

The Close, Union Road, Bridge

Halfway along Union Road is a complex called The Close. As you go under the archway, you find yourself in a quadrangle. The four sides are formed by continuous terraced houses which appear to be Victorian in date and are built with a warm, mellow brick. Along two sides, at first floor level, there is a wooden balcony with a thin metal railing. Each house has a front garden and most have a back garden. All the houses face onto a lawned area with trees and attractive flower borders. A small building is in the centre of the lawn. There is an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity. A very pleasing place to live, but, The Close has a tragic history.

In 1834 The Poor Law Amendment Act was passed. All people unable to support themselves, were forced to enter work houses, so, in 1835, The Union Workhouse was built in Bridge. Many of the workhouses, including the one for Bridge, were built to the same plan, a quadrangle of buildings to house the inmates, together with a chapel, laundry, cookhouse and mortuary. Husbands, wives and children were separated, only to see each other occasionally in the chapel.

Eventually, as laws, conditions and attitudes changed, The Union Workhouse became an old people's home. In the nineteen eighties, the workhouse was closed and the elderly residents moved into a new building. The workhouse was then converted and transformed into dream homes.

Pamela Hall

241 words.

Extract From The 1841 Census,

Bridge Union Workhouse, Kent:

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|--------|--------|----------------|-----------|
| Murphy | Thomas | Aged 35 | Agr. Lab. |
| | Hannah | Aged 35 | |
| | George | Aged 10 | |
| | Thomas | Aged 8 | |
| | Henry | Aged 6 | |
| | Jane | Aged 5 | |
| | Edwin | Aged 3 | |
| | Sarah | Aged 10 months | |

Hannah's Lament

Her hair. They have cut her hair. How have we come to this terrible state? My Thomas, such a good man, such a gentle, kind man, out in the rain, wind, sun and snow to provide for us. They treated the horses better than my Thomas, although he was their best worker. I see him striding along behind the horses, guiding the plough, no one could cut a straighter furrow. In the summer, scything the ripened wheat, setting the pace. But, last winter, so hard, so cruel, his cough came. He tried to work, his whole body shaken with coughing. They said he was useless, they did not want him and we had to leave the cottage. It has broken him. His pride has gone, he hangs his head and cannot look at us. The clothes issued to him are so thin. I fear for his life. There is one of Jane's curls, her father's golden delight. They have taken him, my rock, my support. How will I survive without? My arms are empty. I held Sarah so tightly, Edwin clung to my dress, but they tore her away from me and dragged Edwin screaming. Who will kiss and cuddle my Sarah and comfort Edwin in his nightmares? Jane, Henry and Thomas are with the other children. When they dressed Jane, I could feel her poor little body try to escape from the harsh material. She is so delicate, so fragile. How will she survive? Chimney sweeps. They take them from here. Henry is six and small, the right size. I have heard such dreadful stories. How their skin is grazed, cut, infected by the soot. How the boys become stuck in the chimney. Fires lit to force them out. The darkness. He is terrified of the dark. If I pick up one of the curls perhaps I can hide it in my pocket. The hair is so fine, so soft. It wraps around my finger. My little man, George, quiet, thoughtful. He can read, write, add his numbers, the Reverend White had such hopes for him. I must have some thread, I need it to tie the curl. Where from? It will fall to pieces without it. Thomas loves to be with his father, an out doors boy. He knows all the birds, where they nest, brings freshly laid eggs for me to cook. The Reverend White has shown us true kindness. He tried to find another cottage, spoke to the Master, but to no avail. They would not listen to him. The hair is blowing across the floor, so much from such a small girl. They have taken my blue dress. We worked so hard to finish it in time, Mary and I sewing, then Mother embroidering it with deeper blue violets, crimson heartsease. On that glorious December morning, Thomas and I walked hand in hand to our wedding. The hoar frost, air cracking with cold, catching our breath, brilliant blue sky sparkling the silver plants and trees. In our room, in the gentle, moving firelight, Thomas held me. His lips brushed my hair, lingered, kissed, said how much he loved me, how he would always care for and look after me. As we lay at peace, curled into each other, listening to the wood crackling, I thought that our love would survive all difficulties. What are we to do? Who will help us? I have lost my love, my husband, my children. The hair has been swept away.