IN THE SHADOW OF THE WORKHOUSE
The Swindon & Highworth Union Institution, c1912, and its legacy

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Chapter V
The Workhouse in the 1911 Census (Part 1)

This chapter looks at the total population of the workhouse on census day 1911, Sunday, April 3, and some of the people it lists (see the Appendix for a numerical breakdown of its occupants).

On that day the workhouse accommodated sixteen resident staff and 333 inmates. The staff figures included the Master and the Matron, invariably a husband-and-wife team, a school teacher, labour mistress, girls’ industrial trainer and boys’ superintendent. Also on the payroll were a porter, cook, laundress and seven hospital nurses.

The master in 1911 was fifty-five-year-old John Frank Kilby whose whole life experience had been centred on the workhouse system. He was born in 1855 in the Kettering Union Workhouse, where his parents were Master and Matron. At the time of the 1871 census the family had moved to the Greenwich Union Workhouse, where his parents again held the roles of Master and Matron. By 1901 John and his wife, Emily, are running the Swindon and Highworth Union Workhouse and by 1911 their twenty-four-year-old daughter, Mary, is also employed there as the school teacher. Nepotism had been rife in the Poor Law system ever since 1834.

John died in the last quarter of 1914, while still employed at the workhouse. His wife would not have been permitted to continue as Matron after his death because the Master and Matron’s roles were almost invariably treated as a joint appointment. She would therefore have been left homeless and jobless following his demise. We know that John’s mother had died in 1885 and in the 1891 census we find his father liv-
The workhouse in the 1911 census (Part 1)

The workhouse cook in 1911 was Rose Annie Lewis, a forty-three-year-old widow, originally from Northamptonshire. This appears to be a relatively new position because there is no sign of a cook on the 1901 census. Rose would have been responsible for ensuring that the workhouse diet was strictly observed, and that there was no wastage. She would also have a team of inmates working for her, doing all the menial and heavy tasks. One thing that we can be certain about – the meals for the Master and Matron and their family would have been far more nutritious and lavish than those provided to the inmates.

The remainder of the workhouse staff worked in the infirmary. They are all described on the census as hospital nurses, although, at first glance, there is no indication of whether any of them are qualified nurses. Early nursing care in union workhouses was invariably in the hands of female inmates who would often be illiterate, a serious problem when dealing with labels on medicine bottles!

Before 1863, not a single trained nurse existed in any workhouse infirmary outside London, and in the 1860s pressure began for improvements in workhouse medical care. Some of the most notable campaigners were Louisa Twining, a prominent figure in the Workhouse Visiting Society; Joseph Rogers, medical officer (and severe critic) of the Strand workhouse in London; Florence Nightingale; and the medical journal, The Lancet. In 1865 The Lancet began a series of detailed reports about conditions in London’s workhouse infirmaries. As a result of such reports, the government was forced into action and in 1867 the Metropolitan Poor Act was passed, requiring London workhouses to locate their hospital facilities on separate sites from the workhouse. Florence Nightingale's campaigning also led to improvements in the standard of nursing care, particularly with the founding in 1860 of the Nightingale Fund School at St Thomas’s Hospital. Other hospitals, including both voluntary hospitals and some workhouse infirmaries, established their own training schools, many with superintendents trained at the Nightingale School. Then, in 1914, the British Journal of Nursing reported that the original work of the Fund was completed, and the Fund Council had decided to offer scholarships for the ‘further and fuller training’ of nurses. Two years later, in 1916, the College of Nursing Ltd was founded with thirty-four members, then...
in 1919, the Nurses’ Act was passed, establishing a register for nurses for the first time.

Interestingly, in 1901 there were only four hospital nurses reported on the Stratton Workhouse census, one of whom was described as superintendent nurse Margaret Jane Roulston, from Londonderry. It is likely that Margaret had benefitted from formal training to have earned this rank, but she does not stay in Stratton; the 1911 census shows that she had moved to Staffordshire, where she is working as a superintendent nurse at Leek Union Workhouse.

However, by 1911 the number of nurses had almost doubled to seven, but no-one is described as a superintendent nurse, so it would appear that none of the seven nurses had received formal training. Their ages ranged from twenty-one to thirty-three, and only two of them had been born in Swindon. The other five had travelled from various parts of the country, leaving their families behind, to work in the union infirmary. We have been able to check the 1901 census for some of the older nurses, looking for verification of any previous nursing experience, but we found none. Helen Dunn, aged twenty-eight and from Bristol, had previously worked as a ‘stay machinist’ in a corset factory. Edith Woods, a thirty-two-year-old from Norwich, had been a dressmaker and Fanny Luckhurst from Clerkenwell, aged thirty-three, was a book binder. The apparent lack of previous nursing experience and the absence of any professionally trained nurses in the infirmary in 1911 did not augur well for the level of care provided for its patients. The infirmary had been rebuilt in 1900 to cope with growing demand, the tender for its construction having been granted to local builder AJ Colbourne.

An analysis of the inmates by gender and age is shown on the graph in the Appendix (see page 205). The oldest gentleman in the workhouse was Thomas Mulcock, a ninety-five-year-old widower from Bishopstone. We know that he had been admitted to the workhouse at some time after the 1901 census because at that time he was living with his son, Henry, at West End, Bishopstone, along with Henry’s wife, Myra, and two grandchildren, Walter and Gertrude. The census also records that Thomas was still working as a gardener in 1901, despite the fact that he was in his mid-eighties – not uncommon at that time, before the Old Age Pension Act of 1908. An examination of the previous census of 1891 shows Thomas as still living with his son in Bishopstone, although ten years earlier, in 1881, he is recorded as being head of the household at The Forty in Bishopstone, living there with his daughter, Martha, and two granddaughters, Florence and Elizabeth. The 1871 census is the first census to record Thomas as a widower, his wife, Ann, having died in 1862, aged thirty-seven. They had raised a family of five children, having married in 1848. The 1851 census shows Thomas and Ann living with their eldest child, Martha, in Bishopstone. Thomas’s mother, Sarah, was also living with them in 1851, described as a ‘pauper, born in 1779’. Sarah also lived to a good old age, especially for that era, dying in 1864 aged eighty-five.

Thomas died on August 10, 1911, only months after the census. In view of his advanced years, it is likely that he was a patient in the infirmary, although we cannot be sure of this because the census did not differentiate between inmates and infirmary patients. We know that by 1911 Thomas’s son, Henry, and his family had moved to Lambourn, where Henry was employed as a stud groom, so there is always the possibility that they had not been able to take Thomas with them. The death certificate gives the place of death as ‘Workhouse, Stratton St Margaret’ and the cause of death as ‘senile decay’. The death is registered by the workhouse Master so sadly no member of Thomas’s family was either willing or able to register the death; such a sad and lonely end to a very long life.

The oldest lady in the workhouse was an eighty-eight-year-old widow, Charlotte Taylor, of Highworth. Although tracing Charlotte’s life is more difficult than tracing Thomas’s (because we were not given her maiden name), we have managed to trace her back to her youth in Highworth. The 1841 census shows her working as a domestic servant at the house of John Salmon, the Registrar for Births, Deaths and Marriages for the Highworth and Swindon District, and he had eleven children. She was the only servant employed there, so there is always the possibility that she had not been able to take Thomas with them. The death certificate gives the place of death as ‘Workhouse, Stratton St Margaret’ and the cause of death as ‘senile decay’. The death is registered by the workhouse Master so sadly no member of Thomas’s family was either willing or able to register the death; such a sad and lonely end to a very long life.
in 1860. However, there is no trace of their eldest child, William. Tragedy struck in 1862 when baby James died from acute hydrocephalus and then in 1870 Charlotte’s husband died, just forty-four years old. In between the two deaths, however, Charlotte had another baby, John Frank, born in 1864. She re-maries within six months of James’s death. Her new husband is William Litten, a thatcher by trade, and a widower, sixteen years her senior. William also lived in Westrop and they must have been neighbours. The 1871 census shows Charlotte and William living together at Westrop with Charlotte’s seven-year-old son, John. Sadly, though, this marriage did not last long because William died in the following year, leaving Charlotte as a widowed mother yet again. After four years of widowhood Charlotte then marries Benjamin Taylor, a shepherd, originally from Ashbury, and the 1881 census shows them living at 20 Eastrop Cottages. In the 1891 census they are living in Faringdon Road, Highworth, where they are both described as being ‘now on parish’.

The 1901 census shows Charlotte living in a three-roomed house at Eastrop in Highworth and it states that she was receiving Parish Relief. She is also described as a widow at this stage, Benjamin having died in 1895, aged seventy-seven. She was evidently struggling to survive at that time, but she had obviously managed to keep outside the workhouse door despite having been widowed for a third time.

By this time Charlotte’s son, John, had married and was living with his wife, Ann in Fairford, where he was employed as a shepherd, and he is the father of six children. Feeding and clothing a large family on a shepherd’s wage would not have been easy and John would not therefore have been in a position to support his widowed mother and keep her out of the workhouse. She did still have some contact, however, with her extended family. When Charlotte died at the workhouse on May 29, 1913 at the age of ninety, her death was registered by her niece, Annie Ferris, also of Highworth. Charlotte’s death marked the end of a tough and challenging life, so very typical of her generation.

The numbers of agricultural labourers, general labourers, workers employed by the GWR, other skilled/semi-skilled workers and those employed in domestic service are all very similar. This would seem to indicate that no particular sector experienced greater hardship than the others at that time – one of the times in the Great Western Railway’s history when it was experiencing difficulty and reducing some of its workforce.

There are, however, a few inmates who are more conspicuous than their peers, solely by virtue of their respective former occupations, which were somewhat grander than one would expect to meet in the workhouse. One of these is the former teacher, George Lawrence, who has already featured in Chapter III. There was also another teacher there, a twenty-five-year-old single lady, Emily Moir, who is listed in the census alongside her one-year old twins, John Raymond and Elsie May, born during the second quarter of 1910. The twins do not appear to have been born in the workhouse because Emily had brought them with her to “the house” on September 9, 1910, when they were just a few months old. Our heart goes out to poor Emily; what were her chances of escaping from the workhouse with her two children? Emily was born in Forest Gate, Essex and she had moved, with her family, to Kemsford as a child. Her father is described in the 1891 census as a joiner, but ten years later he has improved himself, the 1901 census describing him as Clerk of Works at Buscot Park. By this time Emily is working as a housekeeper and still living at home. She has also sought to improve herself, the 1911 census recording her as ‘School Teacher, Berkshire County Council’. Sadly her pregnancy prevented her from pursuing her career as a teacher any further. Our research has identified Emily’s death on September 27, 1962, when her death certificate states her occupation as ‘Spinster, Housekeeper retired’ – all her hopes and aspirations dashed by one mistake. We know nothing of the father, so we are left wondering to what extent it may have affected his life, if at all. The death certificate reveals two other interesting pieces of information.

Firstly, the person who notified her death is described as her son, AJ Masters, which could mean that John Raymond may have been adopted and changed his name. Until the 1920s there was no official adoption legislation, but this changed with the introduction of the Adoption of Children Act of 1926. Secondly, the certificate states that Emily’s death, from heart failure, took place at St Margaret’s Hospital, Highworth Road, Stratton St Margaret. Returning to that very same site
to end her days must have brought back some very sad memories for Emily.

Emily was not the only single mother in the workhouse in 1911. The census also shows Ada Matthews, a twenty-seven-year-old domestic servant, and her three-year-old daughter Florence May, who was born during the third quarter of 1907. The 1901 census shows Ada living at 20 Carr Street, which has long since disappeared from the town centre. She was living there with her widowed mother and four siblings. Life must have been a struggle for Ada and her family even before she fell pregnant. Ada’s first child, William, was born in the workhouse on January 7, 1904, Ada having been admitted on October 17, 1903. She took her baby out of the workhouse on July 20, 1904, but they both returned there on September 5 of the same year and stayed for three months. They returned yet again on January 31, 1905, when she was pregnant for the second time and baby Margaret Maud is born on May 10, 1905. Sadly, her new baby dies on January 10, 1906, and six days later Ada and William leave the workhouse. Ada returns again to “the house” on May 14, 1908 and presumably brings her youngest child, Florence, with her, although we could find no reference to Florence’s admission in the Workhouse Creed Register. There is also no reference to William accompanying her so his whereabouts will have to remain a mystery. What is disturbing about Ada’s situation in the workhouse is the entry for her in the infirmary column of the census, which reads “Feeble Minded”. There is no reference to this alleged condition in the earlier censuses for Ada so we are left wondering how she came to acquire this label; it could be down to the fact that she had conceived out of wedlock on three separate occasions, a justification for ‘feeble-mindedness’ in those days.

Another unmarried mother trapped in the workhouse was Ellen Leach, aged thirty-five. Her situation was even worse because she had three children in the workhouse with her – Florence Kate, aged twelve; Elsie May, aged ten; and three-year-old Margaret Ella. This statement is not literally correct, however, because the children would not have actually lived with Ellen. She would have been separated from them as soon as they entered the workhouse, or in the case of a baby born at the workhouse, as soon as the child had been weaned. We know from the 1901 census that the two elder daughters had been living with Ellen at their grandmother’s home in Chiseldon even though Elsie, the younger of the two girls, had been born in the workhouse just a few months earlier, on January 16, 1901. Ellen was shown as a fieldworker at that time and her widowed mother was a laundress. Eking out a living with the two children to look after must have been difficult enough but the situation worsened when another child, Edith Emily, was born on July 10, 1904, but sadly she died early in 1906. We believe that Edith died at home because there is no record of the death in the workhouse records and we do know that Ellen took her children in and out of it on numerous occasions between 1904 and March 1907, when the Creed Register records her re-admission with her two older daughters. The youngest daughter is also recorded as having been born in the workhouse, on January 9, 1908, and as there is no record of Ellen leaving the workhouse after March 1907 we are left wondering how she conceived another child within the strict workhouse regime! Perhaps the regime was not so strict after all.

Ellen must have met with some good fortune after 1911 because she eventually succeeded in making her final escape from the workhouse. Our research has proved that in 1916 she married widower William Oakford, whose wife, Ada, had died in 1915, leaving him with three young children to look after. We are left wondering how this marriage came about; did William go to the workhouse looking for a housekeeper to look after his children and himself, or did he know Ellen already? The marriage lasted for eighteen years, until his death in 1934 at the age of fifty-five from acute bronchial asthma. Ellen died six years later, in 1940, aged sixty-four, the cause of her death being cancer of the colon. Her death was registered by her eldest daughter, Florence, who by then had married and was living in Ogbourne St Andrew. Thankfully, their experience in the workhouse had not split the family.

There are two other ladies worthy of mention, sisters Elizabeth and Florence Hiscocks. Both sisters appear in the 1911 census at the workhouse and both have illegitimate children there. Elizabeth, aged thirty, has a one-year-old daughter, Violet, and eight-year-old Gertrude, both of whom were born in the workhouse. Florence, aged twenty-seven, has a four-year-old daughter, Dorothy May. She had also given birth to a son, Albert, at the workhouse in 1902, just three months before her sister’s baby was born. Sadly, though, Albert died shortly after his birth,
in the same registration quarter. Elizabeth and Florence were the daughters of Ellen and William Hiscocks, a coachmaker’s labourer of Regent Place, Swindon, who had died in 1900. In the 1901 census the family has moved to 43 Exmouth Street where their mother is trying to make ends meet by taking in washing. Interestingly, in the 1901 census Elizabeth is described in the infirmity column as “Feeble Minded” but this is the only time we see this appearing on any census. As explained in Chapter IV, however, we are aware of concerns raised by the guardians over the influence of an older woman on Elizabeth’s behaviour and wellbeing. A thorough investigation of the Creed Register does indeed show Elizabeth and her daughters being discharged and re-admitted on numerous occasions between 1904 and 1916. We have traced Florence’s death in 1957 and her death certificate describes her as a spinster so she obviously never married. Sadly, the place of death is stated as Old Park House, Devizes, which was a branch of Roundway Hospital. The property was purchased by the Ministry of Health in 1948 to relieve the overcrowding problem at Roundway, a long-standing problem ever since it opened as the Wiltshire County Asylum for the Insane in 1851. We do not know how long Florence had been languishing there before her death. It is possible that she may never have managed to break away completely from the institutionalised lifestyle that had been imposed on her when, as a pregnant single mother, she was forced to enter the workhouse. Although Roundway was officially a mental hospital, it was not uncommon to send patients there who were not mentally ill. This was acknowledged by its first medical superintendent back in the 1850s, and begs the question of whether this practice continued after his tenure; a thought-provoking question, but outside the remit of this book. Florence’s death certificate also gives us an insight into her sister Elizabeth’s fate. Elizabeth is shown as the person notifying Florence’s death and her address is shown as ‘c/o St James Hospital, Devizes’. By 1957 this had become a geriatric hospital, following the introduction of the National Health Service in 1948, but before that it had been the Devizes Workhouse. We do not know how long Elizabeth had been living there, but she was obviously a long-term patient there to have used the hospital as her address. It is even possible that she had arrived there before 1948 when it was still the workhouse, otherwise known in those days as the Public Assistance Institution. We have been able to trace the marriage of Elizabeth’s daughter, Violet, on May 1, 1943 to Albert Gaze, both aged thirty-three. They lived next-door to each other in Cricklade Road, Gorse Hill, Swindon, and Albert was serving his country in the RAF at the time of their marriage. In ‘civvy street’ he had been an insurance agent and Violet was working as a ‘machinist in engineering works’, presumably the GWR Works. Their wedding took place at the former Railway Mission Hall in Wellington Street, on the spot near to the site on which the Swindon Bus Station now stands. This must have been the most modest wedding venue in Swindon, being just a small wooden hut, but it is quite possible that Violet may have found great support in that small building. The British Railway Mission was founded in 1881 to communicate the Christian Gospel to the people working for the railway and its associated industries and it is therefore likely that Violet, as a young single woman with no close family on hand to support her, had sought and received friendship there.

One very sad fact that we have been able to verify about Elizabeth is her death on July 27, 1977 at Roundway Hospital, aged ninety-six. Although we cannot be certain, it is very likely that Elizabeth had been institutionalised for the best part of seven decades of her long life – effectively a life sentence for becoming a single mother at the beginning of the 20th century. There was no family member to register her death – she had obviously been abandoned and long forgotten – so we cannot begin to imagine how she had managed to cope with such a hopeless existence over what must have seemed an eternity.

Before we move on from the plight of the unmarried mothers and their children trapped within the workhouse walls, we will consider the fate of a couple of the other female inmates who were not yet classified as unmarried mothers, because their babies had not yet been born, although it was only a matter of time.

Examining the census reports it was not difficult to identify young single female inmates, invariably domestic servants. Curiosity over the reason for their presence in the workhouse led us to investigate the matter further and as a result of those investigations we discovered two of them giving birth within the following nine months.

The first of these women to give birth was Lizzie Adams. This is not her real name because we have used a fictitious name to protect the
family’s identity. We have been extremely fortunate in tracing the story of Lizzie and her baby son because Lizzie’s grandson responded to our request in the local press for memories of the workhouse. You can read the full story in Chapter VIII, under the heading of Michael Jefferies (again a fictitious name). In that story Michael guesses that his uncle had been born in the workhouse. We can confirm that Michael was correct, the birth certificate stating both the place of birth, on May 13, 1911, and the mother’s address as 8 Highworth Road, Stratton St Margaret. By the early 20th century it was common practice to use this address, thereby avoiding any embarrassing reference to the workhouse. We can also confirm that the father’s name section had been left blank.

The second young woman to give birth was charwoman Rose Boland, aged twenty-seven. Rose gave birth to a baby daughter, Violet May, on June 12, 1911, and again the place of birth is 8 Highworth Road. The certificate also confirms that Rose was living at that address when the baby was born, although it also provides her previous address of 22 Queen Street, Swindon. She had moved there sometime after 1901, the census for that year showing her family living at 37 Rodbourne Road. Rose came from a large family of nine children, but only seven of them had survived infancy. Her parents, Rose and William, had both been born in Ireland and her father was a general labourer. In 1911 they were still living at 22 Queen Street with their youngest daughter, eighteen-year-old Beatrice, a domestic servant. We can only assume that Rose had been sent to the workhouse to have her baby to avoid bringing shame on the family. This was not the first illegitimate child that Rose had brought into the world. We have traced her admission into the workhouse on May 9, 1904 and three months later, on August 16, 1904 Rose gives birth to a daughter, Beatrice Maud. Between January 1905 and September 1906 Rose and her daughter spend several periods out of the workhouse, but she returns in January 1909 because she has fallen pregnant again. This time she produces a little boy, Reginald Charles, born on May 21, 1909. Reginald did not live long – he died during the third quarter of 1909. Sadly, Violet May was destined to suffer the same fate, although she did survive longer than Reginald. She died at the workhouse on March 4, 1914, aged two years and nine months, her cause of death being phthisis, a form of tuberculosis. Her mother, Rose, was still living in the workhouse at that time and was indeed present at her daughter’s death. Unfortunately, our efforts to discover what happened to Rose after her sad loss have been unsuccessful.

Besides the illegitimate children living in the workhouse, there were many more juvenile inmates. The number of children living there in 1911 who were under the age of fourteen totalled fifty-nine. In addition to the main workhouse building there were a further twenty-one girls and twelve boys living in the separate children’s home, situated at the top end of Swindon Road, near its junction with Ermin Street, at 2 The Villas, next-door to the doctor’s house and surgery. The home was run by two sisters who had moved to Stratton from Newport in Monmouthshire. The elder sister, Isabella Dalton, aged thirty-five, is described in the census as ‘Foster Mother Children’s Home’ and her younger sister, Edith, aged thirty-two, is described as ‘Assistant Children’s Home’. We will be looking at the lives of some of these children and their families in the next chapter because the stories that we have unearthed deserve a chapter of their own.

To conclude this chapter we will consider another group of inmates worthy of mention, those recorded on the census as having an infirmity. There were a total of eighteen inmates listed as such. These included three blind people, one person who was deaf and dumb, two with epilepsy and one gentleman who was paraplegic. The remaining eleven inmates were described as having a variety of mental health problems or learning difficulties. Since the turn of the 20th century the severity of mental health problems had been classified into four distinct categories. These were ‘lunatic’, ‘idiot’, ‘imbecile’ and ‘feeble-minded’. Someone who was labelled as a ‘lunatic’ was considered to be capable of being rehabilitated to resume the position of their ‘normal life’ before they were stricken. ‘Idiot’ indicated someone who had not been fully developed mentally since birth and had no true chance of recovering their mental faculties as well as often having a short life expectancy. An ‘imbecile’, on the other hand, was a medical category of people with moderate to severe intellectual disability as well as a type of criminal. The term derives from the Latin word ‘imbecillus’, meaning weak, or weak-minded. It included people with an IQ of twenty-one to fifty. The final category is the ‘feeble-minded’, defined by The Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded (1904–1908) in its report in 1908 as ‘Persons who may be capable of earning a living.
under favourable circumstances, but are incapable from mental defect, existing from birth or from an early age: (1) of competing on equal terms with their normal fellows, or (2) of managing themselves and their affairs with ordinary prudence.’

Incarcerated in the workhouse in 1911 were three ‘lunatics’, two ‘idiots’, two ‘imbeciles’ and four ‘feeble-minded’ or ‘weak-minded’ people. The duration of the respective condition is also given on the census, if known. The first ‘imbecile’ we come across is forty-year-old Henry Gleed. He is described as having lived with that condition throughout his life. This piece of information invites further investigation: how long has Henry been living in the workhouse?

Our initial research shows that he had been there for at least ten years because he appears on the 1901 census, again described as an ‘imbecile’. However, he would appear to have spent a period outside the workhouse at some time during the first decade of the 20th century because the Creed Register records him being admitted on March 19, 1904. Back in 1891 the census showed him living with his parents and nine younger siblings at Hackpen Hill, when there is no mention of any learning difficulty and he is working as an agricultural labourer. Indeed, ten years earlier Henry is included in the 1881 census as a scholar, so he was obviously attending school. This begs the very worrying question: why did Henry enter the workhouse? Unfortunately we do not have a definitive answer, but we do know that Henry lived another seven years after we found him on the 1911 census. He died on April 23, 1918, at Roundway Hospital in Devizes, described on the death certificate as ‘County Asylum’. Henry was only forty-six when he died and his death had been registered by his younger brother, Albert, who lived in Kingsdown. Henry’s cause of death is stated as ‘Dysentery 5 months 15 days PM’ (post mortem). This raises yet another question: how could a patient suffer from dysentery for such a long period of time? Poor Henry must have suffered a long and extremely distressing death, in an era when antibiotics had not yet been discovered. He would also have suffered from a lack of proper nursing care, the ‘nursing staff’ being mainly long-term patients of the asylum, a practice that continued for at least another half-century. He had also suffered the misfortune of being transferred there from the workhouse at a time when dysentery was rife at the asylum. During 1915 and 1916 the incidence of dysentery and tuberculosis had doubled and by 1920 the asylum was receiving negative reports from the hospital inspectors because both conditions were still prevalent. We can only conclude, in Henry’s case, that he would have received better treatment in the workhouse than in the asylum, where we have found many other inmates spending their final days.

Another inmate being labelled with one of these four categories is Elizabeth Spencer, aged forty-six, single, and described as having been a ‘lunatic’ since she was thirty-six. Poor Elizabeth had been trapped in the workhouse for at least twenty years. She appears as an inmate there in both the 1891 and 1901 censuses, although there is no reference to her suffering from any infirmity in either of those censuses. We have traced the birth of a son, Ernest, in the workhouse on February 19, 1893, but sadly he died a year later. Elizabeth’s apparent onset of lunacy after sixteen years in the workhouse is not altogether surprising. Was her mental illness triggered by the loss of her child or was it a result of being incarcerated in the workhouse for so long? Perhaps she was not mentally ill at all, but someone in authority had deemed her so. Whatever the reason, we find Elizabeth dying at Roundway Hospital in March 1937, aged sixty-nine. Her occupation is shown as ‘Of Public Assistance Institution Stratton St Margaret, a spinster farm-worker’, and her cause of death is given as ‘cardio vascular degeneration for at least ten years’. The death is registered by the hospital’s medical superintendent; there did not appear to be anyone around to mourn the passing of this lonesome soul.

Moving on to the other infirmities challenging the inmates we have researched sixty-three-year-old William Nash, a single man who had been blind since birth. William had been in the workhouse for over two decades by 1911; he appears in both the 1891 and 1901 censuses as well. He was the eldest child of John and Sarah Ann Nash and he lived with them and his younger siblings in Swindon. William’s mother died in 1877 and his father died in 1894, aged seventy-one. We find John in the 1891 census living with one of William’s younger brothers and his wife, and John is described as ‘living on son’. Obviously William’s brother and sister-in-law were either unable or unwilling to look after him as well, so his fate was to be sent to the workhouse for the rest of his days. It would appear from the high number of discharges from and
re-admissions to the workhouse (at least thirteen recorded between 1904 and 1916) that William must have felt very unhappy and restless within the workhouse walls. He eventually died at the workhouse on December 20, 1922, aged seventy-four, the cause of death being ‘senility’. No-one in William’s family registered his death, this having been done by someone called WJ Wiltshire and described as ‘Occupier 8 Highworth Road, Stratton St Margaret’. Having spent almost half his life in the workhouse, William must have had plenty of time to reflect on the lack of compassion shown to less fortunate members of society.

We conclude this chapter by looking at another inmate who was unfortunate enough to be born with a disability. Her name was Jane Osman, a fifty-three-year-old single lady who had been deaf and dumb since birth. Jane had been trapped in the workhouse for even longer than William; we find her there in every census between 1881 and 1911. There is no trace of her in the 1871 census, but we do find her in the 1861 census, aged just three and living with her family in Chiseldon. In the 1881 census Jane is described as a charwoman so she must have tried to earn a living in spite of her disability. It has not been possible to discover any more about Jane apart from the fact that she died in Devizes on November 28, 1928, aged sixty-nine. Her death certificate shows the place of death as Wiltshire County Mental Hospital, its name having changed in 1922. In the occupation section of the certificate, Jane is described as ‘of The Workhouse, Stratton St Margaret, Swindon, Spinster of no occupation’. There was no mention of her work as a charwoman many years before; that had been long forgotten. The cause of death is given as “Fatty degeneration of heart for at least 1 year 6 months” and the death was registered by the hospital’s Medical Superintendent, Sydney Cole, who held that position from 1913 to his retirement in 1934, therefore having been in charge a decade earlier, when there was a record number of fatalities from tuberculosis and the dysentery that had killed Henry Gleed. We do not know when Jane was transferred to Roundway, nor the reason for the move, but it is quite possible that it was not necessitated by Jane experiencing any mental health problems, but maybe more for the benefit of the agencies concerned. What we do know for sure is that Jane’s death brought to an end half a century of incarceration in institutions where she had seemed quite alone in the world.

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.