

THE UNION

THE WORKHOUSE OF THE MANSFIELD POOR LAW UNION

THE MARKET PLACE was just about a mile from our front door and, looking back to my early life, going there made for an interesting walk. And it nearly always *was* a walk, even though there was a bus every ten minutes and the single fare while I was a schoolboy was only three-ha'pence, or a penny for children under eighteen and still at school. This was nothing to do with financial prudence — or anyway not that much — but more because of the traditional attitude that if you *could* walk, then you *should* walk. There were excuses for catching a bus, such as distance, heavy rain (though you could always shelter somewhere while waiting for it to stop), or something heavy to carry — but not many others. The urgency of life had yet to develop its modern intensity.

To get there, you first of all turned left from the front gate, walked round the corner up to the main road and turned right towards the town. For a couple of hundred yards, as far as Moor Lane, it was still fairly rural, though there were houses, posher and detached, on the opposite side and a few between-the-wars semis on ours. Next came the Junior School, and then a rather different stretch of perhaps a quarter of a mile (I could give the distances in metres but, since I'm writing about the life of seventy and more years ago, I'll stick to the Imperial system that I grew up with).

It seemed a long quarter-mile; you walked down a bit of a slope past a long stone wall, too high for anybody to see over, which bounded a huge potato-field. The causeway (perhaps *courseway*, but in either case pronounced *corsey*), very wide to match the road, was of stone flags; but on the other side was an unkempt sort of mixed hedge, mostly hawthorn and brambles, fronted by nothing more than a gravelled path, until it reached the bus depot of The Mansfield District Traction Company. Behind the hedge was a large area of uncultivated land with a stream, a lot of grass and scrub with stunted trees and a few flat, open spaces, where teachers took their pupils on nature rambles: it was known as 'The Botany', perhaps for that reason. After that, the road's character suddenly changed: not rural, but definitely urban.

This was where the town really began. Here the road became suddenly narrower and had a causeway of concrete paving stones on each side, matching the rest of the town's streets. It was now Stockwell Gate, dipping quite steeply at first until it finally reached the level of the town centre, just after the Empire Cinema. On the left, among other old buildings, some partly demolished and hidden by hoardings, was a tall row of three-storeyed stone cottages in which, a hundred years before, frame work knitters had lived and practised their trade. On reaching the point where the road narrowed it was customary to cross and walk on the other side.

This crossing-over was a habit which I never questioned, but which I easily understood. The wide pavement of York stone on which we had been walking ended at a blind pair of iron gates in a grey stone wall which was high, castellated, and blackened like most of the town's buildings with colliery grime and soot. This ominous boundary, which we crossed the road to avoid, continued almost to the bottom of the hill, relieved only by the main entrance, which was solidly gated and unless open gave no view of what was behind it, except for another big black wall maybe forty feet away at the top of a tarmac slope.

If I'd been older when I first saw it, I would probably have thought that the place was a prison. Indeed, so forbidding was its appearance that it was used as a threat of what might be the punishment for severe malfeasance. It was even said that badly-behaved children had actually been incarcerated there. Like any other child of my age, I simply accepted what I was told. It was one of those examples — like the almost equally grim-looking police station — whose very existence was supposed to discourage criminal behaviour among the more wayward citizenry.

The place had a name, of course, but its true function remained mysterious. My father and grandfather called it the Spike, which wasn't very informative. Neighbours called it the Union. If ever I asked about its function, I would be fobbed off with a few words such as 'You don't want to know what happens in there!' which was a judgement that I could readily accept. There were plenty of other nasty things that I was getting to know about, without adding anything unnecessary to the burden.

Once at school, however, I ran into fellow-pupils more street-wise than myself. I got to know that it was not only called the Spike, but the Workhouse; that it was a horrible place, that the people who had used to live there at public expense were the poorest of the poor and had neither home, nor proper employment, nor friends, and that it had become, in the regrettable vernacular of the time, a loony bin.

Its proper name I never discovered until years later. It turned out to be the Workhouse of the Mansfield Poor Law Union, by my own time a home for so-called incurables, and it seems in its day to have been an establishment quite as harsh and dreadful as its reputation suggested.

I last saw it in 1980, and remember expecting it to be smaller and a less formidable place than it was in memory. It wasn't. But the stone walls had been scrubbed to a clean pale grey, which somehow emphasised their height, and the buildings within had been converted to kindlier uses.

I looked for it recently on Google Street View, but it's all gone now. The whole site has been wiped clean and replaced by the Community Hospital, a centre for rehabilitation after crippling accidents and diseases, what we used locally to call a convalescent home and as such has become a rarity. There can be very few people – if any – left who knew its workings while I was a child, but it may be that the old names stick, in the way that such things do. I wouldn't be at all surprised to find that some still refer to it as the Spike – or even the Union.