

Guildford's Workhouse

Tramps made to break stones!

One of the scandals of our time is the unfortunates sleeping rough on the streets of our towns, . Sixty years ago - ironically before the NHS was founded - each homeless person would have been entitled, by law, to a warm bed and an evening meal for one night. Where? In one of the dreaded workhouses. Each workhouse had a separate building, known as a casual ward or "spike " where the tramps were accommodated. The tramp would be given a bath on arrival: a simple meal - bread,. cheese and cocoa or the like - and ushered to a cell. He would be given breakfast and, after having done some unpaid work in return for his keep, would be free to go on to the spike in the next town.

Guildford's workhouse was in Warren Road. The site was subsequently occupied by St Luke's hospital and has now been developed by Crest for upmarket housing. Some of the redbrick workhouse buildings survive, turned into houses, along with the spike. It's that long, low building immediately opposite the spanking new St Luke's Surgery. The last people to run the spike, before workhouses were abolished in 1946, were Nan and Joe Hammond, who lived in Cline Road, Joe was responsible for maintenance under the Master. Nan, a nurse, was based in the workhouse proper and had responsibility for "the lady tramps" as she delightfully called them. "When one came in I'd go across with a clean nightie, a comb a bar of soap and a towel."

I asked Joe what the conditions were like, remembering George Orwell's descriptions of the condition in a spike as being disgusting, degrading and tyrannical. Joe was most indignant. "It wasn't a bit like that. The last Master was an old soldier. He was a disciplinarian - but you got your rights.

Joe took me round the spike, The entrance gate is still in Warren Road, even with the name plaque which Joe had to alter when the NHS came into being. There was a concrete communal footbath: a corridor tiled in the glossy golden-brown tiles popular in the 1900s and about a score of cells each with a window looking into a small garden. Institutional - but by no means unpleasant. The only chilling thing was a grill instead of a window in one of the cells. The tramp would be locked in there with a pile of stones which he had to break up into pieces small enough to be pushed through the grill before he was allowed to leave. Altogether, a rough but not inhumane approach to a problem which never seems to go away.

The spike was used for storing records by the hospital but has been empty ever since the hospital moved away. Crest donated £160,000 for a community centre to replace Coyle Hall, the community centre demolished during development of the estate. The Borough Council offered a grant of £100,000 for the same purpose and plans were made to convert the spike into a much needed community hall for Charlotteville. It seemed an excellent idea, giving a new and valuable use to a building whose original function was now obsolete. Then, suddenly, the spike was listed as being a building of historical importance which could not be altered (How the tramps would have chortled had they known that their spike would have joined the august ranks of the Royal Grammar School and the Guildhall). The proposal I fell through.

Most other localities in Guildford have their own "village halls", among them Merrow, Burpham and Stoughton to mention only three, It is decidedly ironic that Charlotteville, the town's first suburb, should not possess this important aid to local identity. However, our two Ward Councillors, Tamsy Baker and Gordon Bridger are trying to ensure that Crest's donation and the Borough's promised grant should remain available for the original purpose when a suitable site or building is found.

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