WORKHOUSE FURNITURE

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Elizabethan welfare legislation, culminating in the Poor Law Act of 1601, placed responsibility for looking after the poor on each local community. The Act called on parishes to appoint an overseer and levy a rate for relieving the aged and infirm poor. The rate could be used to build a 'poor house' to shelter those unable to support themselves, but many paupers were given 'out relief' in their own homes. Knatchbull's Act of 1723 authorised parishes to provide a workhouse or 'house of industry' in which able-bodied paupers were made to work for their keep, and within a few years some 150 had been set up. These institutions were intended to deter vagrants from seeking parish relief by combining harsh conditions with tedious labour. Orphans, the old, sick and insane might be lodged in a common workhouse, but most parishes continued to maintain benevolent poor houses which gave food and shelter to deserving paupers. In 1782 Gilbert's Act allowed groups of parishes to combine for this purpose. Sir Frederick Eden's three volume survey *The State of the Poor*, 1797, provides a wealth of detailed information about different kinds of work or poor houses. They ranged from the large well-regulated establishment at Liverpool for 1,200 persons to oppressive squalid institutions in remote farmsteads or small homely refuges akin to village almshouses.

In 1832 the soaring expense of coping with all categories of the poor led to the setting up of a Commission of enquiry to look into the practical operation of the Poor Laws. The most influential figure in drafting the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 was Edwin Chadwick — the architect of the Victorian workhouse system. Parishes were merged into 'Unions' administered by an elected Board of Guardians who were supervised by the government commissioners to ensure national uniformity. The average Union embraced about thirty parishes, centred on some market town, serving a population of roughly ten thousand. Inmates were rigidly segregated into children / able-bodied males / able-bodied females / the sick, aged and other impotent poor. Life for the able-bodied was to be 'wholesomely unpleasant' based on a degrading regime of plain living, discipline and hard labour such as stone breaking, oakum picking or sack making, the aim being to ensure that their circumstances were more disagreeable than the lowest paid labourer. Out-relief to the able-bodied ceased; if a man entered the workhouse his family (from which he would be separated) must join him, life in fact was to be so repellent that many paupers who were 'offered the house' refused to enter it.

Following this legislation grim, prison-like workhouses rapidly sprung up all over the country. In the first two years 127 were approved with an average of 300 beds each, while many enlargements to existing parish houses were made. The Act resulted in one of the most ambitious public building programmes of the century; by 1840 an estimated 350 new Union workhouses had been erected at an average cost of £5,000. They were usually two storey blocks built around a courtyard, the basic rooms being dormitories for each category of inmate, dining rooms, work rooms, washrooms, kitchen, laundry, a ward for the chronic sick, nursery and sometimes a school room.[1]

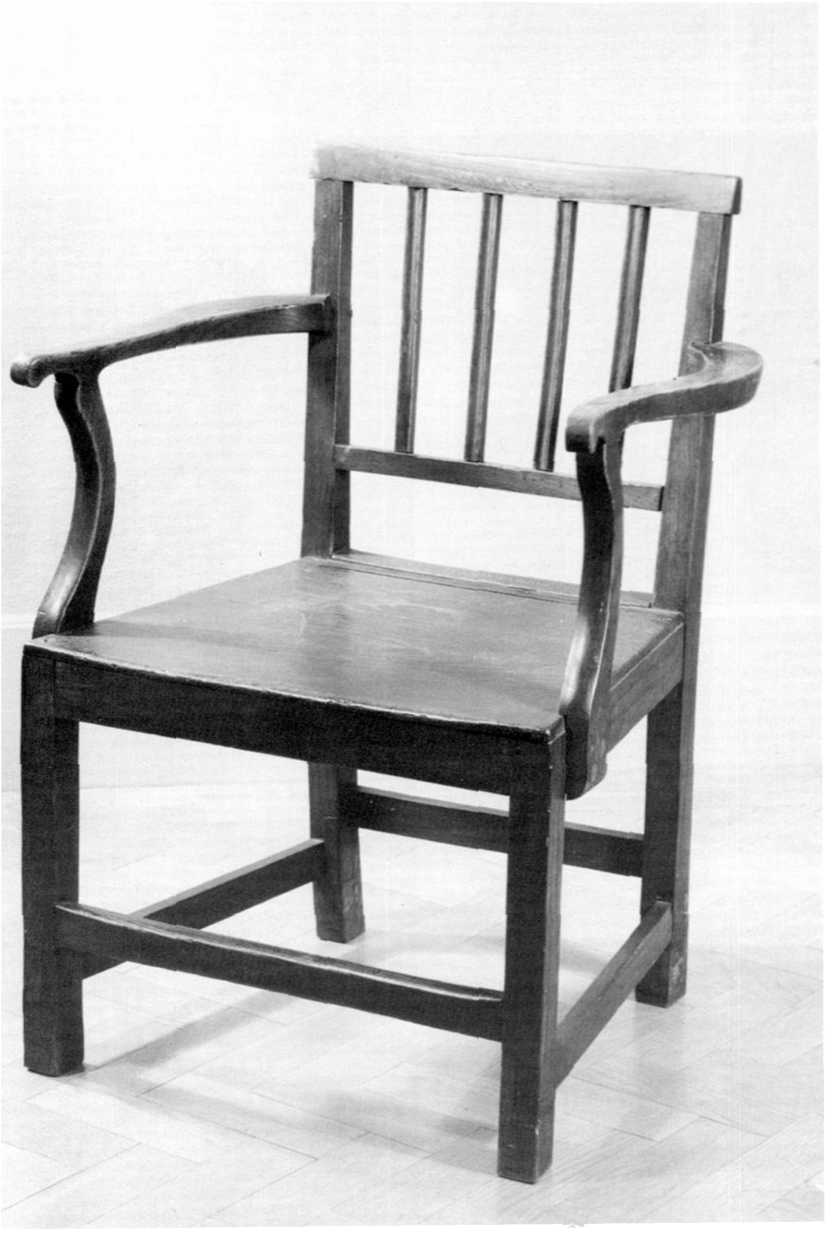
Our knowledge of workhouse furniture comes mainly from scattered inventories, contractors' estimates for fitting out new Union workhouses, the Board of Guardians' minute books, pictorial sources and surviving provenanced items, some of which bear brand marks recording their origin (Figs 1–3).

The parish books of St Botolph's, Cambridge show that in 1741 the workhouse contained sixteen inmates and in 1750 nine. The records, which include inventories for 1739 and 1747,[2] also suggest that the goods of paupers were sometimes taken into the workhouse. In 1747 the ground floor accommodation consisted of a comfortably furnished 'Officer's Parlour', a day room with chairs, stools, a table, six spinning wheels, candlesticks, fire-irons, etc. and a well equipped kitchen. Upstairs there was a bedroom for the Master and four unheated chambers for paupers containing a total of seven feather or straw beds together with an equal number of chamber pots, chairs or stools, one trunk and a looking glass. That St Botolph's was typical of small humanely run early-Georgian parish houses is confirmed by a short inventory made in 1755 when Elizabeth Barningham became mistress of the poorhouse at Arkengarthdale, a rural parish near Richmond in North Yorkshire.[3] The building was provided with six chaff beds, six stools, two tables, four coffres, a dresser, one long settle, equipment for carding and spinning wool, two washing tubs and a picturesque assortment of kail pots, piggins, brass pans, supping pots, wooden bowls, trenchers and other utensils. Apart from the absence of chairs the furnishings differed little from the household goods found in neighbouring farm-houses which suggests that the local community regarded it more as an almshouse than a place of shame. The two storey workhouse built in the local vernacular style at Witham, Essex in 1714 and converted into cottages in 1841[4] illustrates how traditional poor houses merged naturally with domestic village architecture, in contrast to the grim fortress-like Victorian institutions designed to inspire fear and dread. There is good evidence that furnishings too reflected the transition from parish poor house to Union workhouse.

The workhouse built at Charlton Kings, Gloucestershire in 1827 at a cost of £466, was transferred to the Cheltenham Union 1834 and closed down in 1847. Before handing it over to the Cheltenham Guardians a detailed schedule of 'Furniture, fixtures, utensils and other effects' valued at £81 1*s.* 0*d.* was compiled.[5] This list reveals that the Charlton Kings workhouse accommodated about a dozen residents and was more austerely furnished than poor houses at Cambridge and Arkengarthdale. The Committee Room, where applicants for relief were interviewed, contained a square deal table, a set of two elbow and twelve ash chairs, four stools, two built-in cupboards, a tailor's bench and a shoemaker's stall. The domestic offices included a kitchen / eating room sparsely furnished with a 'Long Deal framed Table, four Deal Forms, Deal Dresser and shelves', a pantry, laundry, bakehouse and storeroom. The one ground floor bedroom contained 'an Iron Turn-up Bedstead, a Straw Bed & flock Bolster, an elm box and Maniacs Chain' — a reminder that even in 1834 lunatics were sometimes confined in workhouses. The bedrooms were provided with a varied assortment of eleven iron, half-tester, turn-up, sacking or lath bottom bedsteads; six elm clothes boxes, two night commodes, two deal dressing tables, an oak chest of drawers and a basin stand. The absence of chairs on the premises (except in the committee room) and minimal comforts are typical of the plain living to which paupers were increasingly subjected even under the old Poor Law.

1. Chair, oak, from the workhouse at Wincanton, Somerset, 1838; branded under the seat 'WINCANTON UNION'

Courtesy Leeds City Art Galleries



2. Armchair, elm, from the Forehoe Union Workhouse, Wicklewood, Wymondham, Norfolk, early 10th century

Courtesy Norfolk Museum Service

3. Detail of mark branded on a strip of wood nailed across the back of the chair seat

In 1836 the newly elected guardians of Ledbury Union in Herefordshire drew up a specification for furnishing their new workhouse; this document is of capital interest because it features marginal sketches of several articles.[6] The Board Room was to be supplied with an oak table 14 ft x 3 ft 6 in. raised on shaped end supports, two elbow and sixteen ordinary chairs 'as per sketch' and '1¼ in. segment edge oak seats all round the walls framed with legs &c as the chair pattern . . . the corners near the doorways to be framed quadrant'. The Clerk's Office and Waiting Room required a table containing lockable drawers, three rows of shelves, '20 strong Windsor Chairs Grecian pattern' and 100 ft of deal rail with iron hat pins. The four day-rooms were to have 'deal seats 11 in wide fixed all round the walls on elm or oak bearers', a long table and two forms 'on strong framed legs'. Other items on the schedule included thirty strong towel rollers, 300 ft of deal shelving, a deal bath 'dovetailed and put together with white lead' and fitments such as sinks, plate racks and dressers. Details of furniture for the schoolroom, chapel, larder, laundry and refactory rooms follow. This orderly contract demonstrates the efficiency with which the New Poor Law was administered after the old system of parochial relief was abolished. The creation of large, odious institutions was in some ways a successful solution to the problem of pauperism.

A comprehensive inventory of the Buxton workhouse, belonging to the Aylsham Union, Norfolk, taken by Mr Lawrence, the master, in 1839, provides another insight into how the new 'Bastilles' as they were popularly known, were furnished.[7] The government commissioners who controlled local Boards of Guardians, attempted to impose national uniformity, so this record is likely to be typical of the new generation of Union workhouses. Leaving aside the well appointed Master's Office, sitting room and sleeping apartment, accommodation was provided for 281 new residents who, in obedience to the new regime were strictly segregated according to sex. The women and men each had their own day room, dining hall, dormitory and probationary ward, while there were separate day rooms and school rooms for boys and girls respectively. These quarters contained a basic repertoire of long or short tables, forms, seats with or without backs and stools, the only novelties being cradles in the women's day room, a chaplain's desk in the female dining hall and educational paraphernalia in the school rooms. The usual domestic offices can be passed over, leaving the four 'paupers' sleeping rooms', each of which had a night stool and between them seventy-four double and twenty-four single wood bedsteads supplemented by thirty-seven double and thirty-five single iron bedsteads making up a total of 170 designed to sleep 281 inmates. The schedule of clothing reminds one that paupers were required to wear a degrading uniform.

In their report the Poor Law Commissioners recommended that workhouse children should be housed separately and more humanely treated than adult paupers. It was their intention that youngsters should receive the same education being offered in elementary schools — namely instruction in reading, writing and religious knowledge; in 1842 arithmetic was officially added to the syllabus. In rural Unions it was normal to send pauper children to local schools, but in densely populated urban areas many Boards established separate workhouse schools. In County Durham, for instance, the Sunderland, South Shields, Stockton and Gateshead Unions all provided schools.[8] The Buxton inventory, quoted in part above, records the contents of the Girls' and the Boys' schoolrooms. The latter was equipped with '1 Long Table & 5 inkstands, 2 Long Forms, 4 Stools, 1 Coal Box,

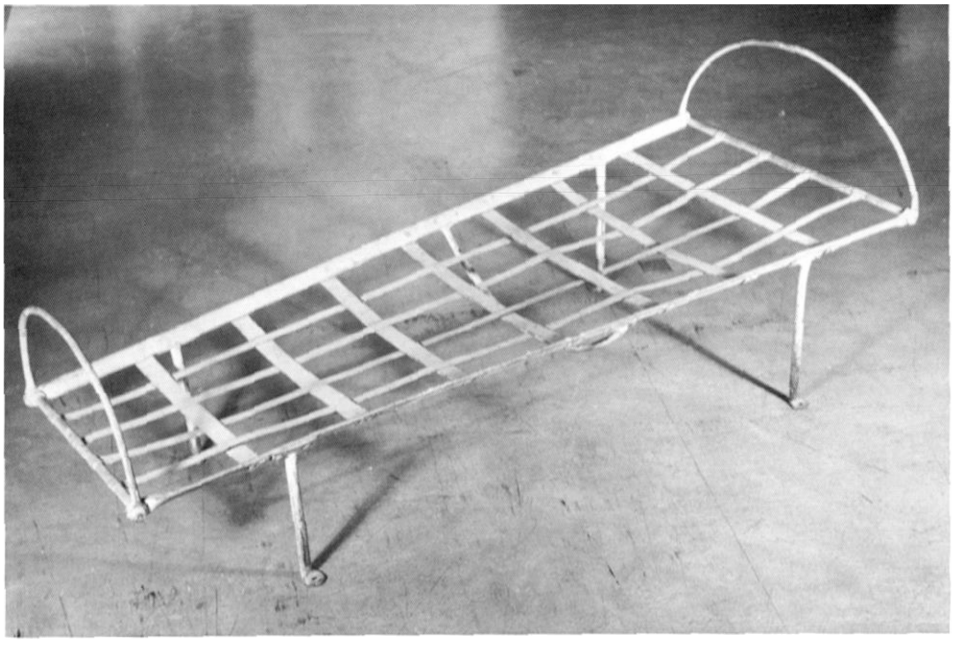
Stove, Fender & dustpan, 4 doz Large Slates, 1 doz Small do., 2 doz school Bibles, 40 Testaments, 40 Lesson Books, 69 Copy Books, 15 Reading Tablets, 5 doz Arithmetical Tablets, 3 doz Prayer Books, 2 doz Hymn Books, 2 maps, 4 doz Alphabetical and Spelling Cards, 6 Catechism Books & 4 doz Primers'.

Two inventories dated 1812 and 1817 survive from the old 'House of Industry' at Ampthill in Bedfordshire,[9] while the first Union minute book reveals how the new workhouse was equipped. The early building contained a room with a cross framed deal table and a dozen Windsor chairs which was also used by the local community as a Sunday school. The main room sported a long dining table and six deal forms, twelve Windsor chairs, a round tripod table, looking glass, fire irons, a warming pan, tinder box and extinguisher; it was modestly comfortable. Besides the kitchen and pantry there was a sick room and three sleeping wards for ten men, boys and women. The evidence points to a small fraternity enjoying a decent standard of living. A diary kept by the Master of Knaresborough workhouse between 1788 and 1792 paints a lively picture of day to day life in a comparable small parish house, reflecting his touching concern for the inmates health, welfare and Christian behaviour.[10]

In 1835 the Guardians of the big new Ampthill workhouse ordered[11] '2 dozen Iron Bedsteads' from Ride and Colman which were no doubt similar to a surviving example of about the same date from Thetford workhouse (Fig. 4). Two weeks later, on 5 November, they resolved 'that an advertizement be inserted in the Northampton newspaper to Upholsterers, Carpenters and others for plans and estimates of Bedsteads either Wood or Iron for the use of the Ampthill Workhouse'. At their next meeting the clerk was instructed 'to order from Wm Battison, George Battison, John Spring and Wm Northwood a Bedstead of each of the large size of good seasoned wood for the inspection of the Board' and a week later he minuted their approval of 'the Pattern Bedstead . . . by Mr George Battison' and odered '50 double Bedsteads and 50 single to be delivered in six weeks time'. In due course the Board paid for all the samples and in February 1839 George Battison received a cheque for £58 6*s*. 8*d*. One of his plain elm stump beds with pine slats is preserved at Bedford museum (Fig. 5).

The invaluable evidence gleaned from workhouse inventories can be usefully supplemented by pictorial sources, particularly during the Victorian period. One of the earliest views is a plate from Rowlandson and Pugin's *Microcosm of London* (1808) of the day room at St James's workhouse. It shows a vast, rather stern interior containing large tables, forms, a few chairs, a wool winder and clothes horse peopled by some fifty, mainly elderly, women either sewing, gossiping in groups or simply resting. Sir H. Van Herkomer's romanticised oil painting titled *Eventide — a scene in the Westminster Union*, 1878, at Liverpool Art Gallery also portrays a spacious, depressingly institutional room crowded with old ladies engaged in reading, sewing, supping tea or sitting quietly on benches. Their gloomy surroundings are brightened by a vase of flowers, a few pictures on the walls and a pussy cat.

An engraving of the West London Union dating from about 1860 records the women's short stay casual ward in which the only furniture was a sloping two-tier sleeping platform constructed of bare boards with no visible bedding.[12] That this type of accommodation was not unique is proved by a slightly earlier illustration of a Refuge for the Destitute and Houseless Poor in Whitecross Street, London[13] where inmates slept together on immense open platforms spread with straw, no attempt being made to provide individual beds. At the



4. Iron bedstead, 1836, from Thetford Union Workhouse, Norfolk. Painted grey the feet pierced with screw holes

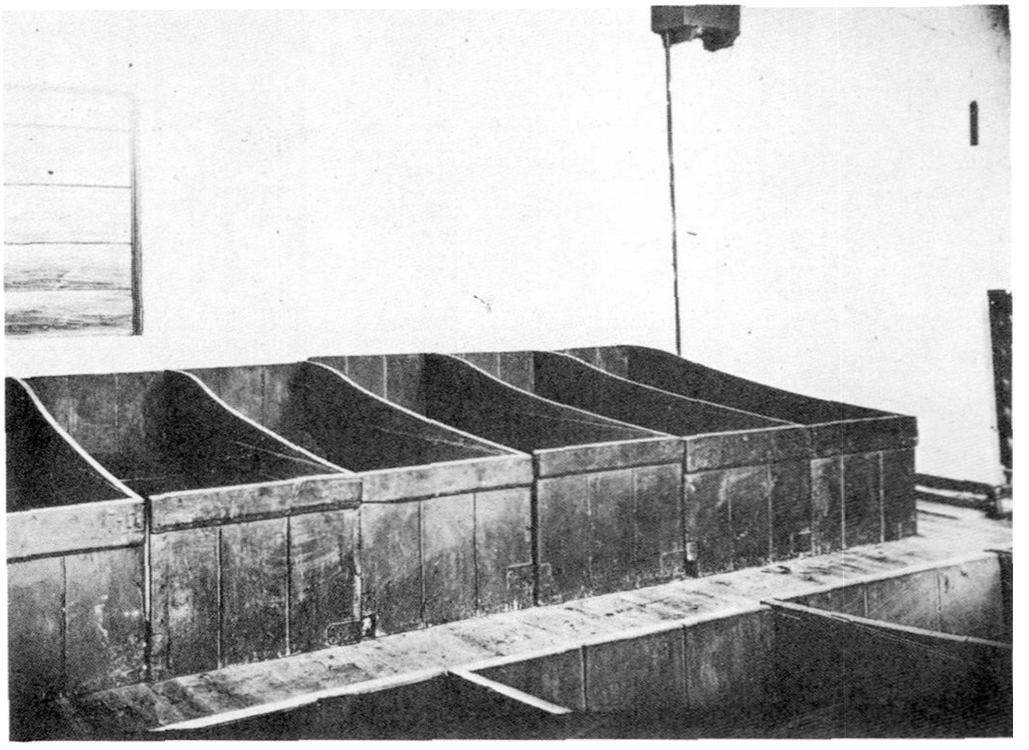
Courtesy Norfolk Museum Services

5. Stump bedstead, elm, made by George Battison for Ampthill Workhouse in 1836

Courtesy Bedford Museum

West London Union, one wall of the barn-like mens casual ward was partitioned into rows of byre-like stalls with loose straw on the floor where groups of men and boys huddled like cattle;[14] it would be hard to contrive more degrading conditions. An engraving of a new ward at Marylebone Workhouse, published in the *Illustrated London News* on 29 September 1867 shows a long room with sleeping platforms ranged down each side subdivided, by low board partitions, into narrow beds each with a mattress and hinged compartment at the head for storing clothes. The walls and roof bear religious texts such as 'In God I Put My Trust' painted in red letters on a blue ground.[15] Some late-Victorian lantern slides of the Otley workhouse[16] include a view of the sleeping quarters which shows what appears to be the original cattle-stall type of accommodation still in use (Fig. 6).

A rare photograph of the female dining room at St Pancras Workhouse depicts long rows of uniformed women[15] seated at narrow closely regimented tables (designed like school desks on cast-iron supports), eating rations off tin plates. Other equally depressing early 20th-century photographs record day rooms, work sheds, sick wards and dormitories.[16] One of the few illustrations of a workhouse Board Room occurs in Mrs Trollope's novel *Jessie Phillips: a Tale of the Present Day* published in 1844. It shows the Guardians in session seated on handsome chairs around a large table.



6. Stall type sleeping accommodation for vagrants at the Wharfedale Union Workhouse, Otley, built in 1873

Courtesy the Walker family

Following abolition of the workhouse system in 1930 many buildings found a new role often as old peoples homes, orphanges or hospitals, while Gressenhall now houses the Museum of Norfolk Rural Life. The destruction of furniture has inevitably been colossal and unless items happen to bear a brand mark proving their origin it is seldom possible to confirm the ancestry even of pieces which still survive in former workhouses. The gatehouse of Ripon Union (1855) until recently contained the Guardians' board room table and chairs but now only a fixed wall seat of painted pine with turned legs and ramped armrests survives in the adjoining waiting room, the vagrants cells and bathroom have been stripped, but in the main block two robust work or sewing tables from the female dayroom are preserved, one of which is built-in under a window to take full advantage of the light. The Museum of Lincolnshire Life possesses a provenanced set of routine late-Victorian Smoker's bows; a severely institutional oak 'Grecian' windsor chair branded 'WINCANTON UNION' datable to 1838 is now at Temple Newsam House (Fig. 1), while Bedford Museum retains one of the fifty elm stump bedsteads which George Battison supplied to the Ampthill workhouse in 1835 (Fig. 5).

A large collection of accredited workhouse furniture is held by the Norfolk Museum Service. One of their most striking acquisitions is an austere iron bedstead made for the Thetford Union about 1836 which must be typical of many recorded in contemporary inventories (Fig. 4). For example in 1839 the paupers' sleeping rooms at Buxton workhouse, Norfolk contained 74 iron bedsteads and in 1835 the Guardians of Ampthill ordered '2 dozen iron bedsteads' from Ride & Coleman. J. C. Loudon, writing in 1833, described as a recent innovation 'Stump bedsteads made entirely of wrought iron; the place of the canvas or sacking bottom being supplied by interwoven iron hooping which is manufactured by Messrs Cottam & Hallen of London.'[17] The Thetford model is painted grey and would have supported a chaff or straw mattress, the feet are pierced by screwholes. Other, more traditional provenanced examples of workhouse furniture at the Museum of Norfolk Rural Life include a banister-back armchair branded 'FOREHOE UNION' (Figs 2 and 3), a long scrubbed pine dining table and group of archaic splat-back chairs indigenous to Gressenhall; the grained high masters desk from Wicklewood Workhouse and a standard early 19th-century East Anglia pattern square backed cross rail chair incorporating three balls from the same institution. Needless to say all these chairs have wooden seats.

By combining documentary evidence with pictorial sources and a search for extant items a reasonably full picture of this neglected vernacular sub-group has emerged. Undoubtedly many specimens of workhouse furniture remain to be identified, but this anthology forms a nucleus for future researchers to enlarge.

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16. Harold Walker, *This Little Town of Otley* (1974), pp. 70–77.
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