

## WORKHOUSE: Part 1 by Virginia Silvester

For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the workhouse was a place of last resort for the poor and needy. In 1836, Eton Union Workhouse was built, for the people of Slough and the surrounding area including Dorney. It had capacity for 440 inmates and was regarded as a model of its type. The buildings survive, repurposed as Upton Hospital.

There could be many reasons for entering the workhouse. Its residents included those unable to afford a home or food, suffering from illness or disability, old people, abandoned children and unmarried mothers. Vagrants could find a bed for the night. The workhouse provided shelter, a basic but nutritious diet, plain uniform clothing, medical treatment and children's education. But it was not a desirable place to be. Men and women were housed in separate accommodation, sleeping on hard beds in dormitories. Married couples were split up and children separated from their parents. The able bodied were expected to work and there were few comforts.

When the census was taken in 1881, the workhouse inmates included three people who originated in Dorney. They were George Denton, a widowed farm labourer aged 67, born on Dorney Common; Richard Davis, an unmarried agricultural worker aged 61, born in Dorney; and Ann Holman, 85 years old and married, described as a general servant and also born in Dorney. I thought it would be interesting to discover their back stories and try to find out why they ended up in the workhouse. This first part looks at the two farm workers; a second part will explore the life of Ann Holman.

George Denton was born in 1813. As a widow, his mother went to live with her widowed brother in Dorney, where she died in 1853. George married Mary Ann Parsons in 1848 and they were living in Eton Wick when their first child, Eliza, was born the following year. They had moved to Boveney when the family increased with Francis born in 1851 and Louisa in 1854. Finally, they settled in Burnham High Street, where four more children were born – Esther in 1857, William in 1860, James in 1863 and Thomas in 1867. At a time when infant mortality was common, George and Mary Ann were fortunate to lose only two of their children – William and Thomas, who both died as toddlers.

Concerned by the effects on education and morality of gangs of children and women labouring in farmers' fields, an inquiry was held in the mid-1860s. In our area, this took evidence from local farmer Joseph Trumper, who explained that he employed a group of 8 to 10 women weeding and removing couch grass. All were aged over 16, some married, and they lived in Burnham village. The women worked from 8am till 4pm, with an hour off for dinner, for 9d a day. Mary Ann was probably one of these women, as we know she worked as a field labourer once her children were old enough. Joseph Trumper also employed three boys between the ages of 10 and 13, driving ploughs or hay carts. They were expected to work from 6am to 5pm, with an hour and a half for meals, and for this they were paid 3s or 3s 6d a week.

Locally, there was much more concern about poor and expensive housing for farm workers than about women and children working in the fields. In May 1868, an article about this in the Burnham Magazine did not mince its words:

*"...the terrible state of the dwellings of our poor...Not only are many of these cottages in the worst state of tottering dilapidation, but there is so little accommodation in them at the price, that the families who live in them must be huddled together...all the sermons in the world won't make a shaky cottage windtight, or give it another room...when these 'homes' are emptied, from the sheer impossibility of living in them, the beer-shops of course are filled."*

The enquiry noted that cottage rents could be as much as 3s 6d a week, which for a man typically earning 14s a week as a farm worker was a substantial amount. One Burnham labourer's wife said it cost her 10s a week just for bread to feed her family of six children, for whom she could not afford to pay the fees to send to school and "*they haven't clothes to go in*". It was stated that George and Mary Ann and their four children were living in a poor cottage with one bedroom. Eliza could read and write a little, but Louisa was unable to do either.

The cottage was slightly less crowded than it might have been because son Francis, aged 13, had been caught stealing apples, walnuts and turnips from three different properties in September 1865. As the boy had a previous conviction, the magistrate sentenced him to 14 days in prison followed by 3 years in a reformatory. As teenagers, Eliza and Louisa too were caught stealing on other occasions – apples and raspberries from a Burnham garden, turnip tops – but escaped punishment. In November 1870, their father George was imprisoned for a month with hard labour. He had been unable to pay a fine of 20s plus 8s 6d costs for stealing turnips. One can only guess at the grinding poverty which drove the family to steal food for the table.

In 1871, George and Mary Ann were still living in Burnham High Street, with their youngest two children. But by 1877 they were in the Eton Union Workhouse, when Mary Ann died there, aged 53. They would have been separated in the workhouse, maybe being allowed to see each other in the yard. George survived there until 1885 when he died aged 72. Their children were in no position to support them. Eliza and Louisa were both married. Esther, who had been noted as deaf, became a farm worker, and gave birth to a daughter in 1877 when she was 19. By 1881 she too was in the workhouse having just given birth there to a second daughter. She was still in the workhouse in 1891 with her two girls, but by 1901 she was working as a laundress and living in a room in Salt Hill. Francis worked as an agricultural labourer and lived for a time with his married sister Eliza, but by 1881 he was in Uxbridge Union Workhouse in Hillingdon, where he died in 1906. James too worked on farms and lived as a boarder, without a home of his own.

The precarious nature of the Denton family's finances made it difficult to avoid slipping into the workhouse when unable to earn enough to put a roof over their heads or food on the table. But times could be hard even without a family to provide for. Richard Davis was a farm labourer like George Denton, but he never married.

Richard was born in 1820, one of eight children born in Dorney or Boveney to Richard and Sarah Davis. Richard senior was also a labourer and probably died when his children were quite young. In 1841 Richard junior was living with his mother and three siblings in Boveney. But Sarah died in 1850 and Richard's brothers and sisters married and started families of their own. Farm work was the main occupation, and the children were expected to play their part. Richard's married sister Jane Swabey lived at Lake End, Dorney Common or Dorney village, and she and her labourer husband had ten children. The boys were working by the age of 11, and in 1871 two of her sons, aged 20 and 14, were living and working at Manor Farm. When she was widowed, Jane lived with first one and then another of her married daughters on Dorney Common, until her death in 1902.

For whatever reason, Richard was unable to find a home with his brothers and sisters. Maybe this was because he chose casual labour over steady farm work. The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was a peak time for construction of the railways, much of it hard physical manual work for which agricultural workers were often recruited. In 1851 Richard was labouring on the development of the lines near Banbury, lodging with a small group of other young labourers from our area. By 1871 he was in Eton Union Workhouse as a pauper, and he remained there, where he would have been unable to see his family, until he died in 1888.