

'The Gardens' was the gentler name given to the Romsey Union Workhouse, now known as Nightingale House. By the 1940s it was more like an early form of NHS care home than the traditional Victorian workhouse. 'St Luke's Hospital' was a focal point of its later remit. The workhouse as such and the Board of Guardians ended with the introduction of the National Health Service in 1948. I have copied below an extract from an article written for our local history group by the late Jessica Spinney. The whole article was recently highly commended by the The Local Historian (national organisation) members of which studied some 1200 articles to arrive at a short list of six.

Extract from Romsey Poor; 1834-1948 by Jessica Spinney (published by LTVAS group in tis occasional journal 'Pots & Papers, Issue 10. 1929 saw the passing of the Public Assistance Order. Much responsibility for the organisation of the care for the poor was placed in the hands of County Councils. In Hampshire, a new Committee of the County Council was formed with its own department and offices in The Castle at Winchester alongside other of the County's administrative offices. The Committee's chief officer was Mr. O.J.A. Carter. Although they retained much local administration including the Relieving Officers and the Guardians, the County took complete financial responsibility.

The Guardians had for some time past given a small grant for inmates to have a day at the seaside. The Public Assistance Committee would not authorise this expenditure in 1931 and those in the Workhouse had to be content with an outing to Broadlands. This was permitted - the only cost being the food for the picnic.

The Guardians' responsibilities included the workhouse buildings and their upkeep as well as staff wages. The Guardians' clerks, who were part-time local people, were gradually replaced by clerks from the Department's Offices at the Castle and the work was done there. The word 'welfare' began to replace 'care'. Children came under the care of a special Children's Officer with her own staff. She visited the children's homes and cooperated with the County Council Committee to make sure the general conditions and particular items, such as clothes, did not make the children appear institutionalised. Boarding-out continued to be an important part of child care.

Since the County Council had control of all the Workhouses, some were used for dealing with certain classes of inmates. Alresford, for example, specialised in looking after men who, in the old day, were called 'idiots from birth' and who often spent their whole life in an institution. Although these men could never have survived outside, here they could with patient supervision and routine carry out various tasks. Romsey's sick wards were improved and called 'St Lukes Hospital' although the name given it by the Guardians, 'The Gardens', was still used. It was principally the poor who were sick and infirm at Romsey, but not entirely so. Suitable staff were appointed by the County Council for these varying kinds of institutions. In Romsey the sick were put in the main building and the Master and Matron given a modern purpose-built house in the grounds which also contained their office.

As part of the rationalisation, Stockbridge Workhouse was closed in 1939. It was in a bad state of repair and although built for 90 people had an average of less than 30 at that time. Most of the inmates came to Romsey and the remainder went to Andover. By then Romsey's Workhouse, which had begun as one private house with limited ground, had changed considerably. The main building had been remodelled, the grounds were enlarged, there were two separate houses, Hayter and Manners House, a chapel, a building for Casuals with a separate entrance, and a Master's house.

When war broke out all building and improvements stopped. Hampshire County Council was required to provide not only for its own possible casualties but also for people from London and elsewhere made homeless by bombing. This meant the establishment of Rest Centres on a large scale. Beds, blanket and provisions had to be stored and much use was made of the workhouses. All who could possibly be discharged were. Some were moved to other workhouses, leaving empty the workhouses considered most suitable for refugees.

All through the war ordinary people still needed help from the local Relieving Officer and some had to be admitted to the Workhouse. After the Second World War it was only a few years before the old Poor Law System was completely dismantled.