

A Poor Man's Heritage

Exploring the life of the poor in Victorian Britain through folk songs and nineteenth century ballad sheets

With the Enclosures Acts driving many small farmers and cottagers off their land (between 1760 and 1840 over 5,500,000 acres were enclosed) and the oppressive regime of the mines and factories (long hours for little reward) it is small wonder that the nineteenth century saw widespread poverty and hardship. Efforts to relieve the situation only succeeded in creating the now infamous 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, intended to make life better for the deserving poor but which only, and inevitably, drove more and more people into the workhouse.

The story of the establishment of a network of union workhouses, day-to-day life, conditions, work and punishments for those inside such establishments is told with historical facts, contemporary accounts and, of course, music.

Developing from a series of workshops for the public and with schools, 'A Poor Man's Heritage' was compiled by Roy Clinging as a special commission for the Salt Museum in Northwich, Cheshire, which is housed in a former workhouse dating back to 1839.

A band of itinerant musicians and ballad singers are plying their wares and when the narrator takes up the story, interspersed with quotes, speeches and short dramatic cameos, the songs are used to highlight the issues along the way. The music is based around nineteenth century ballad sheets and traditional songs of the period, which, as much as possible, use the words, expressions, and opinions of the time.

Traditional songs (*Rigs of the Times*, *The Poacher's Fate*) rub shoulders with new songs and tunes (*Picking Oakum*), first hand accounts from workhouse inmates (*The Song of Edward Lambourn*) and broadside ballads. These range from the optimistic *Hope For The Best* and the rather downcast *Out In The Cold*, through the determination to make the best of a bad job in *The Days When I Was Hard Up*, to the hugely enjoyable, *Women Flogger's Lament of Marylebone Workhouse*.

The first performance was to a full house at the Salt Museum in the historic setting of the meeting room of the Northwich Union Workhouse Board of Guardians. Narration is by Nick Mitchell and the songs and music are performed by Roy Clinging, Dave Russell, Neil Brookes and Mary Clinging. Chorus participation is encouraged.

