

A Pauper in the Amesbury Poor Law Union;
‘Martha Hicks 1839-1920’

The voice of the poor is seldom heard in the course of historical research. Existing records tend to be a record of the lives of the affluent, elite and literate members of society. I encountered a woman named ‘Martha Hicks’ in the course of some research, whose life we might glimpse through the unusual trail in the written record, on account of her extreme behaviour. However, the record is far from complete, only reportable incidents had been recorded. The key sources are the *Minutes of the Meetings of the Board of Guardians (Amesbury)*; held at the Wiltshire History Centre, Chippenham, the *Correspondence* records (between the Poor Law Authority and the Amesbury Poor Law Union); held at the National Archives, Kew, London and the Local Newspapers from the British Newspaper Archive. Together they offer some insight into the life and character of a woman, who had been an inmate in the Amesbury workhouse from an early age, and for most of her life. Martha is an unusual case, and her story is not typically representative of the labouring class in Amesbury.

The Amesbury Poor Law Union was created in 1834 with the introduction of the ‘New’ Poor Law. Until 1834 Poor Law was controlled by the Parish, in 1834 groups of parishes were brought together – centred around a market town – forming Poor Law Unions and effectively transferring local government control from the parish to the Unions, represented by newly elected Boards of Guardians. In its simplest form each Union provided a system of relief to the ‘deserving’ poor. Until 1834 relief was provided by a system of ‘out-relief’ common to agricultural rural areas of England. Out-relief provided the needy with bread and other aid, there are a number of properties belonging to the ‘parish’ identified in Amesbury in the 1820s. The aim of the poor laws after 1834, was to abolish all out-relief, to be replaced with a new system of ‘in-relief’ which would be provided by the workhouse – every union had a workhouse. The Amesbury Union Workhouse was built at South Mill, Amesbury in 1837 as part of the national program of workhouse building. The workhouse was operated on a strict system of discipline and routine. On entering the workhouse – a pauper had to remove his whole family there - families were separated by gender and age. Most paupers resided in the workhouse on a short-term basis, although the Amesbury workhouse had its share of long-term residents, of which Martha Hicks was one.

Born in 1839 in the parish of Winterbourne Gunner - one of twenty-three parishes of the Amesbury Union - to parents Charles and Martha Hicks, Martha

Hicks was the youngest of five daughters.¹ Prior to Martha's birth, on the first of January 1839, Charles Hicks had been arrested for sheep stealing, he was indicted for stealing a ewe sheep, the property of Ann Pile Lawrence, at Idmiston.² He was sentenced to ten years transportation.³ Charles Hicks had been held at Devizes gaol, awaiting transportation.⁴ Then in April of 1839, it was reported that Hicks had been put aboard the York Hulk at Gosport, in lieu of transportation.⁵ He was reported to be a 'man of bad character' and he was then put aboard the convict ship 'Boadicia', sailing on the 22nd August 1839 its destination Bermuda.⁶ Charles Hicks was reported to have died in hospital in September 1843, the location of the hospital is unclear, but after his arrival in Bermuda there had been several outbreaks of yellow fever, and Charles Hicks death in 1843 coincided with the timing of one such outbreak. In a Bermuda bay, the Tenedos Hulk had been converted into a convict hospital ship, this was the probable place of Charles death.⁷

The transportation and subsequent death of Charles left Martha and their children without means of support, it is therefore no surprise that in 1841 Martha and three daughters; Louisa, Sophia and Martha (then aged 2) were recorded as inmates in the Amesbury Union Workhouse. It is not clear when the family had entered the workhouse, it is likely that they would have been left with no alternative in 1839 or soon after.⁸ In 1844, three years after the 1841 census, the Hicks family were still inmates of the workhouse, when in 1844 Martha Hicks senior was charged by the Guardians for leaving her children chargeable to the Union, by leaving the workhouse without them.⁹ It is likely that Martha Hicks senior had died in 1849, in Salisbury, having been born there 'Martha Yates'.¹⁰ Her death left the family orphaned. It is unclear when Louisa and Sophia had left the workhouse, but both are found in 1851 to be servants in Salisbury, both still unmarried, Louisa was residing at 49 Catherine Street and Sophia in Queen Street at the Cross Keys, St. Edmund.¹¹ Martha by now aged twelve years remained in the Amesbury workhouse, an orphan.¹²

In 1861, Martha aged twenty-two years, had then been an inmate of the Amesbury workhouse for most of her life, remaining the responsibility of the Amesbury Guardians. It was during her 20's, Martha had been described as 'a violent and obstreperous character', who was punished in the workhouse fifty-two times between 1861 and 1883.¹³ Punishment in the workhouse ranged from labouring to spending a spell in the 'refractory ward', 'where isolation and a bread and water diet for 24 to 48 hours would have a salutary effect on an insubordinate pauper', although as will be seen for Martha this was little deterrent for the persistent offender. An inmate could also be prosecuted for costs incurred by the workhouse and the Guardians could meter out punishment

for more severe or criminal behaviour. By the time of the first reported incident in 1861, Martha had probably already been punished for on-going incidents while the periods of time between the reports of incidents were likely to have been littered with minor infractions in the workhouse. Martha had also by 1861 been summoned before the Salisbury Petty Sessions, her punishment, she was committed to Devizes Gaol. Reported at the time said 'Martha Hicks a pauper in the Amesbury Union Workhouse, was charged with breaking the windows in that establishment, and was sentenced to twenty-one days imprisonment with hard labour.¹⁴

In 1863 Martha gave birth in the workhouse to the first of three illegitimate children; Walter George Hicks was born in October 1863.¹⁵ Only months later in early 1864 Martha had in addition to the vast number of punishments in the workhouse, been committed to gaol several times. In March it was reported that 'Martha Hicks, an inmate of the Amesbury Union Workhouse was summoned at the Salisbury petty sessions for wilfully damaging a door, the property of the Guardians. Mr. Wilson, the Master of the Union Workhouse, proved the case and stated that she (Martha) had since smashed the Union windows, and otherwise conducted herself in a very disorderly manner. 'She had been in gaol several times' said Lord Folkestone, 'I suppose she likes the gaol diet better than that of the Union'. The witness said 'yes, she frequently says the gaol diet is best, and that when there she gets a pint of porter every day. She was, in fact, quite fat when she came out the last time'. Lord Folkestone; 'I should like to put forth for the information of Sir George Grey. She must be imprisoned for days, which will bring her to a bread and water diet'. The defendant was not present. It was stated that when a policeman hailed at the Union to bring her, she had refused to walk and it was not deemed necessary to hire a conveyance.¹⁶

The national directive for the Workhouse Dietary was formed on the basis that, as an aspect of deterrence the quality of such diet should be less than the standard of diet of which a labourer could achieve for himself outside the workhouse, although diet varied considerably by workhouse and area. The prison dietary however, had no such limitation, which resulted in the possibility of a better standard of diet in gaol. Certainly, in Martha's view, the prison diet and a pint of porter was preferable to the diet in the workhouse in turn it appears to have lessened the deterrent value of prison. In June of 1864 Martha was again summoned to the Salisbury Petty Sessions - only three months after her previous punishment and gaol sentence - this time it was reported that 'at the Salisbury Petty Sessions last Tuesday, Martha Hicks a pauper in the Amesbury Workhouse was charged with assaulting another pauper named Mary Ann Bundy. Mr R. M. Wilson appeared on behalf of the Guardians. The assault

appears to have arisen out of squabble between the two women with reference to the right of Hicks to go into the laundry, which the complainant averred she had no right to do, and upon remonstrating with her, the defendant attacked her in the most violent manner, pulling a portion of her hair from her head, and kneeling on her chest for half an hour. Hicks's version of the affair, however, was that she went into the wash-house to look for her apron, but not finding it there she went into the laundry, when the complainant said what do you want here and immediately took her by the shoulder and hit her in the breast. She – the defendant - admitted that she did then strike Bundy. Another pauper, and the Master of the Workhouse were called in support of the case. The magistrates sentenced the defendant to two months' imprisonment with hard labour. Hicks was then charged with having, on the 19th of June, unlawfully and maliciously destroyed a pair of shoes - the value of 1s. - the property of the Guardians of the Amesbury Union. Mr R. M. Wilson said in this case the Guardians felt bound to prosecute because the defendant had destroyed their property on other occasions and her general conduct was violent, that unless example was made of her they would be unable to maintain the discipline of the House. The Master of the Workhouse then proved the offence and was corroborated by a pauper, named Elizabeth Green. The defendant who has before been convicted of destroying the doors and windows of the house, as well as her clothing was sentenced to two months' imprisonment with hard labour, the latter term to commence the expiration of the former'.¹⁷

Martha's second child - Charles Hicks - was born in the workhouse in 1866.¹⁸ In October 1867 Martha was back at the Petty Sessions, where she was again charged by the Master of the Amesbury Workhouse with having damaged a door, the property of the Guardians, she was sentenced to a months imprisonment with hard labour'.¹⁹ Less than a year later, in August 1868 Martha was again back to the Petty Sessions, when it was reported 'a refractory Pauper - a woman named Martha Hicks - a notoriously violent character who had been several times previously convicted, was summoned for breaking a window in the workhouse of the Amesbury Union. Mr. R. M. Wilson appeared in support of the charge. The defendant, it appeared, had wanted to go out of the workhouse but the guardians refused to let her without her children, upon which she took up a stone and threw it at the window, doing damage to the extent 1s.1d. She was sentenced to two months' imprisonment with hard labour'.²⁰ Apparently undeterred, in December 1870 Martha was sentenced to three months for leaving her illegitimate children to the parish of Amesbury'.²¹ In March of 1871 in the 1871 census, Martha was now aged 30 and unmarried, recorded as a domestic servant, in the workhouse with sons George and Charles, aged 7 & 4 years respectively.²² A few months later in the summer of 1871, Martha gave birth to

a third child - Louisa – likely in the workhouse. The next time Martha appears in the record is in August 1877, when it was reported ‘an inmate of the Amesbury Union, named Martha Heath (Hicks), was brought up before Mr. W. Pinckney and Mr Wigram, on a charge of assaulting Mary Burgess, another inmate. The assault being an aggravated one, she was sent to prison for two months.’²³ Again, in November 1880 it was reported that ‘an obstreperous pauper - Martha Hicks - was charged with having on the 19th of October at Amesbury, unlawfully and wilfully committed damage to the amount of 2s. upon a window of the workhouse by breaking three panes of glass. The woman did not repudiate the offence, but maintained she only broke two windows. The master of the Amesbury Union - Mr. Wilson - gave evidence to the following effect; ‘Martha Hicks was inmate of the house, and, owing to her quarrelsome character was frequently embroiled in some bother with other inmates. On the 19th she had been quarrelling with another inmate and, despite all requests to desist, she became more and more excited. A witness had warned her that she would bring punishment upon her head, but her only reply was to pull down from the line the clothes which her antagonist had washed. After the quarrel had continued an hour and-a-half, the witness again went to her, and, finding all entreaties to restrain her unavailable, she went for the porter to take her to the refractory ward. Before proceeding there, however, she (Martha) took a handful of stones from the ground, and, flinging them through the sick-ward window broke two panes and cracked a third. The following day – the occasion of the meeting of the Board – Colonel Heathcote saw the woman in the refractory ward and desired her attendance in the Boardroom. She promised to follow him, but instead she proceeded to the laundry where she struck the woman with whom she had been quarrelling on the previous day a blow on the forehead. Subsequently, she smashed the door in the refractory ward, doing damage to the amount of 4s. Mr. R. M. Wilson said the woman was of a most violent nature and frequently defied all endeavours at control. The woman denied having struck her fellow-inmate, and, as to the breaking of the door, said that was not maliciously done. The Bench said the woman appeared to be incorrigible and they hoped two months’ imprisonment would have salutary effect upon her’.²⁴ By the time of the 1881 census, Martha aged 40, was again an inmate of the workhouse having returned from her most recent punishment. By this time only Louisa ‘a scholar’ age 10 remained in the workhouse.²⁵ Martha’s two sons had moved from the workhouse, Walter George was a lodger at Road, Woodford, a Blacksmith.²⁶ Charles was boarding with the Lake family at Blacksmiths Cottage, Bulford.²⁷ It is probable that when in 1886 the long serving master – Mr Edwin Wilson - of the workhouse was replaced by Mr Richard Lyle after Mr Wilson had lost the confidence of the Board and had to explain irregularities in the workhouse records.²⁸ It was quite likely therefore that the new master would

have introduced his own ideas for administration in the house. The following year, in July 1887, Martha now almost 50 years of age, it was reported that 'Martha Hicks was charged with having, on the 8th of July, at Amesbury, refused, whilst an inmate of the workhouse, to scour the floors of two rooms. She said that the weather was so warm and fatiguing that she did not feel equal to it. Richard Lyle, master of the Union, said that 'the defendant had been an inmate for several years until recently, when she went out to service and returned.' On the 8th of July she was offered her breakfast, she refused to take her tin, because, she said, it was dirty. (The women had the privilege of cleaning their own tins). He found that there was nothing wrong with the tin. She kept it and, in the afternoon showed it to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Board of Guardians and they saw nothing the matter with it. At supper time she had the same tin given to her, to which she threw the tea over the porter's hand. In the morning she refused to work and abused the witness and everyone else and she made use of bad language - she was an able-bodied woman. P. S. Clarke stated that 'he took the prisoner into custody on Saturday morning and charged her with creating a disturbance, refusing to work and destroying her food.' He told her 'she would have to go to Salisbury' and she said 'she would not'. She laid down, caught hold him by the thigh and endeavoured to throw him down. She tore open her dress. A conveyance was sent for, and then she refused to go. She put her bonnet on the fire and a witness took it off, after which she put it under the fire. Subsequently she was taken to the conveyance and the witness had to fasten her to the back part of it. The defendant stated that 'she wanted her own clothes'. John Frampton then the porter at the Union, said that when he served the supper out in the evening, she threw the tea all over his hand. She did the same thing on Saturday morning. The serjeant called him to his assistance and she kicked at him and spat in his face. The defendant said that the rooms were large enough to hold eight small beds the size of the Infirmary beds, she did not feel equal to the work she was called upon to do. Mr. Lyle said that 'she was accustomed to the work, that if the woman had told him that she was ill he should have sent for a doctor.' The defendant said that 'she stated that she had bad feet, but the master alleged that she was referring to something that took place months ago.' The Bench passed a sentence of a month's imprisonment. The defendant said that she had been aggravated a great deal and she wished to know if the magistrates would be kind enough to prevent aggravation. Mr. Swayne thought that if she behaved herself, she would not be aggravated'.²⁹ Later in 1888, Martha was again reported for 'refusing to do prescribed work; Martha Hicks, an inmate of the Amesbury Union Workhouse, was accused of refusing to do washing on October 31st. Richard Lyle, the master of the workhouse, said that she had from Monday to Thursday her usual work. She refused to do it. When the members of the

House Committee went around, she was most insulting to them, she told them that she would not work but would rather go to Devizes any time. She made use of filthy language, and she told one of the members of the Committee that he ought to be shoved down the gutter, head down and heels up. William Hood the porter was called, as was Mary Ann Burgess. The defendant denied having refused to work and alleged that too much was given to her to do, the Master of the workhouse stated that others had done the same work. Replying to the Bench, Sup. Stephens said that the defendant had been there before, and the master made a statement showing that in years 1861-1883 she had been punished in the house 52 times. A sentence of a month's hard labour was passed'.³⁰

In April of 1889, the Master of the workhouse - Richard Lyle - wrote to the Local Government Board in London, seeking advice about Martha's refusal to have medical treatment and that after more than twenty imprisonments in gaol she was 'putting us to great inconvenience besides undermining the discipline of the house'. The Master reported that after 'November last, Hicks was convicted of refractory conduct in the house, to one month's hard labour. On leaving prison she took a situation at a lodging house in Romsey, remaining there until Monday last, after which she presented herself for admission to the workhouse, whereupon she was removed to the Receiving Ward. The Medical Officer had examined her, she had an eruption suspiciously like 'itch', the Officer ordered her to rub over with ointment, she absolutely refused to submit to treatment. Seeing her again the Officer maintained his previous opinion. He would question if it would be safe for her to mix with other inmates, he had looked at Poor Law Orders for compelling inmates to treatment, the Board were acquainted with the case'.³¹ The advice of Baldwyn Fleming - Local Government Board Inspector - was 'to take the best practicable steps for ensuring the safety of the other inmates and the proper treatment of the woman herself'.³² In the 1891 census, Martha now aged 51 years, is recorded to have been inmate at the Devizes County Lunatic Asylum, St. James.³³ It appears that at some time, following the advice of Mr Baldwyn Flemming, Martha had been removed to the Devizes County Lunatic Asylum, St James. Martha is further recorded in 1901 and 1911 as a Patient, at Roundway, Devizes, the County Lunatic Asylum.³⁴ There is no further record of Martha, it seems she remained confined to the lunatic asylum where after a lengthy confinement, she died in 1920.³⁵

- 1 Find My Past (FMP), *England & Wales Births 1837-2006*, Amesbury, 1839, Vol. 8, p. 263.
- 2 British Newspaper Archive (BNA), *The Wiltshire Independent*, 3 Jan 1839, p. 2-3.
- 3 BNA, *The Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 7 Jan 1839, p. 3.
- 4 FMP, *England & Wales Crime, Prisons and Punishment, 1770-1935*, Devizes, Series HO8, Piece 66, 1 Jan 1839.
- 5 BNA, *The Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 1 April 1839, p. 4.
- 6 FMP, *UK Prison Hulk Registers and Letter Books, 1837-1845*, p. 29.
- 7 Clare Anderson, *Expert Essays; Bermuda 1823-1863 in Convict Voyages*.
- 8 FMP, *1841 England Scotland & Wales Census, Amesbury Union Workhouse*, HO107/1165/2, p. 4.
- 9 BNA, *Devizes & Wiltshire Gazette*, 11 July 1844, p. 3.
- 10 FMP, *1851 England Scotland & Wales Census, Amesbury Union Workhouse*, HO107/1845/168, p. 32.; *England & Wales Deaths 1837-2007*, Salisbury, 1849, Vol. 8, p. 311.; *Wiltshire Marriages Index 1538-1933*, Idmiston, 1822.
- 11 FMP, *1851 England Scotland & Wales Census*, Salisbury, HO107/1847/34, p. 12.; HO107/1847/225, p. 36.
- 12 FMP, *1851 England Scotland & Wales Census, Amesbury Union Workhouse*, HO107/1845/168, p. 32.
- 13 BNA, *The Salisbury Times*, 10 November 1888, p. 3.
- 14 BNA, *Salisbury & Winchester Journal*, 9 February 1861, p. 8.
- 15 FMP, *England & Wales Births 1837-2006*, Amesbury, 1863, Vol. 8, p. 263.
- 16 BNA, *The Frome Times*, 2 March 1864, p. 3.
- 17 BNA, *The Wiltshire Independent*, 30 June 1864, p. 4.
- 18 FMP, *England & Wales Births 1837-2006*, Amesbury, 1866, Vol. 5a, p. 167.
- 19 BNA, *The Western Gazette*, 11 October 1867, p. 8.
- 20 BNA, *The Salisbury & Winchester Journal*, 29 August 1868, p. 7-8.
- 21 BNA, *The Wiltshire Independent*, 08 December 1870, p. 3.
- 22 FMP, *1871 England Scotland & Wales Census, Amesbury Union Workhouse*, RG10/1945/7, p. 5.
- 23 BNA, *The Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 18 August 1877, p. 8.
- 24 BNA, *The Salisbury Times*, 6 November 1880, p. 7-8.
- 25 FMP, *1881 England Scotland & Wales Census*, RG11 2064, folio 62, p. 3.
- 26 FMP, *1881 England Scotland & Wales Census*, RG11 2064, folio 99, p. 6.
- 27 FMP, *1881 England Scotland & Wales Census*, RG11 2064 folio 39, p. 15.; *1881 England Scotland & Wales Census*, Amesbury Union Workhouse, RG11/2064/62, p. 3.
- '28 Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre (WRO), *Amesbury Guardians Meeting Minute Book*, H2 110/10, 1881-1886, 6 October 1886.
- 29 BNA, *The Salisbury Times*, 16 July 1887, p. 3.
- 30 BNA, *The Salisbury Times*, 10 November 1888, p. 3.
- 31 The National Archives (TNA), *Amesbury Correspondence, MH12 13667*, Letter from Mr Lyle, Master of Amesbury Union Workhouse to the Local Government Board, 17th April 1889.
- 32 TNA, *Amesbury Correspondence, MH12 13667*, Letter of reply from Baldwyn Flemming, Inspector to the Master of Amesbury Union Workhouse, copy to the Clerk of Guardians, April 1889.
- 33 FMP, *1891 England Scotland & Wales Census*, St James, Devizes, RG12/1600/152, p. 20.
- 34 FMP, *1901 England Scotland & Wales Census*, Roundway, Devizes, RG13/1926/173, p. 36.; *1911 England Scotland & Wales Census*, Roundway, Devizes, RG14/11934/246, p. 23.
- 35 FMP, *England & Wales Deaths 1837-2007*, Devizes, 1920, Vol 5a, p. 94.