

THE WORKHOUSE

A workhouse was an unlikely requirement of the Ombersley Church Act of 1814. As with the new church, building was deliberately delayed and construction did not begin until the Autumn of 1826.

A sub-committee of the trustees of the new church was appointed and first met on 11 June 1817. Some preliminary had been done and an architect, Mr. Winks, had drawn up plans. These were approved. They show a reasonably large building on two storeys. Men and women were to be segregated and there was an apartment for the Governor. There was a brew house, which was also the laundry and a strong room, which could be used as a cell, should the need arise. The backyard was enclosed by a tall wall to prevent unauthorised absences. It also houses the coal shed and two toilets. Tenders were sought and several builders submitted estimates. However, the project was postponed indefinitely in 1818, when the trustees of the Act resolved to do nothing more until the completion of the Inclosure Act.

When the project was revived in 1820, it was decided to build the workhouse in the Parish Close, a field owned by the trustees of the old church. It was exchanged for a three acre field at Oldfield and Parish Close was vested in the trustees of the new church.

The facade of the workhouse, now known as Hill Top House in Hill Top Lane, bears a striking resemblance to Sytchampton School, which was also built in 1826. The school was built by John Whitney, a local man, and, as nothing more is heard of Mr. Winks, he most likely built the workhouse.

Providing a workhouse was seen as the best way of curbing the spiralling cost of keeping the poor of the parish. Between 1803 and 1832 the cost, for England, had risen from £4000 to £7000. In Ombersley it rose from £400 in the 1780's to over £900 in the late 1820's. Up to 100 people and their dependants were on permanent benefit and from 50 to 75 received occasional relief. There is no doubt they were all poor but not necessarily old, sick or disabled. Many were labourers who work could be seasonal and was, in fact, subsidised by the ratepayers. The workhouse, which housed no more than two dozen of the poorest, never had the desired effect of reducing the rates.

Unlike the Unions set up after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, there seems to have been no deliberate policy to make Ombersley workhouse as dour and unwelcoming as possible. It was well furnished with beds, bed mats, blankets and sheets. There were pewter and tin plates and other utensils. All provided for from the rates.

Mr. Pulley was appointed Assistant Overseer of the Poor and the live-in Governor of the workhouse at an annual salary of £36 and an allowance of coal. The workhouse opened for business at the beginning of 1828. It might, possibly, have been Christmas 1827. It was used for only a few years and closed when the 1834 Act became law. Then 'outdoor' relief was abolished and groups of parishes were banded together as Unions and large bleak and inhospitable workhouses were built to house the poor. Mr. Pulley was unceremoniously dismissed but he insisted on being compensated for the fruit trees he had planted.

Ombersley was one of 26 parishes that joined the Droitwich Union. In 1837 the amount contributed from the rates to the Union was £1049. The Union rented the workhouse for two years. At one time they filled it with five widows with families, four orphans, a child too young to work, a bastard child, a 15 year old, seven with general infirmities, four disabled, four of weak intellect, two elderly and two casuals under order of removal to their own parish.

In 1839 the workhouse was sold to the then Lord Sandys for £790, about £200 less than it cost to build. It was briefly considered as a replacement for the schools in the village but this was soon dropped when his Lordship's terms were made known. What the terms were is not known but it was said they would be ruinous.

The estate rented out the house. It was once the home of the Newlyn artist, Frank Bramble (1857-1915). In the 1911 Census and 1912 Kelly's Directory it was occupied by Captain Christopher Maling and his wife. In 1918 it was home to Mr. And Mrs William Page after he retired as headmaster of Ombersley School. The estate sold the house to xxxxxxxxxx in xxxxxxxx and it remains a private house.