The Isle of Wight Workhouse and Burial Ground.

St. Mary’s Hospital, Newport is the site of the original Isle of Wight Workhouse which opened in 1774 and closed in 1930. The ‘South Block’ which currently houses the IoW NHS Trust administrative services occupies the original C18th building and the land adjacent to the Helipad is the Burial Ground for persons who died whilst resident at the Isle of Wight ‘House of Industry’ (Workhouse). The Burial Ground is the location of 3223 known recorded graves and many more unrecorded. Records exist for named persons and their age for the years 1783/84 and 1813 – 1871 and can be viewed in the attached adjacent file. These records identify many of the original families that made up the Island communities in the C18th and C19th.

The additional attached file of the Ordnance Survey map of 1862 shows the extent of the Burial Ground site (marked 127 on the map) which includes the area from this site between the current Sevenacres building (north) along Dodnor Lane to the current Ambulance Station (south) including the adjacent Helipad. All graves were originally marked and recorded and the Burial Ground was consecrated in 1854.

The adjacent building on the map, simply marked Hospital, was also known as the ‘Pest House’ and the square building, adjacent to it - top right, was the Mortuary. It appears both were built around 1774 to ‘isolate’ and accommodate those persons who had infectious illnesses particularly as a result of regular epidemics such as typhoid and scarlet fever. For example in 1820 during January - February 41 children are recorded to have died of childhood measles and illnesses. In 1849 and 1866 there were epidemics of cholera on the Island and during 1871 -72 there was an epidemic of smallpox with persons accommodated in the additional Hospital building (115 on the map) built in 1827 as a specialist ‘Isolation Unit’ for smallpox.

“On 8th October 1770 several Gentlemen of the Isle of Wight determined that a ‘House of Industry’ should be established and to promote the relief of the poor, house them, and to provide maintenance and employment”.

The Isle of Wight Workhouse (136 on map) following an enabling Act of Parliament in 1768 was built and opened in 1774 and continued to have residents until 1930. The Workhouse could accommodate up to 700 people and in 1781 there were an average 550 residents of whom around 64 were men, 136 women, 179 Girls and 172 were Boys. The Workhouse employed a Governor, Matron, Steward, School Master, Chaplain, 2 Surgeons, an Apothecary, Secretary and Treasurer. The site included a School, Chapel, Workshops, Ponds and Market Garden (135 and 135a on map) and adjacent Farm buildings and Dairy along Dodnor Lane (129 on map).

Many members of Isle of Wight families are listed as having passed through the Workhouse also along with persons arriving on the Isle of Wight from across the UK and countries around the World linked by the Islands nautical and trading connections. A profile of residents would have included the elderly who were unable to look after themselves, the unemployed, the homeless, orphaned children, those born of unmarried parents and the parents themselves, the sick and those with a disability.
The origins of the Workhouse stem from the 1601 Poor Law Act in the reign of Elizabeth I where the responsibility of providing and payment of poor relief to individuals, children and families rested with the communities and persons in each of the Island’s parishes. The traditional view of local parishes and churches was that poverty was inevitable for some – the biblical text being “For the poor always ye have with you”, with the poor essentially victims of their situation and their relief a Christian duty. In practise who actually received poor relief in individual parishes was largely determined by the farmers and tradesmen of the parish and there were many examples recorded of individuals and families being forced to leave parishes to avoid Parishes having to make payment of poor relief. On 8th May 1771 Parliament endorsed an Act instructing parishes throughout the country to pool their Poor Relief payments so that a centrally administered fund could be established and managed by the Gentry and Clergy who would be tasked with building a Workhouse in each County / Diocese. On the Isle of Wight on 25th June 1771 at the Sun Inn in Newport the decision was made to construct the Islands first Workhouse and £20,000 was borrowed to purchase 80 acres of Parkhurst Forest. The Workhouse building was completed and opened on 1st August 1774. The principal gentry behind this initiative were the Oglander family of Nunwell, Lord Holmes of Yarmouth and the Worsley family at Appledurcombe. Others included the Mieux-Worsleys and the Dickenson family, merchants in Newport.

The Workhouse residents were identified and came from the parishes as before to be housed, put to work at the Workhouse or found employment. The Workhouse was there to receive and ‘isolate’ individuals from communities if they had an infectious illness such as smallpox. The Workhouse also offered other additional and general medical care. In the case of orphaned or children born to unmarried mothers they were sent to the Workhouse where they were both educated and put to work for their keep. For unmarried mothers with responsibilities arising from ‘Bastardy’ or a reputation for prostitution supervision and training for employment was given and the fathers were instructed to make paternity payments to the Workhouse. Also included for referral were those who were ‘insane’ or ‘feeble minded’, those with a physical disability such as blindness and many elderly persons who by age could no longer work and had no means of support from their wider family.

In 1776 the population of the Isle of Wight was estimated at 18,024 of who 2,778 lived in Newport the only town of any size. The Island’s character was totally rural with no industry. The remainder of the population were distributed in small villages and hamlets across the island with agricultural employment either principally growing wheat in the fields or rearing sheep on the Downs or fishing on the coast and ‘smuggling’. There were no made up roads, only tracks, and persons often spent their whole life in the village of their birth with those on the Island’s south coast rarely visiting Newport. Gradually the population increased so by 1824 it was 24,000 and 1842 at 42,000. This was almost entirely due to persons coming to visit and live on the Isle of Wight which was now seen as an attractive destination especially the coast with its ‘temperate’ climate conducive to health and wellbeing for respiratory illnesses. The towns of Ryde and Cowes were established and built during this period as were the villages of Shanklin, Bonchurch and Ventnor where farming /
fishing cottages were converted for summer lettings. In turn this created a new form of employment of domestic service for these larger wealthier households.

The Workhouse itself was managed by a group of 24 Directors drawn from the Island’s gentry and clergy and 36 Guardians identified by the parishes drawn from farmers and tradesmen. The Board of Management was composed equally of persons from each grouping and met regularly to approve those persons to be admitted, the amounts of Poor relief to be awarded, and to supervise the employment and conduct of residents. The principal block of the workhouse contained the Chapel, large Dining room and Steward’s room, Sitting Room, Governor and Matron’s lodgings, Nurseries and sick wards. The Cross range building (east) contained on the ground floor School rooms, Apothecary, Kitchen, scullery and bake house. On the first floor further sick wards and 20 apartments for married couples and two sitting rooms for the elderly. Beyond were a Dairy (around 7 cows), Wash house, Brew and wood houses, Barns, Stables and pigsties. The fields were ploughed for the growing of potatoes and arable for wheat. In 1783 the harvest produced grain in the ratio of 1:8 for consumption by the Workhouse with the remainder sold to the Islands 42 mills to generate income for the Workhouse - towards repaying the £20,000 mortgage. On the south side were the Workshops for employment – Shoemaker, Tailor, Spinning and Weaving. In the Workshops hemp and flax were woven into sacks for coal, flour and biscuits by the men and boys and wool spun and dyed into worsted and made into clothing and bedding by the women and girls. In 1826 a Lace manufacturer opened at Broadlands in Newport and many women and girls were indentured to work there until its closure in 1868. The boys and girls up to the age of fourteen spent 50% of their time in the Schoolroom and 50% working in the Workshops. This practice of employment of children in the Workshops continued until January 1873. More than half the persons resident in the Workhouse were children. Schooling was based on the ‘Lancastrian’ method whereby great emphasis was placed on the 3’R’s’ and religion. Children were seated on benches in rows facing the teacher who was on a raised platform at the front. Boys and girls were segregated most of the time both in school, employment and sleeping. William Hollis was appointed schoolmaster from 1789 - 98 at a salary of £10 per annum. This salary rose to £20 pa with the appointment of George Riall from 1811 - 32. Elizabeth St. John was appointed schoolmistress in 1811 at an equivalent salary of £12.60 per annum and continued in post until she died in 1864.

The senior post of Governor of the workhouse was generally selected from amongst Islander applicants by the Guardians (rather than the Directors). Initially there was a fairly rapid turnover of Governors with local criticism of the laxity of the moral standards being allowed in the daily life of the Workhouse with subsequent inspections revealing unregulated comings and goings of residents – in particular to the nearby new Albany Barracks on Parkhurst Road, charges of prostitution and children being born to resident unmarried mothers. Strict segregation of the sexes came to be enforced by 1790. Thomas Westmore was Governor from 1794 – 1800, his son William Westmore from 1827 – 32 and Thomas Pike from 1832 -45. Thomas Pike’s
appointment coincided with Parliaments passing of the New Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834 and he was instructed to implement it on the Isle of Wight. The New Poor Law aimed to introduce a rigorously implemented, centrally enforced, standard system centred on the Workhouse. At a deeper level it marked a fundamental change in the way that the poor were viewed by their ‘betters’, society and their communities at large. The traditional view had been that poverty was to some extent inevitable with the poor victims of their situation and circumstance. The Act endorsed the view that the poor were largely responsible for their own situation and condition which they could change and improve if they chose to do so.

Undoubtedly life in the Workhouse was harsh and rough with liberties severely curtailed. Fortunately many residents only spent a short time in the Workhouse until either they recovered from an illness, or typically found employment in agriculture and making roads (men) or in domestic service (women). Many families and individuals decided their best option was to emigrate, with an uncertain future, to the colonies e.g. Canada and Australia. This was actively encouraged by the Governors of the Workhouse, who assisted with their passage costs. For example records show in 1837 78 persons emigrated to Canada and 42 persons to South Australia.

For those whom the Workhouse was their home it provided a School for the children, and employment / keep in Workshops in weaving and craft skills to make and sell clothes and domestic utensils – brooms, soap etc, and a dairy, bakery and farm to grow, provide for their own food and sell the surplus. Records indicate that a typical weekly diet for residents included the following: Breakfast – Onion broth or Pease soup, Dinner - Beef / Pork / Bacon and potatoes on 5 days a week with the remainder a meat broth, rice pudding and treacle, Supper – Bread, Cheese, Butter and potatoes. Tea and tobacco were allowed on the Surgeon’s orders.

Many of the women residents were trained to be midwives. Charity Hollis – Matron 1794 - 1812, who was wife of the Workhouse schoolmaster William Hollis 1789 – 98, was herself a midwife. Midwives were paid 25p for each birth they attended. Many women were also trained to undertake home nursing at a rate of 12½ p per week and some were trained to be housekeepers and home helps at a rate of 5p per week. Wet nurses received 15p per week. This side of the Workhouse’s training for women coincided with the Island’s population growth and the demand for domiciliary and domestic service in the wealthier households.

A principal post at the Workhouse was that of Surgeon (Doctor). The first was Richard Bassett 1778 – 95 at the rate of £170 per annum followed by James White Bassett 1795 -1837 at £250 pa rising to £620 pa by 1823 following the addition of a ‘lunatic asylum’ ward in 1822. The Workhouse Apothecary set up the Island’s first medical dispensary at Castlehold in Newport in 1823. In 1830 Thomas Sewell established the Island’s first comprehensive medical structure and provision creating 17 districts each with their own Medical Officer. Inoculation against smallpox in particular was promoted. Gradually the Workhouse evolved and established itself as the Island’s first General
Hospital with new infirmary wards in 1807, a 'Pest House' for venereal disease in 1809, further wards in 1822, and the origins of the present Upper North Hospital in 1834. Matrons were Jane Adams 1779 -94, Charity Hollis 1794 -1812 and Hannah Burge 1826 – 48.

Queen Victoria is recorded as having visited the Workhouse in 1869 and to have given her approval. Her daughter Princess Beatrice who lived at Carisbrooke Castle visited in 1902.

Nationally scandals e.g. Andover Workhouse in 1845 about the poor treatment of residents in the nation’s Workhouses became of concern and attempts were made to improve conditions and regulation. In 1860 the medical journal ‘the Lancet’ published reports about the appalling conditions, in particular of the medical facilities in London’s Workhouses, leading to the passing of the Metropolitan Poor Act in 1867, creating new Asylums Board. In 1871 the Poor Law Board was replaced by the Local Government Board with a broader range of responsibilities including sanitation and public health.

By 1900 life at the Workhouse started to become more humane, personal freedoms enfranchised and the emphasis became more on the provision of medical care. Two factors contributed to this. The first was the election of a significant number of women as Guardians – since the 1860’s women had been active in improving workhouse conditions. The second in 1892 was the lowering to £5 of the property rental value qualifying for Guardian election which enabled the election of working-class people as Board members. In 1918 the disqualification of voting rights for those in receipt of Poor relief was ended. From 1913 onwards the term “workhouse” was replaced by “poor law institution” in official reports. In 1928 Neville Chamberlain, the then Health Minister introduced the ‘Local Government Act’ to Parliament which essentially abolished Boards of Guardians and transferred all powers to local councils. They were instructed to end ‘poor relief .. as soon as circumstances permit’ and provide ‘public assistance’ under the Public Health act and the Education Act. On 1st April 1930 the 643 Boards of Guardians in England and Wales were dissolved.

In 1934, now in the ownership of the Isle of Wight County Council, the Workhouse now known as ‘Forest House’ became part of the renamed site of St. Mary’s Hospital. The whole site and its role and responsibilities transferred to the newly established NHS in 1948. In 1952 the ‘Pest House’ and adjacent Mortuary were demolished and also around this time the gravestones and the walled surround of the Burial Ground were removed.

The Burial Ground Memorial erected alongside the Burial Ground site in 2013, is made up of the 7 steel formers made by British Steel and used to form the stainless steel panels for the original cladding of the new St. Mary’s Hospital built in the 1980’s. The 3 steel uprights with 3 coloured press tools at their head acknowledge the many children who have been buried at this site.

Thanks to:
Ordnance Survey map 1862 courtesy of Isle of Wight County Record Office.
Isle of Wight Workhouse – Diocesan Records of Deaths, Baptisms and Marriages, IoW County Record Office.
Historian Johanna Jones – for her thesis ‘Administration of the Poor Law in the Isle of Wight 1771 -1836’ - Myra Joan Jones - copy Isle of Wight Library HQ.
Photographs of the 'Workhouse', Johanna Jones.
Burial Ground Memorial design: Brian Marriott and Will Stay.
Estates department, IoW NHS: Robert Graham and Tom Milne.
Other reference books:
‘History of the Isle of Wight Hospitals’, Dr. Laidlaw.
'Life within the Isle of Wight Workhouse', Bill Shepard and Brian Greening