

St George Workhouse

Bristol Times Articles

by Dave Stephenson



Troopers Hill is in the St George area of Bristol. The parish of St George was established in 1751 when King George II gave his royal assent for the division of the Pip 'n' Jay parish and to the construction of new church, a church that would give its name to a new Bristol suburb.

In 1801 the St George Workhouse opened, not far from Troopers Hill, in Hudds Vale. Some of the finance came from a charity in the name of Sir Abraham Elton – a past owner of Troopers Hill.

Dave Stephenson, who Friends of Troopers Hill met through the Barton Hill History Group, wrote two articles about the Workhouse for the Bristol Times supplement to the Bristol Post.

Dave has been kind enough to share the articles with us and to allow us to publish them here.

With the exception of the current view of the Workhouse (which we have updated); the illustrations were included in the original articles.

St George Workhouse – Part 1 – Published Tuesday 13th February 2007

‘The parish poor’

by Dave Stephenson

When you hear the word workhouse what springs to mind? Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist, that Victorian monologue A Christmas Day In The Workhouse or your grandparents' great fear that they could end up there, such was the disgrace. These dreaded Victorian institutions, which stayed in existence until 1930, came into being because of the 1834 Poor Law act. But smaller, local workhouses, run by the parish and paid for from the local rates rather than by the dictate of central government, existed long before that.

The district of St George was created in 1751. It had its own church, but sent its paupers to a 50-year-old workhouse in Pennywell Road run by the Pip n' Jay church in Old Market. But this all changed in 1798 when the two parishes were separated. St George would, from now on, maintain its own workhouse. This opened in May 1801 in what is now Hudds Vale Road, just off Plummers Hill. The authorities had just 30 days to make sure everyone from the district who needed to be there was.

The workhouse was designed by local man William Paty, whose family had been responsible for building many fashionable houses in Clifton, Montpelier

and Kingsdown. Its first guardians, appointed by Parliament, were Richard Hart, the vicar, William Webb, Richard Adams, Thomas Waters and Thomas Thurston, all gentlemen from St George, plus Charles Arthur from Bath. The vicar, churchwardens and vestrymen employed a clerk, master, matron and servants to work there. Finance came from the local rates and the Sir Abraham Elton's charity This had been left to St Philip's and Jacob's church, but with the parishes now separated St George had a share of it. The house and grounds, which covered just over two acres, contained 10 rooms on the ground floor, 14 bedrooms, two cellars, a wash house, laundry and three outhouses.



Still standing: St George Workhouse, December 2024

The St George church burial records give the addresses of the dead from 1813 to 1835. Most people were well into their 70s, 80s, even older, with very few younger people. The first child I can find dying here was in 1835. In October 1848 a baby girl died aged just five months. No parents names are recorded - she was named Mary St George. I believe she had been abandoned and given the surname of the district where she was found. It was this little girl's death that inspired me to write this feature. It's bad enough not being given your parents' name, but to be placed in an unmarked pauper's grave with just a single bell ringing out I found very moving.

In 1834 a Royal Commission was carried out into all the workhouses in England. St George's was described as clean and in good order but run more like an almshouse, in which the inmates were well fed and taken care off, rather than a place of strict discipline. It goes on to say that the population of 6,285 was very poor and a drain on the rates. Many had been thrown out of work by the discontinuance of a spelter works and there were a great many people with cottages and market gardens whose earnings were precarious and irregular. The practice then was to give the smallest amount of relief possible - not really enough money to support a family. Men, even if they were very old, ill or disabled, were driven to work by abject poverty. The most troublesome were sometimes sent to distant pits to fetch coals. Their barrows were marked and greatly disliked because of the stigma.

The report also states that the colliers of the district, who had a bad reputation, were, in fact, religious and peaceable. The adults were later transferred to the big, institutional Fishponds road workhouse, although the children remained in

St George until about 1850, when it was decided to sell the place. It was said that the guardians had spent some £3,000 in alterations, additions and improvement since it was built.

The 1841 census records the names of 181 people at the workhouse. Some were staff who lived there but the majority must have been children - at least four being found within a few years in the burial records.

All of Bristol's workhouse records - kept in St Peter's Hospital at Castle Park - were destroyed in the Blitz, so we shall never know how many people passed through St George or how many managed to make a better life for themselves. But we know they were better treated than at Pennywell Road, the poorhouse built by the Corporation in 1700 where John Wesley once preached. This much criticised institution - with its padded cells and barred windows for the demented - was not demolished until 1925.



The ancient workhouse in Pennywell Road. This workhouse was visited by John Wesley

‘Pottery linked to old workhouse’

by Dave Stephenson

In 1869, after the St George workhouse had been sold, it became a pottery. Alfred Hiley, Jock Ellis and Arthur Ellis were all owners at one time or another. The latter - who had trade cards printed - called the place "The Crown Pottery of St George". By the time the pottery finished in 1904, the old building had seen a lot of conversion, with extra buildings added. The last owners were the well known firm of Pountneys, who moved to a new pottery in Fishponds. If the archaeologists ever do a dig here it might produce some interesting material - they must have had a tip for all that rubbish.

The building then became home to Imperial Soap who produced big blocks of green soap which could be used to scrub floors, launder clothes and, in fact, keep the whole family clean. It's been said that children from the workhouse were employed here, but that can't be true as the dates don't match up. And, anyway, by that time people were living in part of the complex. Newicks, who had another soap works in Old Market, also ran what would later become the Electric Sparks hardware shops in Lawrence Hill and St George.

In 1919, a big fire almost destroyed the whole factory, which remained closed until Thomas', who had another factory in St Philips, took it over. For a short period it was a leather warehouse, then, in about 1930, R. Moon and Co. moved in. Originally situated in Temple Back, they made tins of all shapes and sizes. These were exported all over the world, as back in those days, many items were packed into tins. Many were produced for Royal events.

It's believed Mr Moon lived on the premises, which, for some reason, was known as the Old Manor House. His hobby was growing roses, which took over his life when he became disillusioned with the business and sold it to Avon Tin Printers, which was owned by Jim Morgan and later, by his son, David.

Besides tins, this company also made baking trays, screw caps, advertising plates and displays. Strangely, they rarely put their name on their products. Using the name Avon Gifts, the company once received a letter of complaint from Avon Cosmetics implying that they were, illegally, using the same name. But after Avon Tin had replied, explaining that their company had been in operation since the 1930s, they heard no more.



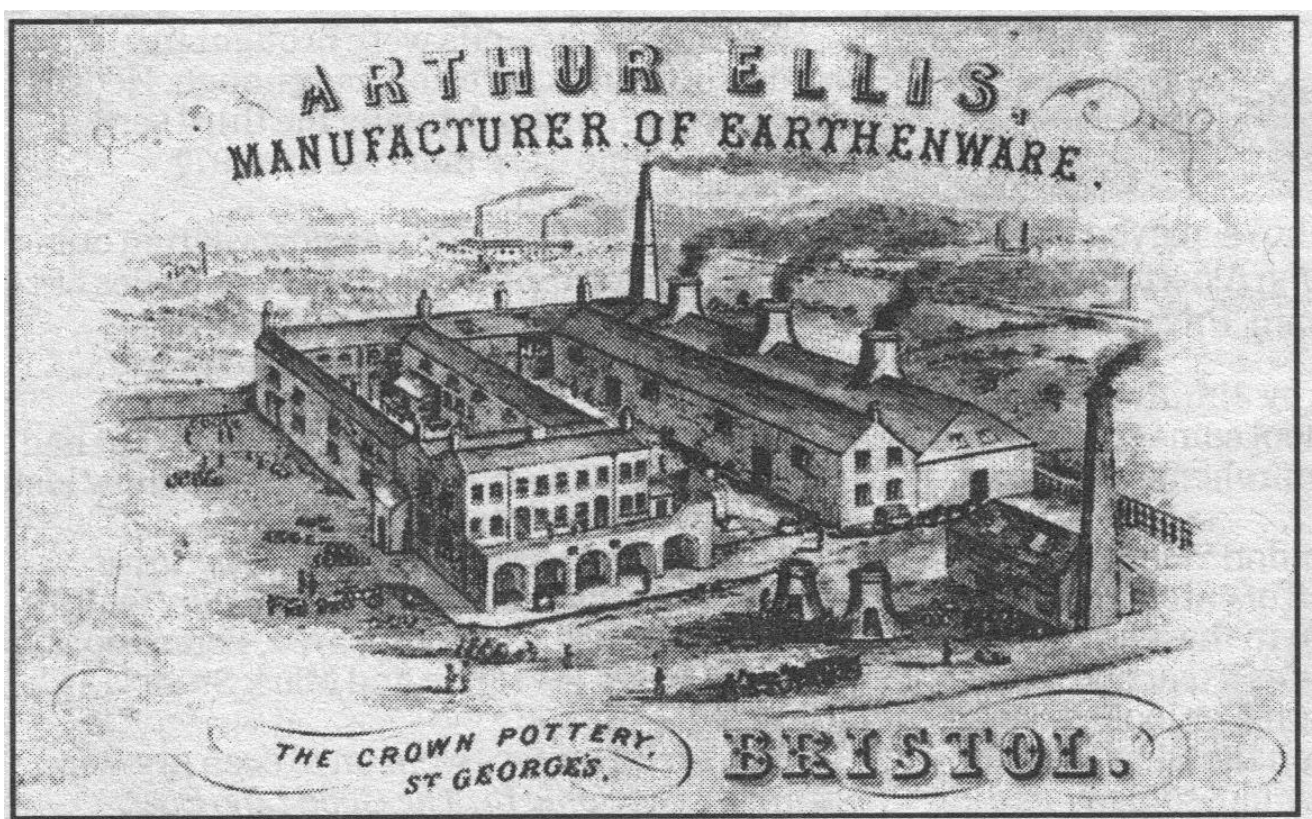
Workers at Avon Tin Printers take a break

Moving from this site in the late 1960's they went to Station Road in Kingswood. Perhaps any ex-employees could tell me how many people worked there and what their products and designs looked like?

Glenfrome Engineering were the next tenants and neighbours often saw hearses, Land Rovers, stretch limos and the like leaving the works after being customised for rich customers. They left the site in 1988.

Planning permission was obtained to turn the place into flats, a restaurant and a health complex. Today, the workhouse building itself is occupied by a company training people to gain extra qualifications.

As regards the flats, it's interesting to read what estate agents have been saying about these buildings, which were not part of the workhouse. They say it's Victorian and a place where children like Dickens' Oliver Twist were taken in and set to work. There would have been gardens to tend, water to obtain from a well, and clothes to wash in the laundry. My research, however, shows that the place was not like this at all.



The St George Pottery

Dave Stephenson also wrote three articles for the Bristol Times about St George Church which he has also given us permission to publish, see:
www.troopers-hill.org.uk/history/StGeorgeChurches.pdf

For more information on the history of St George see:
Friends of Troopers Hill - www.troopers-hill.org.uk/history.htm
Barton Hill History Group - www.bhhg.co.uk/

Friends of Troopers Hill - December 2024