



SPEAKING WITH SHADOWS

Transcript of Series 2, Episode 2: The Workhouse at Framlingham Castle

Josie: Thanks for listening to Speaking with Shadows from English Heritage. I'm Josie Long, and in this series I'm uncovering the stories that challenge the textbooks and show history in a new light. This time...

[Clip] Speaker 1: It's very easy, if you've read *Oliver Twist*, to think that picture you get of this big, gloomy, cruel workhouse was how it always was. And that's, I think, unfair.

Speaker 2: Mary Carter and Elizabeth Woodward, they keep running away and they come back when they need to, and then they run away again. Submitting to the rules of the workhouse very clearly didn't work perfectly for them.

Josie: The harsh conditions of Victorian workhouses, designed as a disincentive to poverty, have long been immortalised in fiction, film and culture. But workhouses themselves evolved over time. They weren't necessarily always the disease-ridden, nightmarish environments that we imagine.

This episode, I'm following a story that will reveal how English laws around caring for the poor have influenced the kinds of support and shelter offered through the centuries, and I'll be asking what insights this gives us into our present-day attitudes to social care and poverty.

I'm off to a small town in rural Suffolk to find out more.

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Josie: I am in the Suffolk countryside and the beautiful little village of Framlingham. I know that Framlingham village is technically famous because of the musician Ed Sheeran but I've basically been instructed very sternly not to bring him up. I feel like even the cab driver on the way here wanted to have Ed Sheeran chat. That's not why we're here today at all. I'm next to what I'm assuming used to be a moat, which is now a nice little path. I think in the distance that's a robot mower that's mowing the lawn, because we're in the future. But luckily English Heritage historian Jeremy Ashbee is here, and I'm going to be able to ask him to share some of the secrets of the castle. Jeremy, it's nice to see you again, hi!

Jeremy: It's lovely to see you too, Josie!

Josie: Here we are at a 12th-century castle. Can you tell me a bit more about when different parts of this were built and how it's fitted together over time?

Jeremy: Yeah, I'd love to. I'm on the same rule as you about not mentioning Ed Sheeran, otherwise I would be saying that it's the castle on a hill that we are standing next to – and it is – and pretty much everything that you're looking at actually dates to the end of the 12th century. So it's jolly old – very,



very high stone walls. It belonged to the Earls of Norfolk – the Bigod family – and when you get into the middle of the 16th century the last load of people here – the Howard family, who were some of the poshest and most scary courtiers in the reign of Henry VIII and his court. So, you know, so far so grand. Then, thereafter, suddenly, having been this powerhouse, in the second half of the 16th century everything starts to change. And that's the story that I think we're going to be talking about quite a lot later on: this contrast between this place of grandeur and authority in the Middle Ages, and then completely different afterwards, from the richest of people to the poorest of people. So let's go inside the castle and then you'll understand a bit more.

Josie: Fantastic.

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Josie: So, Jeremy, obviously we've got the walls of the castle that to me feels like one era, and then just inside there's this whole other set of buildings that look to me to be much later. Could you talk to me about what we're seeing and what's going on?

Jeremy: Yeah, you got it, it's absolutely right. So we're inside the castle courtyard. You're looking at the inside face of the wall, and that's all 12th-century stuff. So it's a complete circuit all the way around, it's got 13 towers standing up very, very high with battlements on the top. That's all from the Middle Ages. There are two buildings still inside and they're not from the Middle Ages – they come from a later phase. There's one building that's in red brick – we now call that the Red House for reasons that hopefully will be fairly obvious – and then running at right angles to that, standing with its back, actually, to part of the medieval curtain walls, a much bigger building built in stone. And those buildings, as you say, they're not medieval in style or anything else like that. They actually date to the 17th and 18th centuries.

Josie: Obviously this is the site of a lot of power in Tudor times – and then it's not. Can you tell me about what these buildings represent and how that happened, sort of how that shift happened?

Jeremy: Yeah, these stories tell us of cataclysmic social change, a whole variety of things, all lots of things that are going on around the same sort of time. Henry VIII famously affects the whole of England by dissolving the monasteries. And one of the consequences of that – and it was talked about at the time – was that the monasteries had operated some kind of social care, that they were providing charity and education for people that needed it, and suddenly that wasn't there anymore. So in the second half of the 16th century, lots and lots of efforts are made to try to make up for this and that comes to a head in 1601, during the reign of Elizabeth I, in what we call the Poor Law.

Josie: I have heard of the Poor Laws. I think in my mind they're really linked with cruelty.

Jeremy: So, Josie, what we're really talking about at the moment is the Elizabethan Poor Law, but what you are thinking of – and loads of people think about this when they think of workhouse – is something comes much later. This is the 1834 Poor Law, which is completely different in character, because the Poor Law, with some changes, actually continues from the Elizabethan period right up until the 19th century.



Josie: So what happened under the Elizabethan Poor Law?

Jeremy: What the Poor Law does is it creates three classes of people and it defines them in relation to their attitude to work and their capacity to work.

Josie: So they split people up into three categories. What were those three categories?

Jeremy: Well, there's different terms that are used for them. If you like to, you can think of the 'idle poor', which are the people who could work but aren't going to. They're vagabonds.

Josie: Vagrants.

Jeremy: They're vagrants.

Josie: Flâneurs.

Jeremy: Yeah, and they go off into the houses of correction, or Bridewell's. There are the 'impotent poor', the people who actually really couldn't do anything, and they go into almshouses or poorhouses. And then there's this third group – and they are the people that Framlingham Castle comes to be particularly associated with – who are the people who could work and they are given something useful and remunerative to do here.

Josie: So where do these buildings at Framlingham fit into the story?

Jeremy: Jump to the 17th century, and enters onto the stage this quite remarkable man, Sir Robert Hitcham, who's got a really interesting backstory. He doesn't come from high society. He's a local boy who was born in the village of Levington, not that far away from here, from Suffolk, and he's the son of a yeoman farmer who's not doing very well. But Robert Hitcham is clever. He has an education and he reaches the top of his profession. He is the attorney to Queen Anne – that's the wife of King James I. He becomes the Serjeant-at-law to Charles I. You know, this is really, really big stuff. He is an MP. He is obscenely wealthy. And he buys in 1635 for £14,000 – which is a disgusting amount of money – a castle. He buys a slightly derelict castle, it must be said, Framlingham Castle. He dies the next year.

Josie: Oh no!

Jeremy: He dies in 1636 without heirs. And Robert Hitcham leaves this very, very complicated will, and inside this castle where there's all these falling-down Tudor-y buildings, he says, 'Okay, help them on their way. Knock them down and do something useful with it. Put up this building inside the castle where the people who can work but haven't got work at the moment can come and get what they need to do stuff.' So that's spinning wheels, maybe, or other stuff, or agricultural implements. Crucially, they're not going to live here. This is just sort of where the hub is. It's the place where their relief is administered, with food or with money or with clothing or with fuel for them to live in. And that is what Hitcham says.

Josie: Wow.

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Jeremy: It took them until the 1660s to do something about it at Framlingham and it's at that point that Hitcham's charity builds the building that we're looking at here, the Red House, at one end of the castle, and that's the quite small building that you can see now.

Josie: Right, so Framlingham is known as a workhouse, but I've also heard the term 'poorhouse'. What's the difference there?

Jeremy: For some times 'workhouse' and 'poorhouse' were almost interchangeable, but 'workhouse' is a better term because it's actually, as I say – this wasn't residential when Hitcham's charity initially set it up. It was just a place to set the poor on work. And actually for quite a lot of the period when we're talking about this, it's described using other terms like 'the house of industry', which is a scary-sounding term. But actually it's quite right.

Josie: It's quite exciting to think of it as quite a radical project, from somebody who didn't come from money deciding to try and do as much as he could to improve people's lives.

Jeremy: Yeah, I think that's right.

Josie: Can you tell me a bit more about the building next to the Red House?

Jeremy: So what Hitcham's charity first builds in the 1660s is just the Red House, which is quite small. Standing at a right angle to that is a much, much bigger building built in stone. Now, this is built in 1729 and, crucially, the whole regime of workhouses in the country was beginning to change at that point. There is a piece of legislation that beginning the 1720s called the Knatchbull Act, named after the person who first put it together, and they introduced what they call a workhouse test, which is to say that in order to get the relief, you actually had to submit to a different regime. And that regime now required you to be resident inside the workhouse. As well as working here, you live here. You become part of the community and you abide by the parish's rules. You submit yourself to that discipline, and that really is the term that you have to use about it. So it's a bit of a hardening of attitudes that's starting to create a different regime at this point in the 18th century.

Josie: Oh yeah, that does make quite a difference, having to actually live here and be institutionalised like that. What do we know about what life was like in the workhouse? Did we have records at all?

Jeremy: We do have records of it, particularly, as I say, from the last years before it tips over – the whole regime tips over into the sort of Victorian Dickensian workhouse regime that we know much, much better. And for that, let's go into the Red House and we'll talk about some of the people and what they did when they were living here.

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Josie: Framlingham's workhouse history spans the centuries, and it proceeds the dark age of the Victorian workhouse and the harsh and inhumane conditions that we associate with them. I'm really curious to know more about what life was like in this workhouse when it seemed to run humanely and



almost at odds with what was to come later. So I'm hoping some of these records from its later history might give us some clues.

So at the moment I'm in the Red House office, which is the modern-day office for the castle. It's lunch time so people are coming and going, and I'm here with Anthony Wooding, who's a member of Framlingham Castle Volunteers. Hi, Anthony!

Anthony: Hello there!

Josie: Nice to meet you. How did you come to be involved with researching the workhouse here?

Anthony: I'm a tour guide volunteer at Framlingham Castle, have been for a couple of years after a long career in law, and I've returned to my love of history. We started to develop a research project, and that is, essentially, we know such a lot about the famous and powerful people of Framlingham, but we don't know much about the people, the ordinary people who lived in the workhouse environment. We've looked at those pauper records and we want to then expand that by genealogical research.

Josie: So, Anthony, can I ask what clues have you uncovered in your research?

Anthony: Yes, certainly. We've found out various things that people did before they came and after they left. So for example we have James Gooding, who's committed to Ipswich jail. And we have a serial offender as well, in 1831, who was discharged for breaking the flower house window – that's Jeremiah Larger. He was sent to prison for 21 days' hard labor. And it appears of a further offence with someone called Richard Moore for stealing the reward box out of the long room – so the reward box, some kind of payment for doing good things, he's gone and stolen it.

Josie: Wow, this guy's a real rogue!

Anthony: At the other end of the scale, people were going in and out of service. Marianne Smith was discharged at the service of a Davey Rees, comes back in again, then goes out to service with another one, Mr Bing, and then comes in again and goes out to a Mr Cloak, and comes in again and goes out to Mr Samuel Goodwin.

Josie: Was that person someone who kept getting good references, but actually was very difficult to work with, or was that person someone who had a really bad run of bad luck with different employers? It just lends itself to so much speculation, doesn't it?

Anthony: Well, it's the fact that these admissions and readmissions were over a couple of months or so. You would have thought there would be a continuity of service, so I agree with you.

Josie: So sometimes it was a way for people, perhaps who had children and were finding it difficult to support them, to be able to kind of live their lives as well.

Anthony: Yeah, there were certainly people who came in with children, potentially pregnant when they came in. There's a lady, Harriet Pipe, who it seems that she was discharged and went to an asylum at



one point – Milton Asylum, which was a mental asylum – but also coming back again to Framlingham and her daughter was also born in the workhouse earlier on.

Josie: So you can sort of chart people's whole lives and family lives through the records.

Anthony: Yeah. Another example which is on the more positive side is a family called the Simpsons, who were eight of them in all, and they emigrated to America from here in 1831.

Josie: Yeah, that is so interesting. Maybe somebody sponsored them?

Anthony: But these are names, you see – by genealogical research, we hope to be able to expand on this and see a bit more about them. So for instance, can we trace them in America? Some of the families in Framlingham now are related to people who were in the workhouse. We haven't interviewed anyone specifically, but the names do crop up.

Josie: That's so completely connecting with the modern village.

Anthony: Yeah.

Jeremy: I think the brilliant thing about this document – and Anthony's just picked up on it and so have you – is that in each sort of two-liner, there's obviously a short story in there waiting to be written. The one about the bad boys and girls, I always do find quite interesting because living in the workhouse was to submit yourself to the parish's discipline, and there are some people that clearly couldn't do that. So, for example, in the inventory, in the committee room there were three pairs of handcuffs. Some people who misbehaved got locked up. And there is a quite sinister-looking space that we now use as the broom cupboard at the bottom of one of the spiral stairs. In 1834, a man called Green, a local historian, talks about this as being, as it were, a dungeon, the place where they put people in the cooler, as it were, to behave. But the most brilliant document, I think, of all of them is the one talking about the changes to the composition of the of the workhouse over individual periods of time. So you get who's come in, who's died, who's been born and, interestingly, who's run away. Mary Carter and Elizabeth Woodward – you know the film *Thelma & Louise*? I do tend to think about that, because clearly they keep running away, and they come back when they need to, and then they run away again! Submitting to the rules of the workhouse very clearly didn't work perfectly for them.

Josie: Yeah. Well, it makes perfect sense because, you know, people want to live their own lives and they want to have self-determination. I can totally understand how having to live in this sort of very disciplined, very structured environment like that would just be suffocating for some people.

Jeremy: It would, and I think there's something else that's going on as well. I think that, to the people of Framlingham, the inmates of the workhouse were a fairly dispensable bit of short-term labour. And sometimes I think that people are going off to these households, and then they don't need them anymore so back into the workhouse they come, and then suddenly enough they do need them again so out they go. And I think there's there's a little bit of that as well, that they are, as it were, not entirely in charge of their own destiny.



Josie: Yeah.

Jeremy: That in its way actually starts to feel quite sinister, because it feels like exploitation.

Josie: Yeah, that's what I was going to say.

Jeremy: Of very powerless people.

Josie: Anthony, you've got access to an account book from the workhouse from 1824. What kind of insight was that able to give you about daily life in the workhouse?

Anthony: Well, there are accounts there relating to the drink and the food. So the entries cover seven days and 27 people. It references 13 stone of flour, five pounds of beef, three pounds of mutton, one stone eight pounds of pork, one pound of Derby cheese, 20 barrels and four gallons of beer. For 27 people, it wasn't much by way of food when you divide it between them, but a hell of a lot of drink! In fact there's not much of a vegetable in there.

Jeremy: No, but I suspect they're actually growing the vegetables locally. I don't think they'd need to bother.

Anthony: Yeah, so they wouldn't need to. They'd get them all from the local supply.

Jeremy: The question everyone always asks is what was Christmas Day like in the workhouse, and the answer is we don't really know, but what we do know is that more was spent on food and drink for that. In one week, the normal regime – three pounds eighteen shillings, nine and three-quarter pence – that goes up to five pounds 17 shillings, four and a half pence at Christmas.

Josie: Oh, that's not bad!

Jeremy: It's a bit better!

Josie: Well, at least there was cheese and milk and beef and things like this. That at least feels like something of a diet. It doesn't feel kind of, like, oats and water and nothing.

Jeremy: Yeah, because we are conditioned to think of *Oliver Twist*...

Josie: Yeah!

Jeremy: And, you know, the gruel and the picking of oakum and all that other kind of thing. And it's really important to not go too far about that because the regime in Framlingham, it's not like that. That's the workhouse regime that comes afterwards.

Josie: How was money earned or generated at the workhouse?



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Jeremy: Well, there are some documents that do talk about this, but there's – you know, I don't know enough to know. There's a bit of a mystery. But there's an account that talks about the earnings of paupers in Framlingham workhouse and it runs through how much they're making per day. So on March the 29th 1817, Thomas Malloes does six days' work at seven pence, generating three shillings and sixpence. Thomas Bruning, five days at 8 pence. Different amounts because there are children involved as well and, you know, there's less. So five children, they're not named – one day at four pence each. Five children, one and a half days at four pence each. And it's sort of heart-breaking to me, but also quite telling. There's obviously a disabled child who's in here, who's only known as Cripple Reed. Now, he is the child of adults that are also in the community. He only earns pennies for jobs done, so small things around the place. But the thing about this is you are supposed to be productive. What I do not know is the money that is generated by their work, whether they get to keep it or whether it has to go into the pot for the running of the of the establishment, and I'd love to know more.

Josie: Well, also, it to me is such a difference if you're working and then you keep the money that you earn. That to me feels like a more dignified and a more...

Jeremy: Yeah, it's progress, isn't it? That you're starting to work your way out of your own situation.

Josie: Yes, exactly. Whereas if you're having to put all the money straight back in, you're essentially just trapped in that place.

Jeremy: Yeah.

Josie: So how and when did things change for the workhouse system?

Jeremy: Everything changes with the 1834 Act and the quotation from the report that was leading to it: 'Each union was to have its own union house which we run in such a way as to be less desirable than the residence of an independent labour of the lower class.'

Josie: So it's literally saying this must be worse.

Jeremy: Yeah. Certainly prior to this, there was outdoor relief as well. So people were coming to the workhouse to receive some kind of subsistence payment, even though they weren't actually providing work within the structure or indeed staying here. Jeremy Paxman's ancestors were receiving outdoor relief – that was on the programme *Who Do You Think You Are?* because he's researched it back. And it changes in 1834 with that report and then the act.

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Josie: The more I hear about life at the workhouse in Framlingham, the more I realised that, in this particular example at least, it's not exactly what I'd initially imagined a workhouse would be like. But I keep hearing about how this all changed when the new poor law, the 1834 Poor Law, was introduced. And I need to find out more about how this changed the whole system of workhouses and why they were changing attitudes to poor, and what was driving that change. I've stepped into the ground floor



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of the workhouse building and it's an extraordinary shift in the modern day because it's the café, it's the shop, so people are having cups of tea and pieces of cake and looking at history books in this building that we know had a completely different life before. One of the things that's interesting is there's at least three different types of window, because there were these different eras in the building's history. So you get some impression of what it used to be like, but at the same time it's a really unusual thing because the modern world has just completely taken over as well. And it's in this space that I'm here to meet workhouse historian, Peter Higginbotham. Peter, it's really nice to meet you.

Peter: Likewise!

Josie: I know that the Poor Laws were revised in 1834. Can you tell me a bit about what led up to that and also what that change meant?

Peter: So from the 1780s onwards, the cost of looking after the poor went up and up, and particularly the handouts – the sort of non-workhouse bit of the system – and the Napoleonic Wars made things even worse. There was a bit of a slump. And the Corn Laws, which we all learned about at school, in 1815 pushed up the price of bread, essentially. It restricted cheap grain imports. So the cost of looking after the poor was going up and the number of the poor people wanting looking after, also going up. So eventually in 1832 the government appointed a royal commission, which in 1834 proposed some major changes to how the poor were looked after. And at the root of that was going to be the workhouse and this idea of a workhouse test – that if you were able-bodied, the only way you would be looked after from now on would be in the workhouse. And the workhouse would be a very unattractive option, was the idea, and no more handouts, was going to be the situation. There's also lots of reports that workhouses were being a bit laxly run, a lot of corruption in the system. For example, in some workhouses you got situations like poor claimants will be given a voucher to spend at a local shop. And the catch was that the local shop was run by the brother-in-law of the official giving up the voucher.

Josie: Which, I should say, feels really – there are so many modern examples of similar things like that, you know, corruption within people lining their pockets in similar ways.

Peter: Because there's so much money sloshing through this system. From 1834 onward, we had a new national uniform, strictly-run, deterrent workhouse-based system, was the idea. All these parishes doing their own things was going to be a thing of the past.

Josie: See, that to me just seems not only inhumane but also not necessarily acknowledging that there might be wider factors that had led to more people being unemployed and more people being desperate.

Peter: Yeah. Well, I think there was also a change in the attitude towards the poor up until that kind of time. The dominant attitude was that 'it's our Christian duty to help the poor'. But there was a growing feeling in certain circles that the poor are poor because of their own laziness, profligacy, young women are getting pregnant because they just assume the parish will take care of them. Things did change over the years. It's very easy, if you've read *Oliver Twist*, to think that picture you get of this



big, gloomy, cruel workhouse was how it always was. And that's, I think, unfair. And again, we hear stories of scandals. There's a particularly infamous scandal in 1845 at Andover, where the inmates were discovered to be fighting over some bones they were pounding as a work task. Now, it turned out they were being at they were being underfed and this caused a huge rumpus, that the poor were being so badly treated they resorted to fighting over little shreds of rotting meat on the bones. By the 1860s, '70s, '80s, most workhouses were full of the elderly, the chronic sick, mentally ill and so on, and the attitude began to soften again. So you began to get generous attitudes in terms of things like the food and the work and so on.

Josie: So it sort of ended up filling a gap that had been filled by the almshouses, or...

Peter: Yeah. By the 1890s workhouses were largely old people's institutions.

Josie: When were the last workhouses, when did they cease to exist?

Peter: There isn't a precise date. In 1930, local councils took over the running of the workhouses.

Josie: 1930!

Peter: Yeah, but between 1930 and 1938 most of them carried on, 'rebranded' I think is the word, as public assistance institutions.

Josie: Oh, so it sort of came into becoming more like nursing homes?

Peter: Yeah, that's 1948, When the NHS started and the welfare state arrived. Most former workhouses either became NHS institutions, hospitals – geriatric hospitals – or they were retained by local councils as old people's homes. The workhouse was the welfare system of its day. It had its ups and downs and a bit of a trough in that from a modern perspective – that was the 1830s, '40s and '50s – but you always have to compare it against what it was like on the outside. And for a lot of people in the mid Victorian times, life outside the workhouse was pretty grim.

Josie: It reflects the wider society, doesn't it? So the more compassionate the wider society or the more stable the wider society, the more compassionate and stable the safety net is going to be.

Peter: Yeah.

Josie: And then, similarly, the harder things are, the worse it's going to be.

Peter: Yeah, if you think about back in 1600 or whenever it was, the problem that authorities were faced with is 'how do we help the poorest people, deter freeloaders and keep the bill under control for doing that?' And that's exactly the same today.

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Josie: It's so interesting to find out the history of this building, because so often with places like castles in particular, what gets shown and what gets highlighted is the narrative of power and of royal or aristocratic history. And it's much more interesting to me that inside these imposing walls you've actually got this other building that represents such a different story and that has such a varied history in itself. Also, such an unexpected place to think so much about attitudes towards poverty in society. Today has challenged, I suppose, what I just assumed that I knew about workhouses and about what that meant. And it's been really interesting to put that into a longer historical context and to learn more about them as part of a wider system of how people looked after one another, or whether or not people felt responsibilities towards each other. It's a shame and I suppose it's somewhat naïve, because you want to hope that people become more progressive or people become more humane over time. But the real story is you have these false starts, you have things going backwards and forwards, you have different attitudes coming in and out of fashion. And there's always going to be debate and tension around these different attitudes to what it means to work and what it means to be in poverty. And you definitely still see some of these Victorian attitudes or pre-Victorian attitudes – some for good and, really sadly, some for ill at the moment today. And you realise that these are things that have long shadows, and that these kind of attitudes have been sort of wrestling with each other, debated and reinforced not just over decades but over centuries. At the centre of this, you have people who are struggling the most out of everyone in society – people who are at the mercy of great winds of economic or societal change that have nothing to do with them. And it can be really hard to accept that there hasn't been a simple progression towards the development of more humane ideas.

On the next episode of Speaking with Shadows...

[Clip] Speaker 1: James Chappell was woken by the explosion and led the search for members of the Hatton family. He pulled Christopher Hatton from the rubble.

Speaker 2: He, we believe, is first black landlord, pub landlord. This man has established himself, established good homes, and there's a difference between being called a servant and a slave, yes? And I think he was a goodly servant to the family as opposed to being a slave of the family.

Josie: Make sure that you follow this podcast on your favourite app so that you don't miss it. You can find out more on these stories by going to the website english-heritage.org.uk/speakingwithshadows or visiting Framlingham yourself. And if you think this story should be heard, share this podcast on your social media with the hashtag #SpeakingWithShadows.