

## HERITAGE CIRCLE

### Janette Robinson, *Voices from the Workhouse – Memories of a Suffolk Workhouse*

Janette Robinson gave a very good talk to the January meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall where she told the sad, but fascinating story of a Suffolk family in a workhouse in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. She has been involved in the local recorder scheme which encourages people to write about their own life. These memoirs are stored for future generations at the Ipswich Record Office. In the course of this work, she was given a wallet of 102 sheets of A4 where four sisters gave their reminiscences of their childhood in a workhouse at Wickham Market. There is other evidence about workhouses, including ledger records on entry, census returns and punishment books, which provide information such as names, ages, place of birth and religion. However, the testimony of these women is invaluable as it gives a 'people's voice' to the evidence about workhouses and their experiences.

From 1601 parishes were allowed to levy a rate to provide for the poor. Those who could not work were given 'indoor relief' in almshouses, while the able bodied might receive food, clothes or coal as 'outdoor relief.' This was resented by many ratepayers who felt they were paying for idleness or lack of thrift. Relief was provided as cheaply as possible but between 1803 and 1818 the national cost rose from £4m to £8m per annum. In 1824 an innovative idea cut expenses significantly. A group of parishes formed a 'Union' and built a workhouse at Southwell. The model was copied across the country and was embodied in the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. All those seeking poor relief had to enter a workhouse. Conditions were purposely grim so that entry was a last resort. One poet described them as 'Prison with a milder name.' Inmates were segregated by gender and age which meant that families were broken up. The able-bodied were expected to work growing food, carrying out repairs, doing the laundry, cooking food and numerous other tasks. Children were trained in 'usefulness' and good behaviour. The workhouses did provide food, clothes, dry shelter, and some basic medical care but the regime was like a prison with high walls, gates and bells. The diet was monotonous. Breakfast was bread and milk, while dinner was a mug of thin soup, potatoes and some meat.

Dora, who was born in Framlingham in 1905, spent most of her first 18 years in the Wickham Market workhouse. Her parents, Emma and Henry, had nine children. The master and matron, Mr and Mrs Balls, were strict but give the impression of being fair in undertaking a difficult job with limited resources. Dora was placed in a dormitory with one sister. She was only able to see her parents and the rest of the family on a Sunday afternoon. However, she spent a year in the infirmary when it was noticed that she was lame. She had to wear a special boot and irons but was never told what was wrong with her. In March 1914 matron bluntly told the children that their mother had died of pneumonia at the age of 41. Soon after, her father joined the army and served throughout World War I. From time to time, the children received cards from their father and they sent him tobacco provided by the workhouse. The children rarely saw Henry after his demob in February 1919

The only day that was different and a little joyful was Christmas Day. The children received an orange, an apple, sweets and a penny, along with a small present. There was a special dinner which included Christmas pudding for dessert. In 1919 Dora and her sisters were sent to different foster parents without warning. She was very miserable and became ill but was eventually returned to Wickham Market along with two of her sisters. She had left school and so was given the task of looking after the young children. Aged 18, Dora asked to be discharged from the workhouse. Within two hours she had left. She found her way to her uncle's house in Framlingham and was able to stay with his family until she went to live in London, marrying during World War II. She came to find some happiness but was marked by her early life which she never spoke about, only recording her experiences in old age.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday 26 February at Rickinghall Village Hall when Tony Diamond will give a talk on *The History of Chocolate*. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information is available at [www.heritagecircle.onsuffolk.net](http://www.heritagecircle.onsuffolk.net).

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