

Interview by Jane Thomson of Jack Forbes son of Workhouse Receiving Officer.  
Circa 2003

JANE: So you were born in

JACK: No, we moved there in 1933.

JANE: And why did you move there?

JACK: He came to Guildford as the Relieving Officer. It was under the old Poor Law system where

JANE: That's why they were called Relieving Officers?

JACK: They used to come and he would see them and then once a week, on a Monday I think, there was a meeting where the Committee got together and said "Well, this woman, she's sold everything she can sell and now she's got nothing," and the Committee would say, 'Fourteen shillings a week' or 'a pound a week', or something like that.

JANE: Oh, right, so it wasn't just residents then? They used to give money to the local poor people as well?

JACK: He used to go out and he'd pay them this money.

JANE: And that's why he was called the Relieving Officer.

JACK: He'd go round to see them and pay them.

JANE: So they could stay in their own homes?

JACK: Yes, he used to go on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, and he'd pay this money out to them. And then there was another system whereby they'd come to him and, say, be given a temperament of food duties – to be able to get food from one of the big shops in Guildford, just the essentials. Everyone under the Poor Law system – the tramps in the Spike – were a part of it. And the old tramps used to come up at night time, you know, and he knew some of them quite well...and he used to get women coming up as well.

JANE: And where did these tramps come from, to arrive at the Spike?

JACK: They'd walk for miles! They used to walk from one workhouse to the other. I don't know where the other ones were.

JANE: There was one in Dorking.

JACK: Was there one in Haslemere?

JANE: Yes.

JACK: They used to rotate round.

JANE: So they just walked between three and four [workhouses]?

JACK: Yes, that's right, especially in the winter. The summer wasn't so bad, but in the winter they'd come at about four o'clock up to the Spike, get a bath, get some food, and a bed for the night.

JANE: Who was the person who lived in the Spike? There's a flat in there – was there a master?

JACK: The master's house was the old lodge, and his name was Mr. Cornwall. I believe his wife was either in charge of the Homestead or she was a matron in charge of the kids.

JANE: And the Homestead building was for orphans?

JACK: Well, not orphans, but children whose mother had gone to hospital and there was no one to look after them. They'd put them in there temporarily. I remember going to school – Holy Trinity School – and the teacher used to come into school from the Homestead. They'd always turn out very well in the mornings, were always very clean and tidy. They were well looked-after. But who lived in that flat?

JANE: I think it was a master of the Spike, from what we can understand, and his wife used to work there as well.

JACK: That's right. He was the workhouse master. But as far as I know he lived in the lodge. He may have lived in that flat earlier on, but I remember him living in the lodge because I used to go and see him there.

JANE: And your dad lived in Harvey Road – Harvey Gardens?

JACK: He came in 1948, and he got the job as the first Mental Health Officer in the area. When he died in 1953 he was still there. That's how he came there from London, because he'd passed his exams as a Relieving Officer.

JANE: Whereabouts in London?

JACK: Woodgreen, North London. I don't know what he did before, if he was in some office related to that, but he had to pass an exam in order to get down here, and that's where he stayed.

JANE: So the tramps, were any of them able to get jobs in a day? Because from what I understand, there was a system whereby if they had any money, they could pay just for a bed for the night – however many pennies it was – and they left their money with the master, but if they couldn't they had to work the next morning until lunchtime.

JACK: They had to do things like chopping wood or cleaning up the yard, but if they could afford to pay then they wouldn't have come to my house even if they had no money.

JANE: They went to see the Relieving Officer even if they had no money?

JACK: I can remember the old tramps, if you were up early in the morning, they'd knock the door with their tin can and say 'could I have some boiling water to make some tea?' They got used to being given tea, and all sorts! I can remember that quite clearly, as a young lad.

JANE: I remember in our village we used to have a tramp, and we only ever saw him in the summer. He used to go back up to London in the winter – I grew up on the Isle of Wight, and he used to come and live in the village all summer, and then he disappeared.

JACK: Some of them tramped about and slept rough.

JANE: Did you say that sometimes your parents had to take them off to Brookwood?

JACK: Yes, that was all part and parcel of it. If a woman was going to St. Luke's to have a baby, they'd ring up any hour of the night and say 'our waters have broken!' He'd get Lanley – that was the old taxi firm in Guildford – they used to ring him up and he'd send one of his cars up and off they'd go, pick this woman up and take her to St. Luke's. It was the same with the mental health. I remember that I went with him once, during the war, and got this old boy out from Harvey Road! How we got him out when my father wasn't a very big or strong man I don't know, but we got this old boy with his raggedy trousers down all the steps in Harvey Road!

JANE: So before there was a National Health Service, or anything to do with health, it was all to do with the workhouse?

JACK: Oh yes, it all came under the Poor Law. He had a very interesting life because of that law. My mother used to help him. If my mother attended a case with my father, she also had to go to maternity, and I think she used to get paid something in the region of about five shillings.

JANE: So they didn't call the doctor out if they could call someone else out first?

JACK: No, they would ring up.

JANE: So the workhouse was the nearest thing to a hospital for those people?

JACK: No, they didn't go in there, the tramps went there. They went to St. Luke's, to the maternity ward.

JANE: But all the workhouse buildings on that site were the local hospital as well?

JACK: Yes, that's right.

JANE: Were there still families there that you remember in the workhouse, who were living there permanently? Were there elderly people that would go there?

JACK: It was youngsters sometimes. The Homestead would take them temporarily if they had nowhere to go, until they found accommodation. The children there would have no father – there were a lot of one-parent families there in those days – but the Homestead would look after them, and that's where they used to go. But as I say, it's a long, long time ago. But a place like that, as you say – if it can be preserved, it should be.

JANE: We're a bit confused about the layout of that Spike – do you remember where they went to have a bath?

JACK: It was all there, all in the Spike.

JANE: If I show you a map of the building, or a few pictures?

JACK: That might jog the memory! As far as I remember I didn't ever go in there. But George Cornwall was the last master.

JANE: Was that up until the war, until 1948?

JACK: I know he was alive then, because he died in the early 1950s. But what sort of job he had in 1948 I don't know...I think he stayed on [at the Spike].

JANE: But the Spike didn't stop being the Spike until the 1960s, according to the records? It still had the tramps going up there. Because we have a photograph from the 1950s where the tramps were queuing up Warren Road, waiting to go in the main gate. Do you remember the names of anyone you went to school with, at Holy Trinity? Reg Limposs?

JACK: Reg was at the grammar school. Kenny Chester, of course. He was younger than me, so he went with my brothers. Doris Dean...they moved into the pub in 1923. She was born there. Jackie Johnson, Danny Cooper, I used to go to school with them. Beatty...Beatty was older than me. I don't know what she did. [?] Gunridge used to live up Addison Road.

JANE: So they're all Charlotteville people?

JACK: Yes. The old town crier used to live up Addison Road! And his son. I knew the present town crier, his father, *his* father, and *his* father! The old town crier's son took over, and then his grandson took over.

JANE: And now it's his great-grandson – he did our pancake race for us last year!

JACK: What's his name?

JANE: Peters?

JACK: It could be Peters.

JANE: And 12 Addison Road was the shop on the corner, because John and Gina Redpath, who are really involved in saving the Spike, have bought that.

JACK: It's a house now, is it?

JANE: Yes, but they're renovating the front of it.

JACK: It used to belong to Reg Bowers, the builder,

JANE: Do you remember it when it was open?

JACK: Gracious, yes!

JANE: What was it like?

JACK: Dark and dingy – sold everything!

JANE: They didn't bake their own bread there anymore?

JACK: No, that was further up...but the old bakehouses, they used to make their own bread. Mr Benjamin, who lived halfway up Addison Road – he was the baker. Jim Harris used to take the bread out of the old horse and cart.

JANE: So they did their own bread locally, around Charlotteville?

JACK: Oh, for miles around. He went for miles on his horse and cart. He used to stay with the horse up in 73 Addison Road – there was a stable there. I don't think it's there now. As you go up the steps to Pewley Way.

JANE: Oh, I think they're retirement flats now, aren't they?

JACK: There was an old wood yard round there, where they used to saw the logs up. George Grover, the old sawmill.

JANE: I suppose it's been built half to death, hasn't it? Not a spare little bit left.

JACK: Of course, it's so narrow the road, isn't it?

JANE: The bus still comes down there, you know.

JACK: All the old people's flats are right up there – and that used to be the church. St. Luke's Church.

JANE: Really? What happened to that, then?

JACK: They sold it. There was a hall next to it, and then St. Luke's Church, and they sold the lot. That was around the 1950s...it was a nice hall.

JANE: Yes, we're trying to get the hall back again – because that's the thing with Charlotteville, there's nowhere like a village hall. We use the school sometimes, Holy Trinity School, which has a big hall, but you can't use it when the kids are there.

JACK: The old Holy Trinity School is now a training place for teachers, isn't it? On Pewney Hill. And the Charlotteville School was down Sydenham Road.

JANE: That's adult education now.

JACK: But it's still the same building. Will you try and keep these old buildings?

JANE: Yes, everything is going to stay, and we're going to restore it.

..... sadly the rest of this interview was not recorded.