



# The Hundred Parishes

## An introductory article about WORKHOUSES

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Over the years, governments have taken various steps to care for the poor and those unable to work.

The Act for the Relief of the Poor of 1601 made parishes legally responsible for parishioners who could not work. Most assistance was given as “outdoor relief”, meaning financial help but with people able to remain in their own homes.

The Workhouse Test Act of 1723 obliged anyone seeking relief to enter a workhouse operated by the parish. Sometimes the parish used an existing building, while others were constructed especially. Several of these buildings have survived, generally as private houses, including those at Ashdon, Clavering, Finchingfield, Newport, Sawbridgeworth, Stanstead Abbots and Stansted Mountfitchet. We would be interested to learn of others.

Photos of how some look today, many years later, are shown here: immediately below, Ashdon is on the left and Clavering on the right; at the bottom, Finchingfield is on the left and Thaxted on the right.





Two more survivors are pictured here: Standon below and Stanstead Abbots on the right; the latter was built originally as the Gatehouse for Rye House.



Under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, individual parishes were grouped together in a Poor Law Union which was responsible for constructing and operating a central "Union" workhouse for the larger area. Many of these much larger buildings survive and have been re-purposed.

Great Dunmow Poor Law Union combined 26 parishes. Its workhouse was built in 1838 at a cost of £8,000 to house 350 inmates. Below is an old postcard view and then a later photo after the building was converted to apartments.





One of Dunmow's architects, George Gilbert Scott, was a prolific workhouse designer who later designed the Albert Memorial and St Pancras Station.

The Union workhouse at Buntingford, shown on the right, was built in 1836 to house 160 people from 16 surrounding parishes. It closed in 1933 and has since been converted into private houses and apartments.



16th-century Town House in Barley is pictured on the left. It served as a parish workhouse for many years. Now, it is used by the parish council and other local organisations for meetings.

Linton's workhouse was built in 1837 in Symonds Lane to accommodate 230 inmates from across the 22 parishes that made up the Linton Union. It is now a retirement home, pictured below.



Saffron Walden's workhouse was built in 1836 for 340 inmates from the 24 parishes that constituted Saffron Walden Union. It became a hospital in 1948. Most of the building was converted into apartments in 1999 although part continues to serve as Saffron Walden Community Hospital.

Twenty parishes from Hertfordshire and Essex were grouped under the Bishop's Stortford Union which built the workhouse in Bishop's Stortford that later became the Herts & Essex Hospital before its conversion to apartments.

Life in the workhouse was hard; families were split, husbands separated from wives and parents from their children - a stark contrast to today's benefits systems.

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