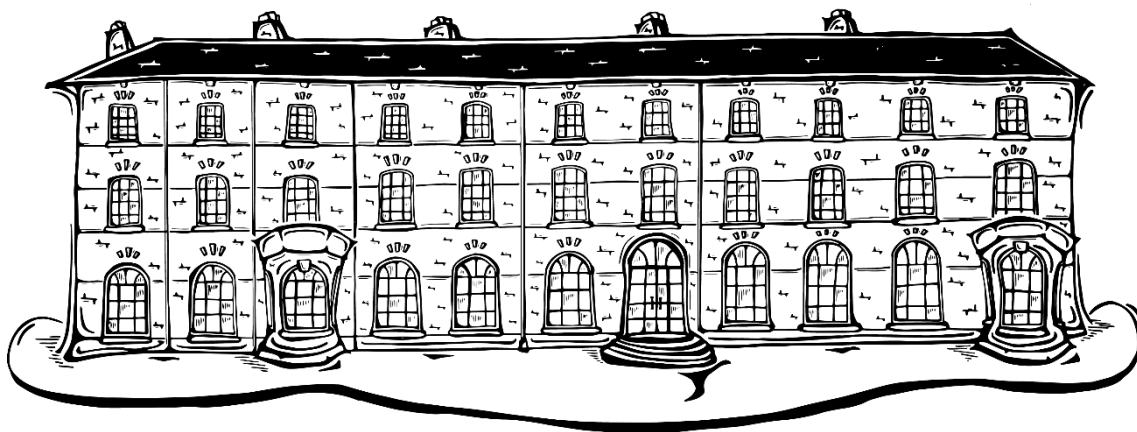


# ‘You don’t know how I feel’

& other stories from  
York Union Workhouse,  
1864 – 1910.



## About this booklet.

This booklet contains some information about York Union Workhouse and thirteen stories about disabled people and disability between 1864 – 1910. The booklet goes with a reclaimed medical doctor's bag containing a selection of objects. These are loosely related to each of the stories.

We invite you to handle and explore each of the objects, whilst reading or listening to the stories.

# York Union Workhouse



York Union Workhouse on Huntington Road was built in 1848 to support people who were unable to, for a range of reasons, provide for, or look after themselves.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 had seen a boom in Workhouse development across the United Kingdom as a growing concern and response to poverty, destitution and, as was argued by some, a social immorality.

The Workhouse segregated its female, male, young and disabled inmates within its many special yards and wards to prevent further contamination.

Inmates were required to follow strict rules and often had to do 'task work' like picking Oakum for rope making or smashing stones into gravel. In earshot of both industrialisation and eugenics, inmates were offered food and shelter, yet judged for doing so.

Originally built to house 300 people, in 1881 York Union Workhouse housed 717 inmates. Later the Workhouse became St Mary's Hospital, then a care home and today is accommodation for the students of York St John University.

# Disabled People in the Workhouse



Disabled people were highly visible in the workhouse, and yet their histories are often hidden and have not been well explored. Disabled People are certainly present and can be seen in the range of administrative and other records associated with the workhouse.

This includes those relating to 'outdoor relief', that of the 'medical officer' as well as in the census records. Indeed column '11' in the enumeration book for the 1891 census gives the option to note the person as either '(1) Deaf and Dumb, (2) Blind, (3) Lunatic, Imbecile or Idiot'. Other terms used for those with a learning difficulty might have been 'weak minded' or 'feeble minded'. But these terms were not clear and used very differently.

Alongside developments in the Workhouse a range of legislation emerged that began to define and shape perceptions of disability, and leaves a particularly negative legacy for disabled people today.

The Lunacy Act of 1845 compelled local authorities to build lunatic asylums. By 1859, of the 36,000 people classed as lunatics in England, all but about 7,000 were in workhouses and a similar number 'with friends or elsewhere'. The Lunacy Acts 1890–1922 referred to 'lunatics', but the Mental Treatment Act 1930 changed the legal term to 'person of unsound mind', an expression which was replaced under the Mental Health Act 1959 by 'mental illness'.

Additionally, the Idiots Act of 1886 was intended to give '... facilities for the care, education, and training of Idiots and Imbeciles'. It made a distinction between 'lunatics', 'idiots', and 'imbeciles' for the purpose of making entry into education establishments easier and for defining the ways they were cared for.

The Mental Deficiency Act of 1913 was the first piece of legislation to provide definitions for these terms: 'Idiots; that is to say, persons so deeply defective in mind from birth or from an early age as to be unable to guard themselves against common physical dangers; Imbeciles; that is to say, persons in whose case there exists from birth or from an early age mental defectiveness not amounting to idiocy, yet so pronounced that they are incapable of managing themselves or their affairs, or, in the case of children, of being taught to do so.'

# **‘You don’t know how I feel’ & other stories from York Union Workhouse, 1864 – 1910.**

The following thirteen stories are taken from newspaper and archive records relating to the workhouse from Explore York Libraries and Archive. They share and explore some small insights about disabled people at York Union Workhouse between 1864 and 1910.



## **The Nurse of Naughtiness**

In the Yorkshire Gazette on February 20<sup>th</sup> 1864 a story of shockingly ungrateful ‘vagabodism’ is told. Mr Hodgson from the Workhouse admitted six ‘destitute’ men, afflicted with the ‘usual parasitical peculiarities of vagrancy and filth’ and placed them in the ‘foul ward’. Believing that ‘idleness is the nurse of naughtiness, ... of melancholy, and ... other diseases’, the Board of Guardians orders the men to be ‘breaking stones’, to make gravel. A practice typically involving smashing larger rocks into tiny pieces to be fitted through a small grate. The men refuse. For two or three days ‘kind persuasion was tried’, by a Mr Wilson from the Workhouse. But they still refuse. So Mr Wilson deprives them of their dinners. This was a ‘signal for open revolt’, and the men ‘commence

rioting ... barricading the yard door ...wrenched the iron stanchions ... set about breaking the windows of the rooms surrounding the yard' as well as threatening set fire to the workhouse to make their escape. Mr Wilson called for the police who quickly came and then when gaining access to the ward arrested the six men, took them to court and gave them several weeks in prison. The judges were of the opinion that the 'offence was of a nature that ought to be visited with great severity'.

## Totally Uneatable

In The York Herald, February 28<sup>th</sup> 1880, a complaint from Arron Wilkinson, an inmate of the Workhouse is discussed. Arron stated that '... ever since Mr Wales had held the reins of office as Workhouse master there had been a marked alteration in the diet of inmates. They only got about half of their proper quantity, and the quality was of a wretched description; for the past few weeks it had been unbearable and he had been compelled to leave it ...'. Reviewing the complaint the Board of Guardians respond '...Wilkinson was a painter by trade, 41 years of age, but for whose intemperate habits they believed he would be able to earn his own livelihood'. And that they state of the food 'no change whatever had taken place', but suggest the complaint was motivated due to Wilkinson having his 'privilege of going out curtailed'. Mr Ernest, one of the Guardians said '... it was a great pity if there was no way by which a man acting in the way Wilkinson had done could be punished

for his insolence, and for the constant discontent which he had manifested, making the whole workhouse uncomfortable’.



## Useful Influence

An ‘important two days’ conference of representatives from the Poor Law Unions in Yorkshire’ was held in York on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1881, The Bradford Daily Telegraph reported. The chairman expressed the view that ‘... conferences of this character should be arranged on a permanent basis ...’ And that ‘... if this were done they would exercise a useful influence in obtaining uniformity in the administration of the Poor Law ...’. Other subjects considered were the ‘... treatment of lunatics (introduced by Mr S. W. North, Medical Officer, York, and Visiting Medical Officer, Friends’ Retreat, York) and vagrants (introduced by Mr Hall, Clerk to the Huddersfield Union)’.

## Did Not Care to Return

Reported in The Yorkshire Herald, Friday June 23, 1882, Mr Cobb charges Jane Kirton for having run away from the York Union Workhouse with clothing worth one guinea. Mr Leaming, the prosecutor, said Jane ‘... had leave given for one day’s outing ...’ but by ‘... her own confession ... had got too much drink ... and had remaining out



during the night did not care to return ...'. Jane then went to Seamer, near Scarborough and got a job as a nurse, where she was later apprehended. Because she had been in trouble before, she was sent to Castle prison for six weeks.

## Shush, Snip Rip.

In the newspaper 'The Yorkshire Herald', on Friday 24th November 1899 a meeting of the York Board of Guardians is reported. The Guardians discuss 'comments made by the Inspectors of the Local Government Board respecting the treatment of imbeciles in the workhouse'. York Union Workhouse is accused of, forcibly, cutting the hair of female inmates short and making them wear dresses made of tough, rip resistant, material. The inspectors also state that when asking a male inmate, a Charles Hudson for feedback, he appeared frightened and wouldn't answer. The Guardians dismiss the complaints and state that they keep female imbeciles hair cut short for 'cleanliness', that they 'furnish' 'these' women with 'those' dresses to prevent them being ripped up and that 'Charles' will always answer them.



## **Existed in Large Numbers**

Reported in The Sheffield Daily Telegraph, Friday, December 22<sup>nd</sup> 1899, the Chairman of the York Board of Guardians said ‘... it was a serious statement to go forth to the public ...’. Mr Kennedy, a Local Government Board inspector said they had ‘existed in large numbers’. The Chairman said he was sure that the York Authorities did as much as any other Union asked to keep their place clean and asked ‘... have you seen them ..?’. Mr Kennedy said ‘... he only spoke of what he had been told [...] about the presence of bugs in the sick and lunacy wards ...’.

## **Neat and Tidy**

‘... Attendants shall take such of the Imbecile patients as are able for a walk when authorised by the Medical Officer, and shall see that they are neat and tidy in appearance...’.

From the ‘Rules for the Officers of the Workhouse’, March 1900.

## **Unless The Restraint is Necessary**

‘... Some important restrictions have been placed by the recent Act on the use of mechanical means of restraint on lunatics. It is directed by section 40 that mechanical means of bodily restraint shall not be applied to any lunatic unless the restraint is necessary for purposes of surgical or medical treatment, or to prevent the lunatic from injuring

himself or others, and in every case where such restraint is applied, a medical certificate must, as soon as it can be obtained, be signed, describing the mechanical means used, and stating the grounds upon which the certificate is founded ...'

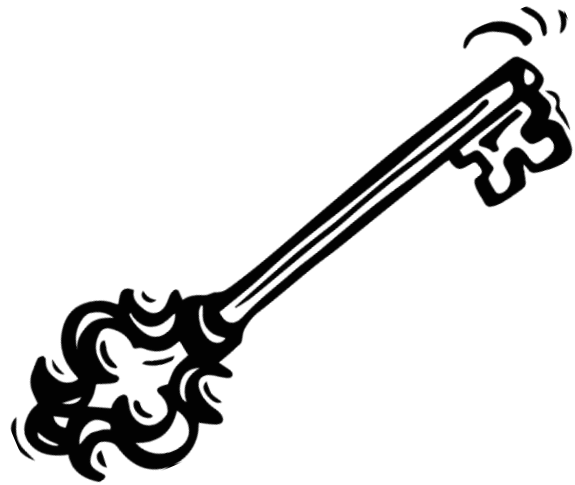
From 'Duties of Union Officers Under the Lunacy Act, 1890', page 63 under the heading of 'Mechanical means of restraint'.

## He Will Be Guilty

'... It is expressly provided by the new Act, that if any officer, nurse, attendant, or other person employed in any workhouse,

carnally knows or attempts to have carnal knowledge of any female under care or treatment as a lunatic in the workhouse, he will be guilty of a misdemeanour, and, on conviction, will be liable to be imprisoned with or without hard labour for a term not exceeding two years. No consent or alleged consent of such female will be any defence to an indictment or prosecution for such offence ...'

From 'Duties of Union Officers Under the Lunacy Act, 1890', page 64 under the heading of 'Abuse of female lunatic'.



## **You Don't Know How I Feel**

Reported under a heading of 'A York Workhouse Sensation' in the Yorkshire Gazette, Saturday April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1901, is the suicide of '... a tramp named John Desmond ...'. Nurse Hannah Mayhew said '... no one could have been more surprised at the discovery than me ...'. John Desmond, an Army veteran of twelve years had told the nurse '... you don't know how I feel ...', just before crawling through a window which was open only twelve inches, and fell on to the hard gravel from a height of fifteen feet, being killed instantly. Mr Shann, a Doctor said '... that the depression due to the man's condition might have affected his mind, particularly if there was any hereditary tendency to insanity ...'

## **Mystery Knife**

Reported in the Driffeld Times, September 13, 1902. '... Joseph Shaw, aged 30 years, committed suicide in a determined manner in the York Union Workhouse on Saturday morning. He was an inmate of the lunatic ward, and whilst the attendant was engaged with another patient he left the ward, went into the closet, cut his throat, and then leapt out of a window, falling a distance of sixteen feet. How he obtained the knife with which he cut his throat is a mystery ...'

## **Accelerated By An Accident**

In The Yorkshire Evening Press, Monday April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1905, Mary Sarah Jackson aged 82 is reported as having died some five days earlier at York Union Workhouse. Mary had lived with Annie Shaw of Townend Street for 12 years before being removed to the Workhouse on account of being too eccentric to be controlled. On 27<sup>th</sup> March, Mary Alice Saynor, attendant in the female special ward said that Mary was standing by the fire, when she ordered her to go to the table, where she tripped on the cocoa matting that was '... worn into a hole ...'. Mary was taken to her bed. She died several days later. Other patients had nearly fallen on the matting on previous occasions and the '... necessity for new matting ...' had been reported. A verdict of 'death by senile decay accelerated by an accident' was returned by the jury who also added there was some neglect on the part of the Workhouse master for not replacing the matting.

## **Martha Bongs (Maniac)**

The Yorkshire Evening Press, Friday November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1905 reported '... a most enjoyable entertainment ...' was given to inmates of the York Union Workhouse. This included a 'Waxwork' exhibition with '... The Chinese Giant, Mrs Winslow and Infant, Captain Kidd and his Victim, Martha Bongs (Maniac), The Celebrated Welsh Dwarf, Signorina Squallim (vocalist), Jack Spratt, Mrs Jack Spratt, The Giggler, Little Red Riding

Hood, The Fair One with Golden Locks, Bo Peep, John and Peter (Porters and Winder Up), and little Nell, duster of figures ...’.

## Through the Butchers Window

Reported in the Sheffield Daily Telegraph, Tuesday, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1910.

Jeremiah Jacques, 62, former inmate of York Union Workhouse, was charged with maliciously breaking two plate glass windows of the shop William Wright, butcher and Guardian at York Union Workhouse.

William had been part of the Workhouse committee who ‘... inquired into an act of insubordination ...’ in which Jeremiah was found guilty and evicted from the Workhouse.



List of names of female inmates in 1891 census with terms 'idiot, imbecile'.

#	Name	Age	Term
1	Armstrong, Mary	18	Idiot from Childhood
2	Bailey, Sarah	28	Imbecile
3	Barlow, Sarah Jane	57	Imbecile
4	Barnes, Harriet	42	Idiot from childhood
5	Beal, Elizabeth	59	Imbecile
6	Beal, Mary Jane	36	Imbecile
7	Bell, Jane Margaret	27	Imbecile
8	Bell, May	44	Imbecile
9	Boyne, Cath	39	Imbecile/Deformed
10	Burlow, Elizabeth	30	Imbecile
11	Castley, Jane	67	Imbecile
12	Chapman, Harriet	32	Imbecile
13	Clundall, Elizabeth	44	Imbecile
14	Cobb, Margaret	48	Imbecile
15	Conway, Mary	20	Imbecile from childhood
16	Cooke, Margaret	44	Imbecile
17	Dale, Marion	42	Imbecile / Deaf and Dumb
18	Dale, Sarah	26	Deaf and Blind
19	Doyle, Elizabeth	52	Imbecile
20	Eyre, Elizabeth Ann	20	Imbecile
21	Farrah, Emma	36	Imbecile
22	Firth, Emily	34	Imbecile
23	Gastrull, Louisa	28	Imbecile
24	Goldsborough, Alice	36	Imbecile
25	Goodyear, Ann	42	Imbecile
26	Gunn, Harriet	48	Imbecile
27	Heskley, Margaret	36	Idiot from child
28	Jordon, Jane	5	Imbecile from child
29	Landrith, Fanny	41	Idiot from child
30	Lofthouse, Charlotte	11	Imbecile from child
31	Lovella, Bridget	67	Imbecile
32	Mawthorpe, Jane	80	Imbecile
33	Mawthorpe, Mary	48	Imbecile
34	Mistaw, Jane	24	Imbecile from child
35	Morris, Ann	58	Imbecile
36	Neville, Ann Mary	26	Imbecile
37	Poskill, Eliza	15	Imbecile
38	Sanlow, Mary	24	Idiot from Child
39	Seayle, Sarah	31	Imbecile from birth
40	Smith, Charlotte	58	Imbecile
41	Sywell, Ellen	36	Imbecile
42	Warrington, Mary Ann	34	Imbecile
43	Webster, Margaret	57	Imbecile
44	Whitfield, Bertha	60	Imbecile

