

Parish Row – Shrivenham – A Terrible Place

By Neil B. Maw

An Act of Parliament of 1834 set up the Poor Law Unions, in which the government grouped together each civil parish into a Union of Parishes. There were approximately 600 Unions throughout England, each one comprising around 20 or more parishes. The idea of the Union was to prevent destitution among the poor and those people who were on the verge of that unhappy situation were sent to the Workhouse, sometimes known as, The Institution. There was a large one in Faringdon and the Union covered all the parishes around the Faringdon area, including Shrivenham, Watchfield, Longcott, Bourton, Ashbury & many others.

At a dinner held at the Faringdon Agricultural Library in November 1860, Mr Henry Tucker referred to the vast efforts that had been made in the improvement of agriculture. Cultivating the soil, new and improved implements and machinery, the breeding and feeding of cattle in dry, clean, well ventilated buildings. This had all improved the yields and profits of the farm owners. However, the workforce upon which this whole agricultural cycle relied, were treated abysmally. He then went on to state that, *“I have employed competent persons to visit every town and village in the Faringdon Union to ascertain exact information as to the accommodation and the inmates in every cottage in the Union. That information I have in my hand, but as it is, circumstantial and voluminous to labour for this meeting, I have made a digest of the leading features which come up with permission, I will read to you.”*

He then went on to explain the shocking conditions under which agricultural labourers lived and here is an example of three.

Watchfield. *A father and three daughters sleep in one room on ground floor; seven persons in a two-roomed cottage of whom two are lodgers, sleeping in the pantry; a father sleeping with his daughter, 17 years of age, and the wife in another bed.*

Shrivenham. *Six cottages, having 35 inmates sleeping in six bedrooms, some of them grown-up sons and daughters, only one privy for the whole and that in a bad state.*

Longcot. *Man and wife with a child, one widower and one single woman with a child, making six persons sleeping in one room; two daughters, each with an illegitimate child age 20 cohabiting with a woman and for other persons making 10 in one room with two beds.*

And there are some other examples he gave from around the area that were much worse. At the moment we don't know exactly where the Union cottages were in Watchfield and Longcot. But we have identified the 'Shrivenham Six,' the location of which, will probably surprise you.



The extract from the Barrington Estate Map shows their location. The row of cottages on the right represent the Alms Houses in Claypits Lane. Compared with the row of six on the left, the Alms Houses were luxurious. If you take a stroll up the alley that leads from Manor Lane to the churchyard, which today is delightful, you can still see the scars from this terrible time on the wall of Manor Cottage. The six tenements would have been little bigger than what we would class today as a large garden shed. They would have been built of a mixture of brick and timber and have had a second floor that formed a bedroom. Within those six bedrooms, 35 people slept, *'some of them grown-up sons and daughters.'* It was of little surprise that disease and incestuous relationships were rife. As we stroll along that alley today, we can only imagine at how it would have smelled in the 1860s. Is this perhaps the reason why that same alley became known as *'Bugs Alley.'*? Is this perhaps the reason why the stone wall at the end of the garden of Elm Tree House that forms part of the alley was

built so tall.? Is this perhaps the reason why on the other side of Manor Lane, the stone wall of Fern House was built upwards with red bricks another two metres.?

The census records of 1871 and 1881 would suggest that the numbers of people living there were getting less. The census of 1891 even gave the tenements the name of, '*Parish Row,*' and the numbers had reduced to 12 people. This would suggest that the parish administration had taken the properties into their care and exerted some kind of control. So, who might have built the tenements.? Documents recently acquired by Shrivvenham Heritage Society show that it was the Haynes family, but assisted by the money of the Rev. Edward Berens. An Assignment dated 1st March 1872, (now SHS Listing No: N914,) show the legal trails in the Wills of Edward Berens and his wife Lady Catherine, and the repayment of £400 that the Vicar of Shrivvenham loaned to George Haynes in 1835. Another document also in the possession of SHS (No: N914,) dated 6th September 1870, between James Fereman and Amariah Fairthorne, confirm that it must have been the Haynes men who built them, when there is a reference to, '*other erections and buildings lately erected or built by Thomas Haynes, deceased.*' We don't yet know exactly when the cottages or tenements were demolished. In another document recently acquired by SHS dated 1912, they were referred to as cottages, '*long since pulled down adjoining the Mansion House.*' This reference is to what was known as, The Manor House, (demolished and now Manor Close) that was literally a few metres away from the cottages, who's inhabitants would have lived completely different lives to those earlier 35 who likely worked in the fields belonging to them. However, it should be remembered that what was normal to those living at that time, would be hugely different to how we live and think today - did we hear you say - "*Thank Goodness?*"