

# Billericay Workhouse



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## Billericay Workhouse

I am sure everybody is familiar with the hellish workhouse in Oliver Twist – a place of hunger, degradation and institutionalised cruelty. So, what was the Billericay Workhouse like did it follow this definition.

The early workhouse directory on account of several workhouses published in 1725, notes the existence of a workhouse at “Billerica.” The workhouse may have dated from as early as 1719 when parish records note that a bond of £50 was borrowed in connection with building of a house for the poor.

A parliamentary report of 1777 recorded the parish workhouse in operation at Great Burstead for 40 inmates. The town of Billericay lays within the Great Burstead Parish, so either name was often used to refer to the same establishment.

Billericay Poor Law Union was formed on 10 October 1835. Its operation was overseen by an elected Board of Guardians, 29 in number representing the following 26 constituent parishes (figures in brackets indicate numbers of Guardians if more than one).

Basildon, North Benfleet, South Benfleet, Bowers Gifford, Brentwood (2), Great Burstead (2), Little Burstead, Childerditch, Downham, Dunton, East Horndon, West Horndon, Hutton, Ingrave, Laindon, Mountnessing, Nevendon, Pitsea, Ramsden Bellhouse, Ramsden Crays, Shenfield, Thundersley, Vange, Little Warley, South Weald (2), Wickford. Later addition Lee Chapel in 1858.

The population falling within the union at the 1831 census was 12,529 – with Parishes ranging in size from West Horndon (pop. 63) to Great Burstead (pop. 1977).



(Gatehouse – original entrance to the workhouse. It was from here that male and female entrants to the workhouse were separated, even married couples and taken to their own areas. Children were sent to a nursery area.)

A new Billericay workhouse was built in 1839/40 on an 11½ acre site in Stock Hill field, between Stock Road to the west and Norsey Road to the east. It was designed by George Gilbert Scott and William Bonython Moffatt were the architects of many other workhouses during this period.

Their design for Billericay was in Elizabethan Tudor Style and cost £11,000 to build.

The main entrance to the site was at the south of Norsey Road where the Porter's Lodge was located. The main workhouse block was a large H-shaped building facing to the south.

Females were accommodated at the west of the site and Males at the east, with children residing in the central and southern portion of the sideways. The south-west wing included a nursery and receiving wards and a chapel at its far end. Opposite the chapel was the Guardians boardroom.

The open space at the south of the main building was used for boys and girl's playground. The areas at the northern side of the main building were used to provide "Airing Courts" for adult inmates.



*The Master's quarters lay at the centre of the main block.*

Additional land was acquired in 1898 at the north of the workhouse and an infirmary was built along with a casual wards and a Labour Master's house. In 1907 further developments included a receiving ward near the main entrance. 1927 saw a new infirmary built.

The workhouse or at least its casual wards, became known locally as "The Grubber" – presumably because it provided "grub" or food.



*Master's quarters lay at the centre of the main block*



Billericay Chapel

The following is an article that appeared in the Echo Newspaper on the 28 November 2022, by Emma Palmer and she has given us permission to duplicate it.

The heading read **'Death, despair and detestable food at Billericay Workhouse where life was cheap for its unfortunate poor inmates.'**

There are so many miserable stories to be found when it comes to the history of the old Billericay workhouse.

We may be facing economic hardships now, but the unfortunate souls who found themselves knocking on the workhouse door some 150 years ago were in a league of their own when it came to destitution and hopelessness.

Unfortunate souls like poor William Judd. He was just 37 when he was admitted to the workhouse in the autumn of 1900 in an exhausted state.

He died three hours later. Judd had been sleeping rough for a few months, kipping down on hay in different barns. His only solace in life was the few dregs of whisky he managed to get his hands on now and again. He died in the workhouse infirmary at 9pm, three hours after arriving.

Or there's the two young boys who were living at the work-house but were sent to the Brentwood Lunatic Asylum because they were deemed to be 'trouble-some'. In other words, they were a bit too boisterous. Their parents weren't even told they had been taken away. Who knows if they ever made it out?

Mary Fewell certainly never made it out of the workhouse. When she died in March of 1926 at the age of 95, she had spent almost her entire life living in the Billericay poorhouse. She's been there since she was 17. To be fair, she admitted she quite liked the life inside the imposing brick building in Norsey Road and said she preferred it to working on the outside. What could she have achieved; however, had she'd not become institutionalised?

Battle of Waterloo veteran Bernard Mace had acquired a number of prestigious war medals during his life. However, he found himself facing hard times in his later years and died in the workhouse, all alone, at the age of 95. Nobody knew of his notable past in the military until after his death.

Not many people really cared about you if you were in the unlucky position to be desperate enough to be sent to the workhouse – or if you found yourself there after being deserted by your spouse or losing your job. And not many really cared about you once you left.

In June of 1850 a young girl named Eliza Atkins was sent out from the Billericay workhouse to work as a servant for a local farmer. Her new master Joseph Boreham and his wife were not welcoming hosts. They stripped Eliza of her clothes, beat her with their hands and then assaulted her with a riding whip.

Eliza had 54 bloody wounds on her body. The couple admitted meting out the beating but said Eliza had been 'insubordinate'. They were given a fine.

Then there was William Taylor, who was just 16 when he apprenticed out by the workhouse to a stream trawling company. He went missing. His body turned up a few months later in Grimsby. He could hardly be recognised; such was the extent of his injuries. It seemed he had been attacked then drowned. He was forgotten as quickly as he had disappeared.

Despite the horrors of having to live in a Victorian workhouse, for some time Billericay was considered better than most of its counterparts, including the neighbouring Rochford Workhouse.

In the 1880s the Billericay Union Workhouse was known as the 'tramp's favourite' due to the light work its inmates had to carry out and the excellent fare it served up. This was to change, however.

In April of 1904 inmates at the workhouse went on strike over the state of food they were given.

The high cost of food served up to the inmates, compared to other workhouses, had raised eyebrows so a new cheaper, diet plan was brought in.

Suffice to say, it didn't go down well. At dinner time on the first day of the new menu a young labourer named Greenhill threw his meat pudding in the swill tub. Others soon joined in the protest.

Under the new food plan the inmates were to receive a pint and half of a gruel dish named 'skilly' for breakfast, alongside some bread. But the weak broth of oatmeal mixed with water was just too bland to bear. Eleven men, ranging in age from 24 to 45 refused to touch the food and when they were supposed to start work their day's labour, they point blank refused to perform their tasks. their minds, however, and the next day they were back to work.

Two years later women living at the workhouse refused to eat the soup because it tasted so bad. Overseers who ran the workhouse asked for the soup to be sent to them at a meeting so they could try it, but it never arrived so they got out of having to try it.

Some inmates took matters into their own hands. In 1900 a 'food burglar' broke into the locked cellar belonging to the locked cellar belonging to the workhouse mast broke into the locked cellar belonging to the locked cellar belonging to the workhouse master Walter Needham.

The culprits made off with 3lbs of Mr Needham's cheese as well as food for inmates' dinner next day.

The bungling thief somehow stepped into a pile of treacle while they were running amok in the cellar, resulting in sticky footsteps being left around the crime scene.

*“The burglar had the misfortune to step into a pan of treacle and his further movements were marked by footprints of the sweet and sticky substance.”* A newspaper report into the incident revealed.

*“It might have been possible to trace him through the treacle, but he seems to have avoided this possibility by removing his boots before leaving the cellar. The police have been looking for the treacly boots, but have not yet found them.”*

Despite the threat of harsh punishment, it seems inmates weren't scared to rebel at the workhouse on occasion. Workhouse residents had to work in order to pay for their keep. There was little choice over what jobs they were given. In 1908 John Taylor was sent to prison for seven days after refusing to carry out his tasks. He was that he had to wash in cold water and complained the water at the workhouse was never hot.

Albert Simmons, a labour aged 25 exhibited his outrage at having to pick oakum at the workhouse (untwisted rope) by setting fire to the entire equipment room.

Upon being arrested he said he didn't care about what he'd done and 'wanted to get a Christmas dinner in prison'. He got his wish. Although some called for him to be flogged, he was instead sentenced to a year behind bars.

Like all workhouses at the time Billericay Workhouse was there to provide sanctuary for many poor, and homeless people of the age.

Some were over-nighter tramps who, for shelter and supper, were expected to chop logs and help out generally, while others could end up living there long term.

One such 'tramp' was Jane Carpenter. She was always in and out of the workhouse. She'd come from Wales and clearly had a hard life. At one point she had been sent to prison for stealing two jackets.

In September 1905, Jane was 75 and penniless. She limped because she had a broken leg that had not been set properly. One night she left the workhouse and laid herself down on a bench, after having a few drinks, when a police officer stopped her.

The encounter ended up with her being kicked so hard she was bleeding heavily. She accused the police sergeant of attacking her and of bellowing at

her: *"If you scream again, I'll give you a dab in the mouth."* The officer, Walter Peters, denied the charge and said he had only 'poked' her on the arm to see if she were dead or alive. He was acquitted and Jane's desolate existence continued.

Children were also to be found living in the workhouse. When they went out to school, they were often teased by the village children due to the distinctive blue stockings they had to wear. It got so bad that in 1895, the workhouse overseers passed a motion to end the humiliation of the children by buying in stockings of all different colours.

The workhouse was gradually reformed and modernised and eventually became the site of St Andrew's Hospital. It is said that the composer Dr Ralph Vaughan Williams once visited the hospital to record and notate folk songs from some of the inmates.

Today the workhouse building still stands and has been developed into deluxe apartments. Little of its original usage is obvious, though its dark history remains intriguing to many.

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In addition to this article in the Echo we have found further reports of individuals living in the Billericay workhouse from the papers: The first is of Bernard Mace mention in Emma's article as being a battle of Waterloo Veteran. However though involved in the Peninsular war (1808-14), there is no evidence of him being involved in the Battle of Waterloo. – Bernard Mace had been in the Billericay Union house (workhouse) for many years died in September 1878 at the age of 95. He was born in Latchingdon on 1 December 1783, to Jane and William Mace. He was baptised at Christ Church, Snoreham on the 19 November 1784.

He enlisted into the 45<sup>th</sup> Regiments of Foot in 1800 and spent 21 years and three months before transferring to the 62<sup>nd</sup> Regiments of Foot, spending 2 years and five months before being discharged in August 1823 at 40 years of age.

The 1841, 1851, 1861 censuses have Bernard and his wife Mary living at Church Street, Great Burstead. Mary died in 1862 but the 1871 census still has Bernard living in Church Street. So, it was sometime after this that he entered the workhouse.

In 1848 he was presented with a Victoria Medal with ten clasps for engagements-*'vis.*, (Portugal, Spain, and France) Vimiers, Talavera, Busaco, Fuentes D'Onor, Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajos, Salamanca, Vittoria, Pyrenees, and



Toulouse. He also believed he was entitled to another two but would have to go to London to get them. Although actively engaged in all the battles for which he received clasps, and the two others, plus skirmishes, he never received the slightest wound.

On retirement he received for the next 55 years a pension of 13 pence a day (1s.1d) resulting in a total payment of £1,080.

The second very interesting inmate is John Denny who ended up in the workhouse in 1904. Very little is known of John other than it is understood he came from the Nevendon area. He came to prominence following Ralph Vaughan Williams (English Composer) visit to see him at the Billericay workhouse in 1904/ The following is one of the songs sung by John to Vaughan Williams. Ralph had the habit

*Brisk Young Sailor Sung by Mr Denny, 25 April 1904, Billericay Workhouse Collected by Ralph Vaughan Williams.*

*1 A brisk young sailor courted me,  
He stole away my liberty,  
He won my heart with a free good will,  
He's false I know but I love him still.*

*2 Where love is hot where love is cold  
Where loved is conquered by young and old Love is such a silly thing,  
Love will to the grave me bring.*

*3 When first I wore my apron low,  
My love followed me through frost and snow,  
But now my apron is up to my chin,  
My love passes by and says nothing.*

*4 On yonder hill there stands an inn,  
Where my love goes and sits him down,  
He takes another girl on his knee,  
He'll smile at her and frown on me.*

*5 The reason of this I'll tell you why,  
It's because she has more gold than I,  
Her gold will waste, her beauty blast,  
And she'll become like me at last.*

*6 I wish my baby it was born,  
Set smiling on his daddy's knee,  
And me myself wrapped in cold clay,*

*And green grass growing over me.*

*7 On yonder hill there is a house,  
Where my love goes, where he does dwell,  
He has two hearts instead of one,  
He'll be a rogue when I am gone.*

*8 Dig my grave both wide and deep  
And place two stones at the head and feet  
In the middle place a turtle dove  
To let them know I died for love.*



*Billericay Board-room (right)*

The following is an article in the Daily Gazette (7 April 2000) by Journalist Tom King which gives a further insight into the history of the work house.

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**Charles House, the new townhouse development in Billericay has had a varied existence as TOM KING discovers**

In one of the unlikeliest of romances, a modern, and very hard-headed building company fell in love with a decrepit Victorian workhouse.

Laing is one of the largest and most successful firms in the construction business. When the company acquired Charles House, in Billericay, there was little sentiment involved.

The listed building was viewed as no more than a promising investment.

"We simply intended to sell it on in due course," says Stuart Wallace, Laing's area manager. "From the building point of view, it wasn't our sort of thing."

Then something rather odd happened. "We became fascinated with the place," says Stuart. "We were almost finding excuses to come and visit the site."

This might seem almost perverse, given the nature of Charles House. For almost a century, it served as the workhouse for Billericay and 26 surrounding parishes.

Workhouses, of course, are a dark presence in British history and myth. For mere buildings, they crop up with remarkable persistence as the chief heavies in books, musicals and films.

Everyone is familiar with the hellish workhouse in *Oliver Twist* (and *Oliver!*) - a place of hunger, degradation and institutionalised cruelty. And who can forget the workhouse in *Cider with Rosie*, where an old couple who had been married for 65 years were separated, and permitted to see each other for a mere hour a week?

Charles House is just one out of hundreds of workhouses constructed all over the British Isles, mostly in the 1840s - the "hungry Forties." Without exception, they were grim works of architecture, apt reflections in bricks and mortar of what went on inside.

Many of them have been demolished, with no tears shed over their remains. Of the survivors, many became the core buildings of NHS hospitals, atoning for their past by serving a new, humane function.

This is how Charles House was saved. It became the main men's block and lab unit for Billericay Hospital. It sat, largely unnoticed, surrounded by modern shack-building, until St Andrews closed in 1997.

During that time, the former workhouse turned from a utilitarian people-processing plant into a historic building.

The bricks acquired the patina of age, lichens colonised the stonework. The huge Welsh slates on the roof, no longer a cheap, everyday item, turned into a symbol of stylish living.

"We've all come round to Victorian architecture in recent years," says Stuart Wallace. "And this was a fine example."

So, against some people's better judgement, Laing took the decision to develop Charles House under the firm's own banner.

The old workhouse has been wholly reconstructed, but using the original materials. The old building has been supplemented by some modern structures, but it is frankly impossible to tell where the Victorian ends and the 1999 begins.

The builders have copied the style of Charles House and used exactly matching - and very expensive - new materials. "We didn't stint anywhere," says Stuart Wallace. "We wanted to do a good job. And, at the end of the day, we do believe that good design is good business."

Laing went to immense efforts to find the correct Mildenhall clay for the bricks. Their architects have also reproduced the distinctive banded-brick decoration which, Stuart Wallace says, "is very much an Essex tradition".

The result is a cosy, rather dreamy courtyard, reminiscent of a cathedral close or an Oxbridge college quad. The neat lawns are edged by box hedging.

"In Victorian times, the garden would have been looked after in this style by some of the fitter old men in the workhouse," says Stuart.

Purchasers are already queuing up for the town-houses that have been carved out of the old building. "They're ideal for people who are trading down - changing their large houses for something smaller, more manageable, but still with some character," Stuart says.

Character they will certainly find. The Charles House interiors as well as the exteriors have been preserved, right down to the mysterious and apparently pointless steps up and down along the corridors, and the odd corners and recesses in the rooms.

"With a project like this, we can't impose our own design," Stuart says. "We have to work within the constraints of the old building. Yet surprisingly, the spaces often seem to be ideal for modern use."

Some might argue that all this represents a prettification of history, a glamorising of what was once a very ugly place, spiritually as well as visually. Yet there is still at least one person alive who remembers the old Billericay Workhouse days, and has a rather different story to tell.

From the beginning, the Workhouse was supervised by a salaried Master, directly responsible to the Board of Guardians. The Guardians comprised prominent local gentry, clergy and businessmen. Perhaps the best known of all the Billericay Workhouse Masters was Walter Needham, a man capable and efficient enough to satisfy the Board of Guardians, but compassionate enough to be remembered with some affection. Needham

took over in the 1890s. His daughter, Mary, was born in the Workhouse, and lived locally, surviving well into her 90's.

In fact, it was Mary Needham, 91, who was the guest of honour at the reopening ceremony. Having cut the ribbon and declared the new project formally open, she then enjoyed a busy time talking to the media.

"People don't always talk kindly about workhouses," said Mary. "But in many ways, they weren't as black as they've been painted."

She talks with some authority. Mary is the daughter of the last master and matron of Billericay Union Workhouse.

"Those who were able certainly had to work hard for their keep," says Mary. "That included the master and matron. They worked very hard for the welfare of everybody, and they did their very best to create a welcoming atmosphere."

Mary now lives in a cottage on the other side of Norsey Road, opposite the master's residence where she spent her childhood.

"It is good to see the old place being given new life," she says. "It was worth saving. The workhouse certainly isn't a place that Billericay should be ashamed to keep."

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Regular meetings of the Board of Guardians were held and duly minuted. The Minute Books – held at Essex Record Office, Chelmsford – are fascinating and well worth studying, giving valuable insights into the mindset of those responsible for ensuring that “the House” was correctly (and economically!) run.

The media in those days did not report on the conditions of the work and poor houses, so I wonder how many people were aware of the them and the terrible conditions. My maternal grandmother was born in Greenwich on the 11 May 1893 and I remember clearly speaking to her about workhouses in the early 1970s and she had no recollection of them and as far as she knew they had not existed.

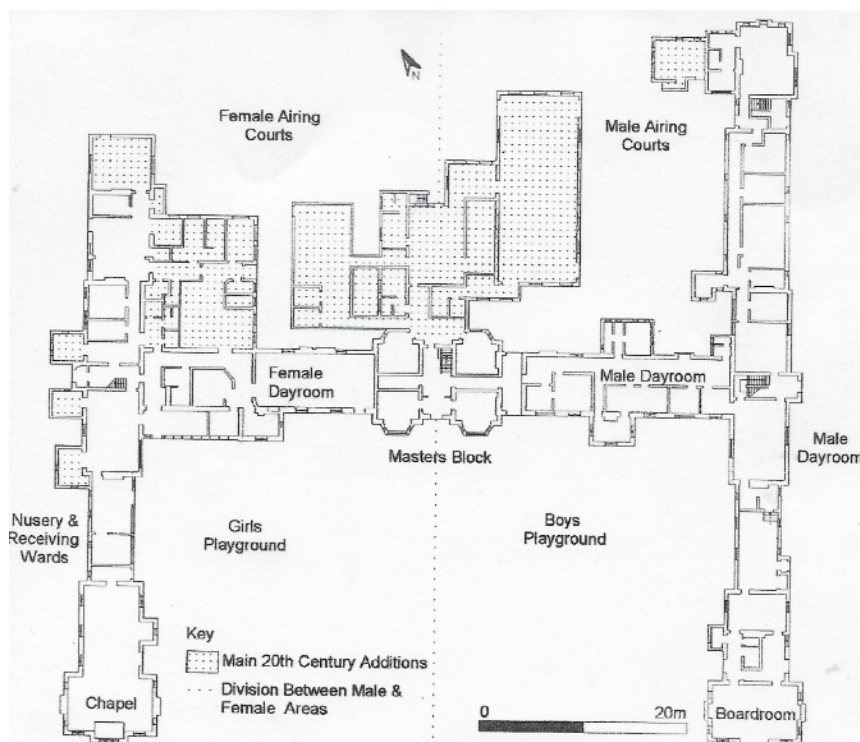
The workhouse was often referred to as the “Retreat.” It is a grade II listed building.

Despite popular perceptions, the regime and physical condition in workhouses evolved enormously over the years. For many though, that was irrelevant. It was the overwhelming shame and stigma that had become associated with entering the workhouse that meant they would rather die than pass through its doors.

We have also produced a pamphlet on 'Workhouses of Essex' which traces the origins of the workhouse back to the late 1300s. Including the establishment of the Billericay Workhouse.



*Billericay Workhouse Ariel View*



## *Ground Floor Plan*

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