

Shipston Area U3A – 25th. January 2022

An illustrated history of our Local Workhouse

There was a buzz of anticipation within the Townsend Hall as over 100 Members and Guests welcomed U3A Member Maggie Wood to present her lecture about the history of our local Workhouse which housed local people with “no place to call home” from c.1836 to 1928. The audience also felt the relief of eased lock down regulations at the first U3A meeting of 2022 where they were able to mix together socially.

We understood that Shipston on Stour around 1836 was almost entirely an agricultural farming community where close-knit families worked the land and provided casual labouring employment for able bodied men as required. For unemployed women life was even harder. The Workhouse was built and supported by local benefactors such as Mrs. Elizabeth Townsend of Honington Hall and indeed the original Grade 11 listed building still remains near to the Catholic Church but has been converted to private flats. The Workhouse was built to accommodate up to 300 strictly segregated people but is recorded as having a more usual total of around 200. Conditions were very poor when compared to our modern standards.

Shipston Workhouse was part of a union of 36 Workhouses scattered across this region and housed a variety of poor “inmates” who suffered from physical and mental problems and were perhaps unemployable as a result. At that time there were no other community support facilities available, and they were directed to the Workhouse. Despite the strict segregation, we understood that some “Bastard” children were born to unmarried women and around 1882 the Vicar of Tysoe intervened to assist an Eliza Parker who had four children. We also heard of Emily Wilson, Mother to four children who was forced to the Workhouse when abandoned by her carpenter husband who sailed to New York in 1910 but occasionally sent her money. She went back in and out when able to support herself.

The boys within the Workhouse were partially integrated with Shipston School for some basic education up to 11 years of age and then usually set to work on local farms. The girls were shown some very basic domestic skills and then placed “in service” as live in domestic servants within local houses around the area. Physically or mentally handicapped unemployable people or children remained within the Workhouse. Corporal punishment was severe and widespread throughout and Mrs. Elizabeth Townsend was famed as a local generous benefactor who strived to improve the lot of the poor souls within the Shipston Workhouse.

The lecture by Maggie Wood was very well received and she was given hearty thanks by a fascinated audience who then returned gratefully to their comfortable homes.

Tom Clifton 31st. January 2022