maintained rigorously. In one meeting in 1837 it was resolved 'that on a second admission of paupers of disorderly conduct they should be set to hard work and to the performance of those menial offices which are the most unpleasant and laborious'. Also paupers 'of a refractory nature' were sometimes placed on bread and water diets.

Conditions for the paupers tended to improve as time went on. Children were allowed toys, picture books, and adults were given books and newspapers after 1890.

In the same year all inmates were permitted to attend the Faringdon Sports on Whit Monday, and from 1888 onwards, the Faringdon Chemist gave a 'limelight show' each Christmas. Around this time the young boys in the Workhouse were regularly allowed out to play football or cricket against the members of the National and British schools in Faringdon.

In general the life of the inmates was intended to be most unpleasant. The Poor Law system was devised to deter people with severe financial problems from claiming relief. The Victorian age was one in which it was felt that anyone who was prepared to work hard would be able to earn a comfortable living. It took a long time for people to realise that the typical inmates of Workhouses were simply not able to earn a reasonable living. The aged, the very young and the physically and mentally handicapped obviously could not survive without assistance even if they wanted to, and, if their families did not look after them, they had no choice but to enter the Workhouses.

However, for all its ills, the Poor Law system laid down an administrative basis upon which later systems for the provision of local government, hospital and medical and educational services were built.

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