

The Walthamstow Workhouses

In the first half of the 18th century members of the Vestry committee of the Parish of St Mary the Virgin in Walthamstow were increasingly concerned about the rising outdoor relief costs of maintaining the elderly, sick and deserving poor people in the Parish. They were aware that a number of other Parishes had tried to resolve the problem by putting their poor people into a Parish owned and run Workhouse. The benefit to the Parish was that by doing this they could control and minimize the costs of maintaining the paupers.

The Hoe Street Workhouse Experiment

At a Vestry committee in 1725 it was agreed to rent a house in Hoe Street with a yard, orchard and the other appurtenances, including; a barn, stable, and cow-shed from Joseph Schooling to be used as a Workhouse. This was at a cost of £14 per year for three years. They also had an option for a further three years rental and agreed to pay him £1 to insure against any loss or damage by fire during the rental period.

The Workhouse opened in 1726 . Thomas King and his wife were appointed as the Governor and Governess of at a salary of 5 shillings a week. In addition the Vestry committee agreed to pay the sum of 1 shilling per week for Richard Jordan(Thomas King's grandson) to live there and to act as a clerk.

The Rectory Road Workhouse



As this experiment was successful it made economic sense to build their own Workhouse and in 1730, a purpose-built workhouse was erected on an acre of Church Common purchased for £6. The building, a simple two-storey design with eight rooms accommodating 30-40 inmates, cost £343.12s.3d.

Over the entrance to the Workhouse is carved a

quotation from the bible (II Thessalonians 3:10) that reflects the attitude of the Vestry

committee members who built the Workhouse. It says: *'If any would not work neither should he eat'*.

The Workhouse Furnishings

An Inventory of the goods and Chattels Belonging to the parish of St. Mary, Walthamstow, in the workhouse of the said parish taken this 25th day of March, 1747.

In the Vestry room

An Iron grate, two Tables, two benches and one print.

In the front kitchen,

One Iron Grate, fire shovel, poker and two pairs of tongs, an Iron fender, frying pan, tramils, four tables, seven forms, one chair, two small shelves, one box iron and stand, two heaters, two pewter dishes, three plates ditto and a warming pan.

In the Back Kitchen,

Twenty-one Earthen pans, two braspotts and one Iron pot, three saucepans in small sizes, sixteen trenchers, three dozen of wooden spoons, one chest, two dressers and two shelves, an Iron beef fork and spit, two pails, two washtubs and one form.

In the Cellar,

Two beer stands, one pickling tub and one brass cock. In the Brewhouse, a Coper, two washing forms, six wheels and a cinder sieve,

In the little Room,

A pair of iron grates and fender, a Dresser, three shelves, a small cupboard, one pair of brass candlesticks and one Elbow chair

In the Pantry,

Two shelves, one salt tub and one flowertub.

In Mr. Hanes's Room,

One chest of drawers, twenty pair of sheets and one clock.

In the Womens Chamber,

Four beds and bedsteads with two blankets and one Rug to each bed and one small chest.

In the men's chamber,

Three beds and bedsteads, two blankets and a Rug to each Bed and two old chests.

In the two Back Chambers,

Five beds and bedsteads with two blankets and a Rug to each bed, one old chest, table and trunk and one chest of Drawers, one Iron fender, one pair of tongs and a dozen of Chamber pots.

The Brew House & Bakery

In the 18th century people didn't usually drink water because it was often unhealthy. Instead, they drank 'small beer' which was very weak beer. The other main food staple was bread. It obviously made economic sense if the Workhouse was able to brew its own beer and bake its own bread. In accordance with this the Vestry committee decided in 1742 and 1743:

1742. Ordered that Mr. Francis Gaussen do forthwith cause a digging or Boring as near the Workhouse as possible, in order to find a spring of water to supply the Workhouse for Brewing, etc.

16 Oct 1743. ordered that John Keruam, the Bricklayer, should forthwith open the well in the yeard of the Workhouse and to make the same as Deep as Needfull for the better suplying said house with water, and to be about six foot wide.

In 1747...That an estimate or proposals should be taken by the churchwardens and overseers of the poor of the parish for Building and erecting a Brew house, Brewing copper, etc., also an oven for the use of the said workhouse.

10 Aug. 1747. This Vestry took into consideration in what manner they should dispose of the moneys left to this Parish by the late Sir Henry Maynard being fifty pounds when it was unanimously agreed that it be expended in building a Brew house, Oven, and Utensils for the use of the Workhouse.

The Workhouse Poor.

The Workhouse inmates were men, women and children who were admitted by the decision of Vestry members after they had applied for 'Parish relief'. For example : on the 4 Dec, 1742 it was ordered that Eliza Field, Widow of W Field be taken into the workhouse at her request by letter to her father in law, hearing date 27th Nov. last, complaining of having two sore breasts and not able to work for her livelihood.

Numbers of Inmates

In 16 Oct. 1743 an examination of the number of people in the Workhouse was made, and it appeared that from 30th Sept last to this day there was and are still in the said house including the Master and Mistress Thirty-two persons in number, viz' :

*Men, 3 from the age of 33 to 60.
Women, 12 from the age of 27 to 82.
Boys, 5 from the age of 1 to 11.*

Girls, 12 from of 4 to 14

Medical Care Of The Poor

16 July, 1755. Agreed to allow Mr. Thornton the sum of Twenty Pounds per annum for the care. Medicine, cure broken Bones &c. of all the poor belonging to this Parish provided they apply to him by order of the Parish officers, and that if they are able to come to his shop for such Relief. The money to be paid him Half yearly by the then acting overseers.

Clothing & Your Sunday Best

In 1780 the clothing issue for men was:

2 Coats and 2 Waistcoats. One of each to be kept clean for Sunday. The other Coat and Waistcoat for common use. All to be made of good Yorkshire Plain or a drab colour with flat Metal Buttons and two pairs of Russia drab Breeches, 3 shirts, 3 Stocks, 3 pair of Stockings, 3 Coloured Handkerchiefs, 2 Night Caps, 2 pair of Shoes and 1 Hat.

The ancient men may have a great Coat and the old women Cloaks if needful.

The clothing issue for women was:

A Gown and quilted Pettitcoat of Linsee the same colour as the Mens Cloaths and an extra Gown of the same for Sundays. a Baize Petticoat. a Pair of Leather Bodice, three shifts, 3 Night Caps, 3 day caps, 3 pairs of stockens, 3 Coloured and 1 white apron, 3 Coloured and 1 white handkerchief, 2 pairs of shoes, 2 Pockets and a Straw hat

The 'Linsee' petticoat was a home loom weave of linen and wool that originated in the Suffolk village of Lindsey. It is a coarse fabric that would have been quite 'itchy'. Similarly, Baize is a coarse woollen or cotton cloth.

The leather bodice was a forerunner of the Victorian stays and was laced tightly at the back.

In the 18th century, working women didn't carry handbags and they didn't have pockets sewn into their clothing. Instead they had removable pockets that were tight around the waist and were accessed by slits in their gowns and petticoats.

Note: Neither women nor men wore underpants during most of the 18th century.

'P' Is For The Parish Poor

From The Vestry Minutes: 5 Sept 1741. It was ordered that every person receiving of this Parish Relief and their wives and children shall, upon the right sleeve of their uppermost garment, wear the Badge of a Roman 'P' and the said Badge be provided by the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Parish to be brought to said parish account.

4 May, 1761. It was agreed to recommend to the Committee to put into immediate execution the orders made the 26 Dec For all poor who receive relief from this parish to wear the badge and that those who are able do attend at least once in a month and appear with them before the Committee those days they shall appoint.

Authors note to the above: Hemp linen was produced in great quantities in Russia and was therefore often called Russia linen in the 18th century. Russia drab is any coarse hemp fabric that is unbleached that is left a drab colour.

Abusive, Dirty And Unruly



The inmates were not always docile . At the same meeting where it was agreed that Eliza Field be admitted, a complaint was made to the Vestry committee that :

4 Dec, 1742, Anne Edmund in the Work House being very abusive, idle and unruly. It was ordered that on her first abuse the Master or Mistress of the Workhouse gives her the correction of the house.

The Workhouse Master & His Wife

Those who wanted to run the Workhouse applied for the job by tendering a price to feed and clothe the inmates . The successful applicant was the one who offered to do the work for the cheapest price. Over the years there were a number of records of the Workhouse master applying to the Vestry Committee to be given an increase in the rate per person.

John Tarlen, Workhouse Master

17 May, 1756 Mr. Tarlen the present Master of the Workhouse proposed to accept two shillings a week for every person young and old that are now or shall be hereafter brought into this Workhouse and to provide for them the following necessary^ viz.: -

Diet according to the Bill of Fare Delivered and signed by the Master.

That the several persons be clothed at the master's expense.

That bedding be provided at the masters expense.

Coals and Wood and Candles &c at the master's expense.

Brewing vessels. Casks &c to be kept in repair at the master's expense

The master accepts of the terms for one year beginning at midsummer next and promises that when he leaves this employment that all clothing bedding and Brewing vessels shal be left by him for the use of the Workhouse.

Mr Tarlen's Menu (Please Sir, Can I Have Some More?)

Mr Tarlen's proposals for keeping the poor in the Workhouse at Walthamstow

Sunday

Breakfast: Bread cheese and Butter.

Dinner: Beef and Pudding.

Supper: Bread and Butter.

Monday

Breakfast: Broth.

Dinner: Beef or Pork with peas pottage.

Supper: Bread and cheese.

Tuesday.

Breakfast: Milk Poreage.

Dinner: Pudding.

Supper: Bread and Butter.

Wednesday'.

Breakfast: Bread and cheese.

Dinner: Rice Milk.

Supper: Bread and Butter.

Thursday.

Breakfast: Bread and cheese.

Dinner: Beef and soup.

Supper: Bread and Butter.

Friday.

Breakfast: Soup.

Dinner: Thick Milk.

Supper: Bread and cheese.

Saturday.

Breakfast: Milk Porrage.

Dinner: Beef and soup.

Supper: Bread and Butter.

The above for two shillings a head per week.

Thomas Flack, Workhouse Master

19 April, 1762. Mr. Flacks agreement with the Parish.

I propose if agreeable to the gentlemen officers and the other gentlemen of the parish to take support and maintain all the poor of Walthamstovv in meat drink washing Lodging and clothing For one year and to allow the same salary to the apothecary who shall attend the poor in sickness as usual and to take all poor persons Belonging to this parish that shall be allowed objects of charity by the officers and gentlemen of the committee and to support and maintain them as aforesaid For a sum of money which two seven- penny rates shall amount to at a Leaal pound rate. When relief shall be wanting by any of the poor belonging to this parish, aforesaid that on their applying to the officers and gentlemen of the Committee and making their case known to them that then by a line From the officers and gentlemen ot the committee I promise to relieve and support them according to their respective distresses and necessities.

N.B. I propose to have nothing to do with the certificate poor in Walthamstow. I propose that every three Calendar months that I shall maintain the poor according to these proposals To receive one quarter of a years pay for the same.

8 July, 1762. Mr. Flack haveing relinquished his present agreement for the maintainance of the poor to end the 12"" inst The said Thomas Flack was chosen and appointed master of our Workhouse and to be allow'' two shillings and Four pence per head For each person within the workhouse and to Find the poor in victuals, cloaths and all proper and necessary apparel For three months certain to commence the 12"" instant.

15 Sep. 1766. agreed to allow Flack master of the Workhouse three pence per head more per each person in the Workhouse from Monday the 22 Instant.

29 Dec, 1766. Ordered that Mr. Flack the master of the Workhouse be allowed three shillings per head weekly for all the poor in the workhouse.

6 Feb., 1771. Mr. Flack complaining that the High Price of Provisions renders it impossible for him to maintain the poor at the present rate of £2-19s per week it was agreed to allow him three shillings per week per head till further orders to commence from the 17th instant.

Agreed to allow Flack two pence per head more for the poor on account of the dearness of all sorts of provisions. To commence from Monday last. To continue for three months.

The Beadle

Was a Parish Officer who had various duties and carried a ceremonial stave as a mark of office. He summoned parishioners to various meetings and led processions into the church and kept order during services. With regard to the Workhouse, for practical purposes In Walthamstow in



the 18th century, it was the Beadle who represented the authority of the Vestry committee. As both were concerned with the Parish poor, the posts of Workhouse Master and Beadle were very closely related

Charles Dickens, writing in 1839 wrote: *"The parish beadle is one of the most important member of the local administration. He is not so well off as the churchwardens nor is he so learned as the vestry-clerk, nor does he order things quite so much his own way as either of them. But his power is very great, notwithstanding; and the dignity of his office is never impaired by the absence of efforts on his part to maintain it."*

5 Sep 1742. John Johnson, present master of the Workhouse, was ordered to be sworne into his office of Beadle and overseer, and a coat, trimmed and a Last hatt and a staff to show his office, to serve two years, to be payed by the churchwarden, to whose discretions the Buying, etc. of said coat is left

24 April, 1748. It was agreed to give Richard Haynes £20 a year more than he was to have by Agreement of the 22nd* day of March, 1746, to be paid Quarterly, out of which the Churchwardens to bye him a Coat and Hatt as Beadle and the said Haynes to act as Beadle for the Parish on the above terms.

20 June, 1750. At a Vestry held at the Workhouse of the said parish for the election of a master for the said Workhouse from Midsummer, 1750 to Midsummer, 1751, was continued and nominated Richard Haynes to

be master thereof, he consenting to have Ten pounds taken from his former salary.

1 July. 1750. Anthony Gallant to have Ten Pound per year to serve as Beadle of the parrish and two guineas to serve as Vestry clerk to commence from the twenty forth of June last.

29 Oct.1764. ordered that Gallant shall be sworn in a constable for the use of the parish and that he shall do and perform all such matters and things that the churchwardens and Vestry shall require or think proper and the Vestry in consideration of the said service do agree to pay him Twenty five pounds a year as Beadle and Ten pounds a year as Vestry clerk and in gratuity for his last four years service as Vestry clerk his salary to commence from Michaelmas last.

ordered that a Watch house or cage may be built for the security of detaining all such idle persons that may be taken up from time to time.

26 Dec, 1764. ordered that Gallant do go twice a year to see after the children that are put out apprentice. To go in the month of January and August and to give the children sixpence each to Incourage them to be good.

11 Sep.1765. ordered that Mr. Embleton do forthwith go about building the cage

An Extension To The Workhouse

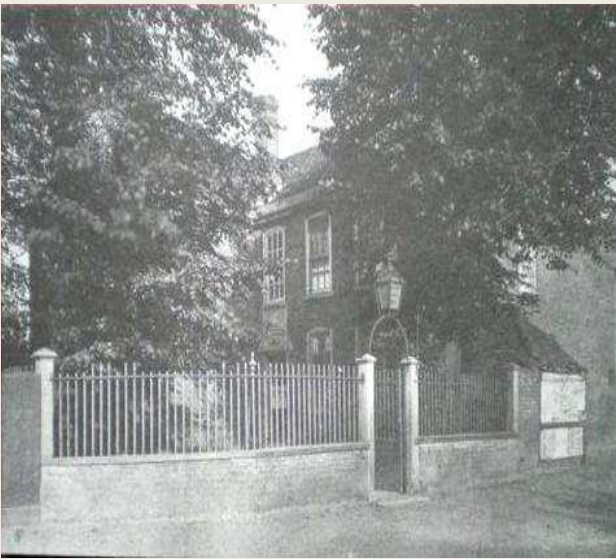
25 April, 1756. Resolved: That the enlarging of the Workhouse be in the backyard, and that the front of the present Brewhouse be pulled down and a new Building to be erected there for a Workhouse which is to be two feet wider than the present building is and to be carried to the full length of our ground and a Room to be built over it of the same dimensions and on the end of the yard a new house to be erected cross the yard.

Ordered that Mr. Tarlen do bring a plan of these intended Buildings containing all the particulars of the materials that are to be used in the same against the Second day of May to which day this Vestry is adjourned.

2 May, 1756. Mr. Tarlen and Mr. Edwards have according to the Resolution of the last Vestry brought a plan and the Description of the intended Building and this Vestry have ordered them to remain in the Vestry room for any workman of this parish to examine the same and to bring or send in an estimate sealed.

17 May, 1756. The following things were agreed upon, viz. that in order to make an additional Building to the Workhouse according to the proposals delivered. Resolved that towards this expense a pound rate be raised upon the inhabitants of this parish of three pence in the pound For half a year commencing From Lady day last and to be collected by the present overseers of the poor and to be added to their rate in their account of expenses made for the poor.

A Jack Of All Trades (Not A Bricklayer But He Knew A Man Who Was)



Vestry House in 1905

Not only did Mr Tarlen tender successfully to become the new Workhouse master but he was also appointed to build the Workhouse extension:

17 May, 1756, Mr. Tarlen accepts to do the carpenters, plumbers and glaziers work to the additional Building of this house according to the plan of Mr. Embletons For eighty pounds to which this Vestry agrees.

Mr. Bennett accepts to do the bricklayers work according to the proposals £82:19:6 – agreed thereto.

Extra Work Authorised

20 June, 1756 ordered that the connection to the new ward be made from the Dwelling House by a covered passage instead of a stair case intended from the Workhouse.

That Mr. Tarlen the carpenter be allowed a sum not exceeding Two Guineas for his additional workmanship and that Mr. Bennett be allowed the sum of one pound five shillings on the same account for his extra work.

18 June, 1757. agreed that Mr. Bennett pave the Back Kitchen with flat stones and at the same time new stone steps at the back door and new lay the passages within doors and without. Likewise that the pump for more convenience be moved further in the yard.

3 Oct.1756. ordered that Mr. Williams the smith do make a compass grate with shovel poker tongs and fender for the Workroom

Workhouse Maintenance & Furnishings

3 Oct.1756 ordered that Mr. Nash do buy eight Beech Bedsteads with castors and double sacking Bottoms.

5 May, 1758. ordered that some Linen and Blankets be bought into the Workhouse and two beds and bedsteads.

5 May, 1758. ordered that a Mash Tub be bought for the use of the Workhouse. (Note: This would be for brewing)

9 Aug' 1759. ordered that the sash windows in the workhouse be made to slide up and down.

9 Aug. 1759 ordered that Mr Archer the present Overseer do buy twenty pairs of sheets for the use of the Workhouse.

13 Jan.1760. ordered that the churchwardens provide a Bier and Black Cloth Cover for the Burial of the poor.

'If Any Would Not Work Neither Should He Eat'.



The 1780, the Walthamstow Workhouse rules proscribed a start of day for all at 5.30 am in the summer and 7 am in the winter. Bed time was 9 pm in Summer and 8 pm in winter. No work, except necessary household work and cooking, was performed by inmates on Sunday, Good Friday, and Christmas Day.

Left: Women picking oakum in the 19th century

Workhouse inmates were given a variety of work to perform, much of which was involved in running the workhouse. The women mostly did domestic jobs such as

cleaning and working in the kitchen including brewing and baking. Inmates also did laundering, sewing, spinning, weaving and shoe mending. Some worked in the vegetable gardens to provide food for the workhouse.

When this work was done they also worked at picking oakum. This involved teasing out the fibres from old hemp ropes. The resulting material was sold to the navy or other ship-builders who mixed it with tar and used it to seal the lining of wooden ships.

Although it did have elderly and sick men, in theory, the Workhouse didn't contain any healthy male inmates who were fit for work. Those male inmates, who were capable of work, were set to work helping with Parish maintenance work or agricultural labour on Parish owned farms etc.

Church On Sunday

All inmates were required to attend St Mary the Virgin's church on Sunday morning. They wore their Sunday best clothing and sat at the back of the church in the pews reserved for their use. This meant that the Vestrymen and other Parishioners could see how their Parish rate money was being spent.

16 March. 1767. ordered that the poor who receive the bread on Sunday do attend there during the time of Divine service and come there personally without they are sick or lame or to have no bread.

Children In The Workhouse

Virtually everybody will have read or seen a film version of *Charles Dickens, 'Oliver Twist'*. It is not an accident that the full name of the book is *'Oliver Twist, the Parish boy's Progress'*

The hero of *Charles Dickens's* novel is a middle class boy who, through no fault of his own, is put in a Workhouse with ordinary working class children. The book contains a painfully accurate account of life in the Workhouse and has a happy ending when Oliver Twist is reconciled with his well-off middle class grandfather. Unfortunately, it wasn't like that in real life!

In the Walthamstow Workhouse, children were taught to read, write, cast accounts and given the rudiments of a religious education. When they were old enough, the Parish paid employers to take them as apprentices.

Disbursements in 1741.

Widow. Cath. Masson aged 80 to buy needles to teach the children in the Workhouse to work she likewise teaches them to read.

4 Oct.1741. It was ordered that Peter Flower, the present Churchwarden, should pay for the putting forth Apprentice the three undernamed poor children of this parish, viz':

Willowby Arundall, aged eleven years, to John Arundall of Hackney, County of Middlesex soapmaker and Tallow chandler, £1.

Thomas Clifford, aged 14 years last August, to Richard Gilbert, of St. Martins in the fields, Barber surgeon and Periwig Maker, £2.

Martha Needham, aged 12 years last February, to Joshua Tofft, of Colchester street, Goodmans Fields, a Taylor and sails man, £2.

5 Oct 1746. It was ordered to put out Apprentice to James Bryan in New Gravel Lane, woolcomber, Jane Gray, one of the poor children of the Workhouse, and to pay £2 with her as customary, and fifteen shillings for Clothes, Shoes, and stockings, &c., she being very Bare and also to pay the Rent for Foremans family, he being Run away and they very poor; at the same time it was agreed to give Will Pigott one pound one shilling towards satisfeing Mr. forbs the man midwife for laying his wife, he being in poor circumstances and very ill at that time

Outdoor Relief

Because of its expense, the Workhouse was the last resort by the Vestry committee in providing assistance to needy people. Their preferred option was to make dedicated time limited payments to applicants for relief. However, this situation changed dramatically after 1795.

8 Dec, 1741. Allowed 2 shillings per week for a month suckling of Eliz. Smith granddaughter, a Bastard child born in this parish, namely, John Smith Henry Catling applied for Relief, his wife Sarah being disordered in her mind, was ordered three shilling per week from this day until further orders, and Ann Edwards or Widow Daper shall attend her as nurse and have her meals in this Workhouse

4 Dec, 1742. Ordered the churchwarden to pay Robt Cooper 4 shillings for a week only, without he sees just cause to continue said relief he having a wife (namely Mary) Two sons and 3 daughters and the misfortune of Mr. Plowmans cart going over his foot deprives him of being able to Work to maintain his family.

5 Oct 1746. It was ordered to pay the Rent for Foremans family, he being Run away and they very poor; at the same time it was agreed to give Will Pigott one pound one shilling towards satisfeing Mr. forbs the man midwife for laying his wife, he being in poor circumstances and very ill at that time

6 Oct. 1751. Elizabeth Brown appeared at this Vestry and Representing her case that one shilling a week was not sufficient to maintain her and it having being heretofore represented to us that she has been a Laborious and Industrious woman when able to work it was agreed to allow her two shillings and sixpence a week.

A New And Bigger Workhouse

By 1834, the cost of giving relief to the poor was becoming increasingly expensive. In 1795, there was a poor harvest that resulted in a shortage of grain and this drove prices sky high. As a result, a new form of outdoor relief was introduced to alleviate the distress of the rural poor.

The new system was a means tested scale of wage supplements measured against the price of grain. Essentially, families were paid by the Parish a 'top-up' to their wages. This level varied

according to the number of children and the price of bread. For example, if bread was 1s 2d a loaf, the wages of a family with two children were topped up to 8s 6d. If bread rose to 1s 8d the wages were topped up to 11shillings per week.



A horse tram at the south side of the West Ham Workhouse.

This system appears to have reached its height during the Napoleonic Wars, when it

was a means of allaying dangerous discontent amongst a growing rural working class.

The immediate impact of paying the poor rate fell on the landowners of the parish concerned. They then sought other means of dealing with the poor, such as the workhouse funded through parish unions. However, the costs of running and maintaining the individual Parish workhouses was constantly increasing. Eventually pressure due to structural poverty caused the introduction of the new Poor Law in 1834.

One of the results of the 1834 Amendment to the Poor Laws was to allow individual Parishes to join together in union in order to built bigger workhouses. The new Union Workhouses took more inmates and reduced administration and other costs.

The West Ham Poor Law Union was formed on 31st May 1836. Its operation was overseen by an elected Board of Guardians, 24 in number, representing its 7 constituent parishes as listed below (figures in brackets indicate numbers of Guardians if more than one):

Essex: East Ham (2), West Ham (10), Little Ilford, Low Leyton (3), Walthamstow (4), Wanstead (2), Woodford — St Mary (2). With a later Addition: Cann Hall (from 1894).

The population falling within the Union at the 1831 census was 24,770 with parishes ranging in size from Little Ilford (population 115) to West Ham itself (11,580). The average annual poor-

rate expenditure for the period 1833-35 had been £14,714 or 11s.11d. per head of the population.

A new West Ham Union workhouse was built in 1839-41 in Leyton. It was based on a T-shaped main block, with lower wings to the rear creating two courtyards for the use of male and female inmates. The building was extended to provide additional accommodation in 1845

Bill Bayliss

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Principal resources used in this article:

https://archive.org/stream/officialpublicat13waltuoft/officialpublicat13waltuoft_djvu.txt

https://archive.org/stream/officialpublicat14waltuoft/officialpublicat14waltuoft_djvu.txt

<http://www.workhouses.org.uk/WestHam/>

'Walthamstow Past' by David Mander.