

Sarratt Local History Society - "From Plough to Poverty" How Sarratt Helped and Housed its Rural Poor



A celebration of 200 years of the Day Alms Houses

Some 60 people, mostly Sarratt residents, enjoyed a wonderful evening in our village hall on Tuesday September 21st. They had come to hear Angela Colman and Sue Clark, committee members of our society.

If anyone has glanced at the stone plaque on these cottages, you would realise that 2021 is the 200th Anniversary of when Ralph Day rebuilt them in 1821. But Angela and Sue had researched much further back in time, to discover how Sarratt cared for its poorer inhabitants in distant centuries.

Angela spoke first, reminding us that our village grew from a small hamlet clustered around the Church. Holy Cross was built around 1190. Few details of early incumbents can be found, perhaps an itinerant monk from St Albans visited and brought alms for the poor and sick. The village labourers were serfs, paid a few pence for their work but tied to the Lord, at this time the Abbot of St Albans, the landowner, and all their produce had to go to him. Everything depended on a good harvest; destitution could follow if the harvest failed due to bad weather, pests or disease.

Angela spoke of the two massive events which must have had an impact on Sarratt - the Great Famine of Europe in the 1320s when crops failed everywhere (now thought to be due to a massive volcanic eruption in what is now New Zealand) and the Black Death of circa 1349. But Sarratt survived. The shortage of labour meant wages increased by a little, but life was still hand-to-mouth. General unrest resulted in the Peasants Revolt of 1381, after which serfdom was abolished. Did a labourer from Sarratt travel to London to hear Wat Tyler? We shall never know! But there was also insurrection at St Albans so quite likely some went there.

The abolition of the monasteries after the Reformation in the 1530s meant that no relief for the poor could be found there. Government intervention came in the form of the Poor Law of 1601, which meant that each parish had to levy a Poor Rate to support their inhabitants. Also, better-off parishioners with a conscience began to leave a small legacy for the poor of the parish. One such was Margerie Hobbes, who in 1604 left 10 shillings to help the poor in Sarratt - a big help in those days.

At this point Sue Clark began, and told us of the Settlement Acts which meant that people could not move from one parish to another without a certificate indicating that their home parish would support them if need be. An Overseer of the Poor had to be appointed for each parish. Sadly, the Payment Books for Sarratt are missing, but Sue had found one for Rickmansworth at the Hertfordshire Archives, and showed us images of some pages, itemising what became known as Outdoor Relief payments for such things as fuel or shoes, and especially burials.

There seems to have been an Almshouse in Sarratt from about 1700, probably on the existing site, provided by one John Baldwin but few details can be found. By the 1820s the building was obviously in disrepair as it was "new built" at the expense of Ralph Day. Help with maintenance came from his brothers Henry and Thomas. The Day family had lived at Sarratt Hall since the middle of the 18th century. A Trust was established with investments from all three brothers, and another building was bought in The Dell at Chipperfield. This was not as successful and was sold in 1888.



A huge change came about with the passing of the New Poor Law in 1834 which established Workhouses. Sarratt was part of the Watford Union, which built a workhouse in Vicarage Road, later

to become part of Watford General. Sue had done much research at the Hertfordshire Archives and found the Workhouse Register, detailing many poor people from Sarratt who went in and out of the workhouse. It wasn't compulsory to stay there, but if you were destitute there was often no alternative. Thank goodness we had the Almshouses for a fortunate few.

Children in the Workhouse were often orphans, and sometimes fostered out, which happened in Sarratt - indeed there is a fascinating account of the "Sarratt Ferment" concerning this in our Scrapbooks if you check our website. The Workhouse system was not abolished until 1929. Sue had also checked all the Census Returns every ten years from 1841 to discover who lived in the Almshouses, and possibly why they needed help.

Joanna Staughton, who counts Ralph Day as a direct ancestor, thanked Angela and Sue on our behalf, stressing what a fascinating account they both had given us and how thankful we all must be for our life in Sarratt today.

Dawn Pitts