CHAPTER II

The Swindon & Highworth Union Institution, c1912, and its legacy

Caroline Ockwell & Graham Carter

A Heritage Lottery Fund project by the Alfred Williams Heritage Society
In his heart, Alfred Williams was a poet, and it was only on the suggestion of friends that he switched from publishing books of verse to prose, beginning what would become a series about towns and villages in the area, with A Wiltshire Village.

Researched in 1911/12 and published in 1912, it painted a picture of life in his native South Marston, a small village in which the chief employment was agricultural, although a proportion of the male population, including Alfred, travelled to Swindon, four miles away, where the Great Western Railway’s works provided better-paid and often more reliable employment.

Alfred would eventually also write and publish Life in a Railway Factory in 1915, a warts-and-all account of Swindon Works, but A Wiltshire Village matches all his works for its charm and the vivid insight it gives us into both contemporary life and past times in South Marston and – in the case of “the house” – marginally outside the parish.

He devoted a whole chapter of his book to his visit there, which we can calculate took place in the late autumn or winter of 1911/12, and, as he always did, he used the real names of the characters he encountered. The full chapter is reproduced here:

Following the way down by Cat’s Brain fields, a short distance brings you to the workhouse, which, though a mile from the village, is yet very closely related to it: it is the last home of the poorest and most unfortunate. Many have gone there to end their days, to die out of sight...
of all that is kind and charitable, doubting of life, doubting of love, of truth, fidelity, and friendship, doubting sometimes even of Providence itself – alone, forgotten, deserted for ever, forlorn and solitary. The workhouse is not one building; there are many sections and departments, a great many of them modern, newly-built, indicative of the times. Fifty years ago the place was considerably smaller, but there was not so much poverty about in those days, and what is more, a good many of the old folk were not so readily inclined to accept of its barren hospitality as are very many of this generation; there is a deplorable weakening of character creeping in all round upon us. Modern local industries and conditions, too, have vastly increased the need of a refuge; it is surprising how many “cast-offs” there are here from the manufacturing centre. Once admitted, these soon became acclimatized. The atmosphere and environment of the place prevail over whatever moral courage they may otherwise have had; they accept the condition, and think no more of battling with life themselves. If they were not paupers before, they are doubly so now, physically and morally too.

The general aspect of the place from the entrance is very gloomy and forbidding; it is enough to make the stoutest heart quail to behold it. Who could describe all the passionate thoughts and feelings of those who, beaten and buffeted about with the storms and waves of life, have been forced here at last, forced to own defeat in love and fortune, broken and ruined in health and estate, forced to humble to that fate they had fought so long against, and feared and dreaded for so many years, to cut themselves off from the world of joy, and renounce their little remaining shred of freedom and independence for ever and ever? Is there not deep tragedy in it? Perhaps some will not be willing to concede this, because it is not always evident. But are the deep things of life ever evident to the superficial gazer? If a man does not always weep and howl, do you think he has no sensibility? Do you deny him emotions and a soul? Are there not “thoughts that lie too deep for tears”? The man of true temper and courage never wears his heart on his sleeve. The deepest misery is a dumb misery. Because a person is poor and a beggar, that does not make his sensibility less; very often it intensifies it.

The poor creature looks at you in a very dazed and vacant manner; that one expresses worlds of despair and wretchedness; here is one cowering and shrinking like a hunted beast; another turns his head away from you for shame; here is one whose eyes are truly imploring: Are not all these possessed of deep, a super abundance of deep, feeling? Do they not all, somehow or other, express the real, the only true, tragic quality? Of course they do. Language they have not, goods they have not, friends they have not, fine clothes they have not, they are life’s cast-offs, the world’s “not wanted,” the sweepings and shavings, the dust and rags of society; but they are flesh and blood, of our stamp and image, wearers of the same form, the same mind and intellect, body, soul, and spirit as the best of us living. There is more real tragedy at the workhouse gate than is written in half the ranting, mawkish plays exhibited in the theatres nowadays, though the dullard may not be sensible of it, and the generality of people are in too desperate a hurry to pander to their own wants and ailments to bestow more than the most casual thought on those of their less fortunate fellow creatures.

At the same time, no one in his right mind would claim that all is tragedy there – that would be a great error, a positive falsehood; it is only so in the case of those who are forced, greatly against their own will and soul, to accept the refuge; it is only so to the brave and the true, to those possessed of character and principle; the coward and the hypocrite are utterly incapable of tragedy altogether. For many enter in the workhouse doors willingly, without any reluctance at all. For them it is simply an escape from the onerous responsibilities of life, from the necessity of having to toil hard to procure a livelihood. Henceforth they are free, secure, and satisfied; they do not mind the penalties and restrictions, or, at any rate not very much, and a short residence there soon brings about a spirit of total acquiescence. They are not all like old Mark Titcombe, who, weak and infirm at eighty-five, his last bit of savings spent, would rather have been butchered in bed than taken from his cottage and carted off to “that place over yander, to the ‘firmary.” That is a smooth hypocrisy, used to beguile the simple and the ignorant. “It is not really the workhouse you are going to, you know,” they tell the old people, “but only the infirmary.” As if that were not an integral part of the system, and one of the most distressing of that.

Besides those who suffer tragedy, then, at entering the dark abode, there are those who go in willingly enough, or with very little reluctance – the morally weak and incompetent; others who experience the
comfort of relief – such as have surely felt want, and whose one thought is to be rescued from it in the easiest way possible; some who hail the sight of the walls with real pleasure – the periodical tramps and visitors, the physically hungry and destitute; and, wonder of wonders! those who go in of their own accord, who, although possessed of some kind of a home, plead to be admitted to get out of the reach of their families, friends, and kindred. So, while some are dragged in, suffering hell pains, and others enter with a weakly “I will, and yet would not,” this one with an inner satisfaction, a kind of “what is to be will be” feeling – all fully aware and certain that their liberties are to be the price of their admittance – these last, by a strange irony, by the height of paradox, come hither to obtain their independence, as if they should re-echo that familiar cry, “save us from our friends.” So, beside the genuinely poor and aged, together with the infirm of all classes, there is the skulker, the vagabond or professional tramp, the unfortunate person, the besotted drunkard, the erstwhile evil-liver, and that upright and honest, yet pathetically mistaken and deluded creature, the self-sacrificer – the swearer away of his rights and liberties, unusual, unnatural, and incomprehensible.

The workhouse, dingy and drab-looking, lies off the road somewhat, sixty or seventy paces. The entrance to it is barred with stout iron gates, which are generally fastened and locked, day and night as well. High elm-trees overshadow the entrance, and continue in a line along the hedgerow there. Just within is the porter’s lodge – a little hut big enough to contain two persons – fitted with a stove for use in cold weather; to the right and left, before the house, are some shrubs and evergreens, which look almost black from the road. On one hand, going in, is a patch of turf with goal-posts, where the juvenile paupers forget their situation in the excitement of a game occasionally; on the other, are gardens for flowers and vegetables. Farther down on the left are outhouses and buildings where the tramps and roadsters, who are admitted for the night, pay off their score the next morning with a little healthy exercise with the saw and hatchet, or other implement. Beyond that is more ground for vegetables, worked by the permanent “staff” of the place. Here is the school play-yard, walled round, and fenced in with iron railings like a prison; this is the shoemaker’s, and there is the tailor’s shop. In the front part are the master’s quarters, the board-room, and the offices; adjoining these is the workhouse proper, where the paupers are confined. The infirmary is a new building, and is situated at the rear.

The greater portion of the tragedy is here, for those detained in the other parts, though poor and unfortunate, are able-bodied enough; these are doubly wretched, in that they have no possessions of any sort, and are afflicted with diseases as well, more often of a permanent kind: there is no hope of escape for them. “What is that man there?” I asked one old fellow, well over 80. “Is he going out again?” “I dunno; I dun expect so,” he replied. “A lot as comes in stops here till they dies.” That is it precisely. The old fellow was there waiting for death to relieve him, too; but though he could see and dimly understand the fates of others, he had not fully grasped the position in regard to himself. Other people’s misfortunes generally strike us more forcibly than our own.

There are all sorts of people in the infirmary, afflicted with many and various complaints, and a few with none at all beyond that of extreme old age. Very many of them are old roadsters, who have tramped, and tramped, and tramped, until their legs were quite worn out, and they could go no farther on the journey. Their friends are dead – if they ever had any, that is; their kindred dead too. A great many of them never had a home; they have drifted and drifted about from place to place, town to town, village to village, from one county to another, workless, aimless, and careless, happy enough, no doubt, until Time clapped his hand heavily on their shoulder and cried to them: “Hold! You have gone far enough.” Henceforth no more highway, white and dusty under the summer sky, or brown and muddy in autumn, or frozen in winter. No more lying down in green fields, and under shady trees, or camping in the lanes, with wallet crammed full of provisions begged from house to house along the road through the village. No more sleeping in the open air, and kindling the little fire in the early morning with a few dry, rotten twigs from the hedgerow, to prepare the steaming beverage – the water obtained from the last cottage or brook, and boiled in a tin with a wire handle; the tea and sugar begged also from some compassionate cottager, or purchased at the little shop someway back upon the road. And no more pitiless rain, and getting drenched to the skin, and shivering in the cowshed, or under a haystack all night; or bleak and bitter wind and chilling tempest – hungry, cold, deeply wretched and miser-
able: for they must share pleasure and hardship too, wear the rose and
the thorn, though more often the thorn, one would imagine. But liberty
and independence are sweet; one is sometimes tempted to envy the
tramp’s easy-going manner and irresponsibility. They have entered here
for the last time now, and will leave no more, until their old bones are
hauled away to the churchyard.

A great many of these are confined to their beds, and do not move
about the ward; and while, here and there, you may induce one to talk
a little, others are moody and sullen, and will have nothing to do with
you; it will be best not to interfere with them. After all, there is no rea-
son why a man, even though he be a tramp, should be made the victim
of everyone that passes through the place. Compassion is all very well
in a way, but when it is so closely combined with vulgar curiosity as to
be almost totally indistinguishable from it, it is wise to be considerate
in the exhibition of it. The tramp’s habit of life invests him with a cer-
tain amount of reserve, and even of defiance; that is his characteristic.
Most likely it was the early quality that determined him to adopt that
manner of life, too; so we must expect it to be no less in evidence at an
advanced age. You cannot break their spirit of independence: they
maintain this to the last. Some of them, to be sure, will talk with you,
and tell you all about themselves; but the best way to effect this is to
take them on the road. Here, if you have leisure, and a few pence to
spare, you may easily obtain your value back again in narrative.

The other night, coming home from work in the dark in January, a
voice hailed me out of the mist and shadows, and enquired the way to
the “house,” and the distance. Drawing near, and halting, I could see it
dimly: it was an old man with a long grey beard, and billy-cock hat. He had no
wallet or bundle of any kind. His voice was low and musical; he was
evidently town-bred; he spoke very courteously; you liked him imme-
diately. His name was William Lines, aged sixty-nine and a half, by
trade a tin-smith. “How far have you come?” “From Nottingham, sir,”
And where going?” “To Bath, sir” “Don’t ‘sir’ me, there’s a good fel-
low. Got any friends?” “No! Well, not that I know of.” “No sons to help
you?” “I had two, but I don’t know where they are. They were both in
the army at the time of the war; but I think they enlisted under other
names I have never heard of them since.” “Where have you lived all
this time?” “I was born at Bath, sir; then worked at London for a time,
after at Worcester, and since at Nottingham. I have not done a lot for
some years now but have wandered about from place to place. You see,
I thought if I could get to Bath, my pension will be due in six months’
time and I might rub along then a little. How far is it to Bath from
here?” “About thirty-five miles.” “That will take me three more days,
for I cannot get along very fast.” I gave the old man what money I had,
with many apologies – it was no more than three farthings, if I must
confess a personal matter – shook him mightily by the hand, and
wished him good luck and his pension. He took the small gift gener-
ously, thanked me profusely, and with a “God bless you, sir” and a
kindly “Good-night,” went on his way. I hope that by this time he has
received the coveted weekly allowance, and has fallen in with someone
or other of his boyhood acquaintances, and is moderately comfortable,
at all events, for he seemed a most genial and affable character.

The other occupants of the infirmary are a miscellaneous lot. They
are of all sorts, sizes, and ages. Here is a little mite of four years who
fell in the fire and was burned severely. He is nearly well now, and is
looking bright and bonny. He sits up in bed surrounded with picture-
books, and looks wonderfully around, shedding sunshine everywhere.
Even the crusty old tramps are interested in him, and, though too
moody to smile, watch his every movement with visible pleasure and
amusement. The nurses are very fond of him, and wish he would stay
longer, but his mother will soon fetch him away home now. The hus-
band is seldom in work; they are very poverty-stricken. Here is a boy
of fourteen who looks fat and well enough, but suffers from fits. He is
young fellow has a weak heart, and is incapable of fighting the battle
of life. His old mother has no home. See lives with another son, one of
several, all of whom are poor, with large families. There is nothing left
for him but the “house.” He serves on the staff, and is responsible for
many duties to be performed about the ward.

In another bed, close at hand, is one very white and emaciated. He
looks at me long and earnestly. Walking up to him, I recognise one I
had often seen about the factory. He recognised me in return. I took
him by the hand, and our eyes met. There was no need to speak; it was
too, too evident. He was in the last stage of consumption. Death had
marked him for his own, and set his seal upon him. His eyes were dim
and swimming, sunken and hollow. When he looked at you, though his lips did not move, he expressed volumes. I felt a cowardly sensation. His cheeks were shrunken; the bones almost protruded through the skin. The lips were strained; he was very white about the mouth. His hands were skinny and clammy with perspiration; he was no more than a skeleton. Perhaps his age was thirty or thereabout. I do not think we spoke half a dozen words each; he was too weak to converse. Our eyes interpreted our thoughts and feelings. Then I passed up the ward, but I know he watched me as long as I remained visible. The next time I went to the “house” his bed was occupied by another; he was gone and forgotten. Who cares about a pauper? Get them out of the way quickly and make room for others.

Who is this pitiable-looking wretch coming through the doorway here, with his head swathed in bandages, and only a small part of his face visible, and even that a loathsome sore, his nose eaten away, his cheeks eaten, too, the evil spreading all around his neck, under his chin, and everywhere? At the first sight of him I thought of the “Leper of the City of Aoste,” as told by Count de Maistre, for the description is identical with the appearance of this man – face eaten away, totally unrecognisable, horrible and ghastly looking. On enquiry I learn he has been in the army, and contracted the disease somewhere abroad. It spreads slowly, and is not infectious, they say. But how shocking for the poor patient, and disagreeable for the other inmates! One sight of the unfortunate fellow is enough to set nature in revolt; but I suppose the others are used to seeing him, and take no notice of his ailment.

There is quite a crowd here from the neighbouring town – cast-offs from the factory and others – ruined in health, and otherwise unfit for service; it is a striking testimony to the efficacy of modern industrial and urban conditions in producing physical wrecks and paupers. The majority of these are young men between thirty and forty, some afflicted one way and some another. In the natural order of things they have a long way to travel on Life’s road; theirs is not by any means a pleasing prospect or an illumined future. Let us hope they are deficient in imagination, for to a person of any thought and penetration it would be hideous; it would be enough to drive him to distraction. Of the genuine agricultural class there are very few; that is a matter for congratulation. Here and there, of course, where a man outlives all his relatives and friends, and becomes bedridden, he is forced to come into the “house;” but the superior health of the rustic stands him in good stead, and if he has any children they usually see to it that he is spared the disgrace of the “union.” If they do come here at last they will not live very long. Old John Lane who clung to his little cot at Cat’s Brain till he was eighty, and was fetched inside, only survived a week, and Mark Titcombe died in three months. The man of independent spirit is deeply wounded at being brought to the workhouse; he is struck to the soul with it; it will be most likely to prove mortal.

Albert Trueman, exactly seventy, whom I met in the yard as I was going in, was pacing up and down like a caged beast. “Here, “ thought I, “is one ill at ease, who cannot be reconciled with his condition.” A little conversation with him soon verified my conjecture. He was a most diminutive man. He was scarcely four feet high with the tiniest of features. In one eye he was stone blind; he could only see a very little with the other; by raising his head and turning it on one side he could just discern you. At first he thought I was an official. I soon set his mind at rest on that point. Where was he born? “At Highworth.” “What! just out here?” “Yes, sir.” “And what happened afterwards?” “Then we went to Wanborough. That’s where I went to school.” “Yes.” “Do you know Wanborough, sir?” “Oh yes, I am often there.” “Then we went to live at Bishopstone.” “Yes, I know Bishopstone too.” “I know every inch of they hills, sir.” I felt drawn very near to him. “But what did you do after that, and how did you lose your sight?” “After that I went to London, sir, and kept a coffee-shop at Vauxhall, and then a little hotel, and done well at it, too.” “But your eyes?” “I got a cataract, and under went an operation. The same doctor done it, sir, as took the one from Mr Gladstone’s.” “Yes.” “But they got bad again, you know, and I can’t see at all on this one, and only a bit with the other.” “What did you do then?” “Lost everything, sir, and got my living selling matches.” Here he took an empty vesta-box from his pocket, and showed me the kind.

“But how did you get here?” “Walked it through Hungerford last fall. I wanted to see the old country. I hadn’t see the Shepherd’s Rest for fifty years. But I wants to get out of here. Bless you, sir, I can’t rest like some of ’em. I wants to get my living. You see, I am seventy, and if I can get my pension I can earn some more beside and muddle along. But I can’t stop in here; There ent a bit of peace night nor day. Remem-
ber me, sir, and do what you can for me. I am going to see the pension officer next week.”

Poor man! I sympathized with him – as hypocrites always do – and took my leave. If it had been in my power I would have made him happy there and then, if for no other reason than that he knew the hills, and had worked there, but I was powerless to render him any material assistance. “To be weak is miserable, doing or suffering,” Milton said. There are times when this strikes you very forcibly. Strength very often seems to be in the possession of the wrong individual.

Robert Brooks came from the village to the infirmary. He is eighty-five, and was once well-to-do. His people were farmers. He has plenty of kindred even now, in good circumstances, but who wants to be saddled with an old man? Robert Brooks was born at Stanford-in-the-Vale. He can still remember the riots. He heard them blow the horn, and saw them march up the street in a body. When he was a young man he went overseas to New Zealand. Did he make money? Well, not much. Perhaps he was too refined; he was always most gentlemanly. But he was not destitute. When he came home again he went to live with relations; he was never married. It is a repetition of the old story. Someone dies; the old bonds are broken; you are not wanted any more. So Robert went to live at the cottage with the cow-man. Then he, too, removed, and the old man had to do the best he could, and find fresh lodgings. Only old “Madame” Pewsey would take him in. Then his legs gave way; the doctor said he must come to the “house.” There I saw him in the infirmary. It is truly pathetic. Does he feel it very much? You must guess that, for he says but little. Gentle he is, and kind, and intelligent, courteous and superior, sensitive, too; but he does not complain. Every Sunday he worshipped it almost. When he came to church with it, he walked up the nave in veritable triumph; it was just that pardonable pride in the possession of a trophy that pleases so well. If you converse with him, he is full of the sights and experiences of battle; he is white-hot with it. “I fought in blood up to my knees,” he declares to you solemnly. He hated the “Rooshans” like poison, and scorned the French soldiers: “The dirtiest devils alive,” he styles them. The Turks were the best of the lot, in his estimation. He can tell you of many hardships, the horrors of war, the suffering, the bitter cold of winter, piercing frost, and famine. He was happy to return back to old England. He received a pension for his service, and is really very well-to-do. It is a pity he cannot be settled out of the workhouse, but he protests to you that he is quite happy and satisfied, and if that is so, he may as well choose his own dwelling, for satisfaction is the general goal of life, though few indeed are they who ever succeed in attaining to it.

There is an interesting character in the old men’s ward. He used to be gatekeeper for many years, and was a schoolmaster by profession.
He was surprised that anyone should be interested in him. “This place is a hell to me,” he said fervently, “there is no one at all to speak with, no one at all.” He looked round on the others: “The best time they ever had in their lives, most of them,” he declared; “they love it. Oh, if I had only known it, if I only had! But there, it’s no use now.” He was born in Oxfordshire. They were well-to-do. “I hear you were a school-master.” “Yes.” “Now, tell me all about it.” “My first school was near Marlborough; that was in ’64. I have spent many happy hours in the forest at Savernake. Then I went on the Indefatigable in the Mersey.” “Yes.” “After that I went to Wrexham, then near Snowdon, but I did not get on so well among the Welsh. After that I had a school in Surrey, that was my last,” “And why did you leave that?” “Disagreed with the parson over High Church matters, and was forced to quit. My dear mother died at that time. I spent all my money. Father didn’t want me. My brothers were well off, but they didn’t want me either. I tramped about from place to place, came to Swindon, got a job, clerk to an insurance agent at 12s. a week, and lost it, and that’s how I came to be here.” I forbore to ask him of the future, for he has great sensibility, and that is pretty obvious. He is seventy now. What hope is there remaining for him in that place – what hope, I say? I will leave you to answer the question.

In the ward with the old veteran were a little lad of ten in consumption, waiting his turn at the sanatorium; another of about the same age with skin troubles; a blacksmith who had been operated on for spinal disease and pronounced incurable; one in bed with hopeless rheumatism; another with heart and lung disease, who, when he breathed, lifted himself half out of bed, and whose days are certainly numbered, though he spoke to me very cheerfully; and another lying like death itself. Several times I asked him, as kindly as I could, what was the matter, but received no answer, or thought I did not, though his eyes met mine, then he turned them aside. Stooping still closer to him I repeated, “What is the matter with you?” Then his lips moved, though very faintly – no sound came from them – but I could tell from their motion it was “Heart.” His dinner, a large cup of stew and a thick chunk of bread, stood on the locker untouched beside him; the other inmates went on with their meal, and took no notice of him. Dying! A slow lingering death, and the others beside him as well. Without, the great world goes on its course. The happy and prosperous, the smug and comfortable, arise, go forth, eat, drink, enjoy life, and home to rest. Thought! Pity! Condolence! What? For whom? What do you mean? I do not understand you! Selfishness! Greed! Personal pride! Tragedy! Tragedy!
About the authors

Caroline Ockwell is the Secretary/Treasurer and a co-founder of the Alfred Williams Heritage Society and is passionate about Alfred Williams and his literary works. Her family’s connections with ‘The Hammerman Poet’ go back much further than the century covered by In the Shadow of the Workhouse. Her grandfather grew up with Alfred during the late 19th century and he was a frequent visitor to her family home in Stratton St Margaret. Caroline grew up in Stratton during the 1950/1960s, just a mile away from the old workhouse, and her former primary school shared its boundary with “the house”. The combination of these close connections gave her the inspiration to link the Heritage Lottery Fund’s All Our Stories project with the writing of this book. This is the first time Caroline has taken up the challenge to become an author, previously always having been too busy with her day job as a chartered tax adviser.

Graham Carter is a freelance journalist with a special interest in local history, and he is the Vice-chair and a co-founder of the Alfred Williams Heritage Society. Born in Swindon and brought up in Upper Stratton, he can trace his ancestry back to this area over at least eight generations. In 2006 he researched a major history called The Chronicle of Swindon, which was serialised by the Swindon Advertiser, and he writes a weekly column for the paper. In 2012 he became a co-founder of Swindon Heritage, and in 2014 he published Full Circle, an illustrated history of that part of the former Swindon Railway Works now occupied by the University Technical College in the Railway Village.
See www.alfredwilliams.org.uk to read the other chapters and to find out how to buy a hard copy of the book.