

Ewelme Poor and Beggarbush Hill

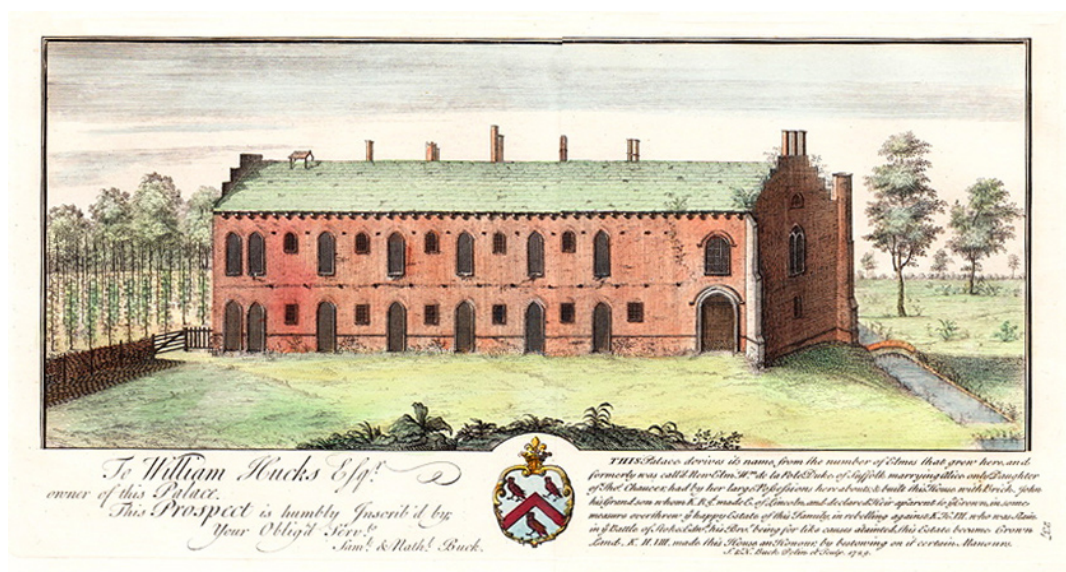
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In affluent and desirable 21st Century Ewelme it is difficult to believe that real poverty once existed here, however, the location known as Beggars' Bush Hill shows that to be the case. The earliest use of the term 'beggars' bush' is found in an Almanac of 1591, and the term 'to go to the beggars' bush' was applied to those reduced to poverty ostensibly by their own folly. With the dissolution of the monasteries and religious houses after 1536, the poor lost a reliable source for charity, so beggars abounded. The 1597 Act for the Repression of Vagrancy required "any rogue, vagabond or sturdy beggar found begging should be stripped naked from the middle upwards and openly whipped until his or her body be bloody, and then passed to his or her birthplace or last residence." The local parishes were responsible for enacting this Law, so vagrants gathered on a roadside parish boundary, traditionally under a hawthorn bush, to escape the punishment and beg passing travellers for alms. Thus, Ewelme's beggars' bush was on the boundaries of Ewelme, Benson and Nuffield Parishes, and is first mentioned in a Survey of 1606/07.

Studying the centuries of Poor Law Acts is a complicated undertaking. Basically, Elizabeth I passed the first Poor Law in 1601 which divided the poor into two groups - those unable to work due to age, illness etc., were helped by their Parish with 'outdoor' relief or almshouses (as in Ewelme); and those who could work but did not, were severely beaten as mentioned. A vast and inefficient social welfare system was created, based on the village/hamlet where local relief was organized by Overseers of the Poor, Constables and Justices of the Peace. Some parishes were more sympathetic towards their destitute than others. Word got around, and paupers moved in from less generous parishes. To prevent this, the 1662 Settlement Act was passed, returning paupers to their parish of birth, and residence for a year and a day was required to qualify for Parish relief.

Parishes were often inundated by war victims passing through, but needing relief from the rate payer. Ewelme's Constables Accounts 1695-1702 show an extraordinary amount of movement of cripples, probably victims of 'William's War' (Protestant William of Orange dethroning his Catholic father in law James II). In one year a staggering number of 334 victims were given temporary relief costing £13 10s 0d and 'carried' on (moved very rapidly) to the next Parish by Constable John Reeve.

In 1786 the former accommodation building of Ewelme Palace (converted later to Ewelme Manor), was adapted into tenements to house poor families



The remains of Ewelme Palace accommodation building used to house the poor.

. Roundsmen were introduced about that time who could auction the labour of paupers to local farmers, sometimes for monthly or weekly periods. Prices varied according to the time of year, the old and infirm selling for less than the able-bodied. This system subsidised the cost of keeping the pauper, but was discontinued by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.

In the late 16th to early 18th centuries Ewelme's poor benefited from small bequests from individuals (Wheedon and Headache [sic]) in bread, fuel or clothing at Christmas. Nonetheless, Ewelme struggled to provide for its destitute, and the poor rates rose from £82 in 1776 to £503 in 1803, when 29 adults and 21 children received permanent 'outdoor' relief. They represented 1/10th of the village population! By 1813 total expenditure was over £900 – second only to the larger village of Benson in the 13 other parishes of the Hundred. Inhospitable Workhouses were built after 1783, and Ewelme became part of the Wallingford Poor Law Union in 1835. The church Burial Register shows many villagers ended their days in the Wallingford Workhouse.

In a rural area, unskilled men had little option but to become low paid labourers on the land. Through many male generations of any one family, 'occupation labourer' is recorded in the church registers. Large families lived in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in cottages divided into 'one up, one down' dwellings by opportunistic landlords. If a family could not afford a funeral using a horse-drawn hearse taking the deceased to the church, farm workers were paid a shilling each to carry the coffin, and given bread and cheese by the undertaker. Some assistance was provided, with a Friendly Society established at The Greyhound in 1869 and Coal and Clothing Clubs set up, where members paid a small weekly sum throughout the year. Wealthier residents boosted the funds. This continued into the 20th century with a nursing and maternity benefit society. A soup kitchen was run from the [Old] Rectory house, where children could collect a can of soup twice a week.

It is sobering to reflect that real deprivation existed in Ewelme well into the last century. For the majority of villagers there was nothing 'good' about the 'old days', but mercifully, Ewelme's 'beggars' bush' had become just a name.

Ewelme Village Archive