



IN THE SHADOW OF THE

# WORKHOUSE

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

ONLINE (PDF) VERSION,  
CHAPTER BY CHAPTER:  
INTRODUCTIONS

**Caroline Ockwell & Graham Carter**

A Heritage Lottery Fund project by the Alfred Williams Heritage Society

See **[www.alfredwilliams.org.uk](http://www.alfredwilliams.org.uk)** to  
read the other chapters and to find out  
how to buy a hard copy of the book

With thanks to Paul Wilkins, Brian Carter, Frances Bevan, Andy Binks,  
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the preparation of the book, and all those who contributed stories  
and other information to the project

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## Preface

*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.*

*Alfred Williams, A Wiltshire Village, 1912*

It seems fitting that the inspiration for this book has come from a truly inspirational local author whose life spanned the latter quarter of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century – a time when life in the workhouse was gradually changing.

That author is Alfred Williams, known widely as ‘The Hammerman Poet’. Spending his entire lifetime (apart from First World War service) in the village of South Marston, he was familiar with the Highworth and Swindon Union Workhouse, situated in Highworth Road, in the neighbouring village of Stratton St Margaret, just a short walk across the fields from his home.

Alfred was an exceptional person. Despite becoming a ‘half-timer’ at the village school at the age of eight, and leaving education completely when he was just eleven years old, he learned the classics, read Shakespeare, experimented with painting, taught himself four languages and, all the time, went about absorbing whatever information he could about the natural world and the people around him. This was no mean feat considering that he fitted all this into his meagre spare time, either at home or in breaks at work in nearby Swindon’s Great Western Railway factory, where he worked in the Carriage and Wagon Works’ stamping shop.

It is Alfred’s first published book of prose, *A Wiltshire Village*, which has inspired us to delve further into the aspects of everyday life in our local workhouse during the early part of the 20th century. While his book mainly describes his home village of South Marston in 1911/12, he has included a complete chapter devoted to the workhouse, which

accommodated residents from South Marston as well as other neighbouring villages and, of course, the industrial town of Swindon. This chapter makes compelling reading, expertly portraying the feelings of despair and hopelessness experienced by those unfortunate persons forced to live within its walls. It also vividly describes the fear and dread instilled in those more fortunate individuals who have, at least for the time being, managed to maintain their independence.

The Alfred Williams Heritage Society's centenary celebrations in 2012 to commemorate the publication of *A Wiltshire Village* coincided with the Heritage Lottery Fund's launch of its All Our Stories project, inviting local community groups throughout the country to bid for funding to collect people's stories of past events and record those recollections for posterity. This project mirrored exactly Alfred's enthusiasm, a century earlier, for collecting stories from his fellow country folk and record them for the enrichment and enjoyment of future generations – and so the idea of writing this book was born.

Alfred's description of "the house" gave us a head start in our research, which has included trying to find the real-life stories behind the specific characters named in his book. We have experienced varying degrees of success in this aspect, and you can read more about this in Chapter III.

The publication of *A Wiltshire Village* came shortly after the 1911 census was taken, and we have been able to use this to build up a picture of the staff and inmates living there at that time. This is described in detail in Chapters V and VI. We have also conducted a lot of research at the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre in Chippenham, reading through old minute and account books, and used the scant details of registers that still exist to track individual inmates, wherever possible.

Our quest for information has not been limited to the events of a hundred years ago. We have researched the origins of the workhouse system in Elizabethan times, through to the creation of the "modern" workhouse in the 1830s and then its conversion to a Public Assistance Institution almost 100 years later, before it was eventually replaced in the late 1940s by the Elm Court Welfare Home. Meanwhile, the infirmary became St Margaret's Hospital following the introduction of Britain's welfare state and our National Health Service. A lot of the research for this latter period has also been conducted at the Wiltshire

and Swindon History Centre and we are grateful to Claire Skinner and her hardworking team there for all their help and support.

We also owe a huge debt of gratitude to all those members of the public who have responded to our requests for personal contributions, some of whom are descendants of former inmates of 8 Highworth Road – the workhouse's alternative address, which was invented for use on official documents, thus alleviating the stigma of those who were born there. We recorded interviews with them, some telling harrowing and heart-rending stories of loved ones' life experiences within its walls.

We have also met former staff of St Margaret's Hospital and even the son of a former Superintendent of the Public Assistance Institution/Elm Court who grew up there during the 1940s/1950s.

Extracts of some of the interviews can also be found on our website, [www.alfredwilliams.org.uk](http://www.alfredwilliams.org.uk), where you will also be able to listen to a song composed and performed by John Cullimore, Chair of the Alfred Williams Heritage Society. Called *The Shadow of the Workhouse*, this is a very emotive song, portraying the real fear and dread of the workhouse, and is well worth a listen.

We also have to thank a number of local historians for their help, including Frances Bevan and Andy Binks, and particularly Paul Wilkins, whose broader history of the workhouse we look forward to reading when his extensive research is complete.

Our own research did not stop in the past. In our modern, relatively affluent society, we regularly hear news reports of increasing reliance on foodbanks, radical reforms of our current welfare system, the plight of the homeless and the abuse of the more vulnerable members of our society, so in our final chapter we ask: what happens now?

Writing this book has been challenging at times and extremely thought-provoking. We feel privileged that our contributors have been prepared to share their personal stories with us, and we sincerely hope that the following pages will give you the reader a greater insight into life at 8 Highworth Road, Stratton St Margaret, during the last century.

**Caroline Ockwell & Graham Carter**  
Alfred Williams Heritage Society  
December 2014

## The Shadow of the Workhouse

by John Cullimore,  
Chair of the Alfred Williams Heritage Society

To all those I have loved, this song is writ for you.  
In sickness and in health, I've known what I must do.

Here in our self-made Eden, we've struggled and we've grieved.  
We trusted dear old England to meet our every need,  
And yet it seems we've come to this; we live on charity and gifts.

While some admit defeat and turn away in shame,  
We struggle to go on and hope for better days.

The shadow of the workhouse reaching to our door,  
And if we take relief, we're doomed for evermore.  
I'd rather die here in my bed than join those ranks of living dead.

Forced to sacrifice the homes that they had built,  
Sad they could not raise the funds to pay their bills.

I hear them kicking, screaming, taken with brute force  
From their place of refuge, dragged through their front door.  
How did they reach this sorry state?  
No man should ever bear this fate.

Last home of the poor and unfortunate,  
Many go there to end their days,  
Out of sight of all that is kind and charitable:  
Forgotten, deserted, forlorn.

The shadow of the workhouse reaches to our door,  
And if we take relief, we're doomed for ever more.  
How did we reach this sorry state?  
No man should ever bear this fate.

The dust and rags of human kind alone, abandoned and resigned.

Dedicated to the memory of  
Alfred Williams  
(1877-1930)

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## 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.

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