

## **The Nacton Workhouse**

Julie Johnson was our speaker for our October speaker meeting. She grew up in the Nacton area and had always been curious about the history of the local Workhouse. Later, as a student, she wrote her dissertation on the subject. The word Workhouse evokes the grim Victorian world of *Oliver Twist*, but its story is a fascinating mix of social history, politics, economics and institutional architecture. The Nacton Workhouse was built outside the village on the site which later became Amberfield School in 1976.

Part of Suffolk's rich social history, the Workhouse system had spread across England. The Workhouse in Theatre Street in Woodbridge was founded earlier in 1668. Built in 1758 for 350 inmates, the House of Industry at Nacton was larger than the village itself. It was built on private land donated by benefactor Admiral Vernon. It aimed to reduce poor rates by housing the poor and employing them in tasks like spinning wool and making twine. The area covered included Felixstowe and many other parishes. The building and furnishings cost over £4,500 but within four years the poor rates had been halved and £2,000 saved. The structure of the Workhouse was rigid. Officers included governor, treasurer, chaplain, schoolmaster, visiting surgeon, baker, barber, shoemaker and nurse.

Julie told us about her work in tracing the origins and development of the Workhouse at Nacton. She looked at its patterns of admission, employment statistics and population figures. Julie relied heavily on parish records for her research. 1834 was a pivotal moment when Workhouse inmates were first recorded thanks to the provisions of Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. The Inmate register recorded which parish they came from, length of time stayed and outcomes. She showed us several examples of people admitted, one individual seven times! Inmates were separated into those who could work, those who couldn't and idiots/lunatics. Women earned much less than the men. Some women were listed as Widow (Surname). They lost their own identities. Julie found evidence of her own distant relatives listed. Some had been laid to rest within the boundaries of the Workhouse. A burial register linked to a Memorial.

She touched upon the stigma attached to being in the Workhouse at the time - the ultimate failure. There was a perception that it was an easy option, roof over head, food provided etc. Julie finished by telling us a few individual stories. One inmate. Ann Ellis died at the exceptional age of 88 in 1928. Twins Marie and Elizabeth Lawrence of Felixstowe were admitted aged 4yrs.in 1834 when their mother died. Julie encouraged anyone interested in the topic to look online for recently available records. We had a record number of visitors attending which showed the enormous amount of local people keen to hear about the Nacton Workhouse!

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