

Midsomer Norton Audio Trail - Number 80 High Street

[Ambient sound: Victorian workhouse, machinery, children playing]

The building at 80 High Street may be a retail unit now, but it has a colourful past as a former workhouse. We've heard about some of the few Midsomer Norton residents who had wealth and power, but many more people were not so lucky.

Before there were census or tax records, local finances and events were logged by the church. A record book from 1758 to 1831 has survived, and in February 1826 it's noted down that the Poor Houses at Thicket Mead on the edge of Midsomer Norton were

Voice 1: Very much out of repair and quite uninhabitable...

A new one was

Voice 2: To be built nearer the village so as to be more under the eyes of the Vestry and Overseers of the Poor.

It's thought that the building in front of you was originally that Poor House, a charitable foundation where poor or homeless people lived. Later it became the workhouse, an institution that had developed over several centuries. The Poor Laws recognised that destitute people needed support, and parishes were legally obliged to provide work and shelter for them. It was intended as a form of social welfare, and a workhouse would have existed in most British towns.

Unfortunately, the authorities began using the system to discourage the poor from seeking help. Workhouses became prisons, housing only the most desperate and vulnerable people. They were terrible, with forced child labour, long hours, malnutrition, beatings and neglect. Death was common, with diseases such as smallpox and measles spreading quickly. Beds were squashed together, with little space to move and little light.

Families were divided. Children were separated from their parents. Someone entering the workhouse was given a uniform to be worn for the entirety of the stay. The inmates were prohibited from talking and were expected to clean, cook and use dangerous machinery.

Charles Dickens was a famous critic of the workhouse system. In his novel *A Christmas Carol*, one of the characters says of the workhouse that

Voice 3: Many can't go there; and many would rather die.

Socially attitudes did gradually change, with workhouses eventually becoming refuges for the elderly and sick, then hospitals. Midsomer Norton workhouse closed and a new one was constructed in nearby Clutton. The system was finally abolished altogether in 1930.

The building you can see had two bay windows; the inverted Vs show the joins onto the rest of the front wall. After its life as a workhouse ended, it was converted into a tobacconist and newsagent. Other businesses followed before it became an independent toy shop and then part of The Entertainer group. The premises bring far more pleasure to people now than they had when it was a workhouse!