

'A COWTOWN STORY'



Written by Angela Trayhorn
Illustrated by Peter Archer

'Victorian Brixham' St Mary's Project
Key Stage 1+2

'Cowntown'
A Tale from:
'The Victorian Workhouse'
Key Stage 1+2

A story by Angela Trayhorn
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Eliza and Samuel are from Higher Brixham and both find themselves admitted to The Union Workhouse in Totnes, because their families have fallen upon hard times.

The workhouse was a place where poor people, the elderly and infirm were housed and fed if they had no work or money.

In the workhouse, people - called inmates - had to work hard, often picking junk and oakum to pay for their board and lodging.

Junk was the name given to old ropes and cables used on ships. These were cut up into small fibres called oakum. The oakum was mixed with tar and grease to make a thick sticky paste which was used to make wooden ships watertight.

Many died from a poor diet, hard work, ill treatment and lack of medical help.

But some managed to find a way out of the workhouse and make their way in life.

Brixham Parish workhouse was situated at Bakers Hill and had 60 beds in 1776. In 1834 this closed and a new larger 'Union Workhouse' was built in 1836 at Totnes which is where our story takes place.



A boy aged 7 and a girl aged 5 are sitting on a wooden floor. They are inside the Totnes Union Workhouse in the year 1860.

They are picking oakum, old thick rope used on warships and boats. The old rope is unpicked by hand for re-use.

They are surrounded by huge coils of rope and overseen by 'The Superintendent'.

The girl Eliza is quietly crying:
Samuel is working beside her.

‘What could be wrong?’ He whispers,
‘don’t let the Superintendent hear
you at it!’

Eliza replied: ‘This oakum is so
rough it makes my fingers bleed
and they’s so sore. I’m tired and
hungry, ’tis hours to supper and
bedtime’.

Samuel shushes her.

‘We’ll get beaten if he catches us
a’talkin’. I’ll pass you some of my
picked rope so as you can make up
the tally. You here with your Ma
and Pa?’

Eliza says: ‘Just my Ma and big
sister. Pa died and we could not
stay in the cottage, so we had to
come here. What about you?’

'Ma died, Pa's in gaol and my brothers are apprenticed. I'll go apprentice soon to a farmer like me brothers. Hope to earn money when I'm older see, and get out of here!'

Eliza turns to Samuel and says.

'I'm to be sent as scullery maid when I'm 7. I'm to be called Mary but I don't like that name. I won't be paid any money just my bed and food'.

'All scullery maids is called Mary' says Samuel.

'Buck up', tomorrow's Sunday and we shall have Sunday School instead of this mean task. I'm trying real hard to learn to read'.

Eliza replied: 'I can't read letters and I won't be able to do the sewing with these sore fingers'.



Children in workhouses had no free time. The 'bell' was rung at 5am summer time and 6am in winter.

Children were dressed in rough smocks and given 30 minutes to eat their breakfast. Dinner was mid-day and supper was eaten before bedtime at 6pm.

Between meal times everyone including children as young as 4 were expected to work up to 10 hours a day.

Food was frugal (a small amount) and monotonous. Gruel, a thin watery porridge was served for breakfast. Dinner at mid-day was bread and cheese. Supper was a few seasonal vegetables with very little meat in a broth, a thin watery soup. Water was drunk and there was no fruit given. The children were always hungry.

There was no work on Sunday but children had to attend Sunday School. This was supposed to include reading, writing and numbers for the boys and sewing for the girls. Religious instruction was given to both boys and girls.



Because of the poor diet, poor living conditions with hard work, disease was rife. Scarlet fever, diphtheria, typhus and consumption (Tuberculosis) were common causes of death.

The death rate for children under 5 years of age was higher in the workhouse than anywhere else in the community.

The next time we meet Eliza and Samuel, she is 10 and he is 12. Eliza was sent to be a scullery maid at a large farmhouse, and Samuel was a 'pauper's apprentice' to a Brixham farmer.

Both are in the parish of St Mary's they see each other at Church on Sundays which they have to attend.

Eliza and Samuel are at Church. Eliza whispers to Samuel 'I'm up at dawn to light the house fires and the oven for cook. I have to scrub the pots and clean the floors. The cooking pots are made of iron and very heavy. My hands are sore with the scrubbing. I have to fill the copper to wash the house laundry, with water which I fetch from the well.'

'Tis hot and tiring work and I can't go to bed until all the chores is done! The housekeeper is a fierce and unkind woman. But the cook is a kindly lady and I think she might teach me cooking so I can better myself. I've been given the name Mary like all the maids, and I don't like it.'



Samuel tells her 'Farm work has been very hard and the farmer is a harsh man. At my age I'm expected to do the same work as the men. I'm learning to plough with the oxen and the farmer gets impatient with me. Soon he says we are to have horses to plough as they be much faster. I do try to keep up with the reading but don't get much chance as there's so much work and no time off!'



Eliza smiles and says. 'There's a fair at Churston on Sunday after Church. I hope to see you there and then we can have a proper talk.'

It was difficult to have a friendship because employers did not allow their male and female staff to mix. Any such friendship was often kept a secret.

Samuel is 21 and has done well. He is now the ploughman and if he marries, will be offered a cottage of his own to go with his job. This was known as a 'tied' cottage.

He has been 'walking out' with Eliza and meeting her at Church Suppers. He is now in a position to marry.

Eliza had her wish and was taken to work with the cook at the large farmhouse. She has enjoyed the improved situation but the working hours are still very long. She is now 19 and may marry with her employer's permission.



Samuel says. 'Hopefully we could marry this spring if your Misses allows you. The cottage is a good one and ready to live in'.

A delighted Eliza replies. 'I'll ask Madam on Sunday. She won't be too pleased as I'll have to give up my job and she will have to find a replacement.'

Samuel says. 'It will only be a small affair. No one's seen father since he left prison but my brothers will come if they can be spared from work.'

Eliza says excitedly. 'My sister will help me with the wedding dress, she gets "hand me downs" as a ladies' maid and she's clever with a needle. I'm sorry mother did not live to see me married, but she could not keep going in that workhouse.'



Permission was given for Eliza to marry. Having given up her job, she and Samuel moved into the tied cottage on the farm.



They soon had their first child. As long as Samuel stayed in good health and could do his job, they would keep their cottage. If he lost his job they would be homeless. And if he failed to find other work;

THE WORKHOUSE WOULD BECKON.

The 'Workhouse' system came to an end in 1948. Ninety years after Samuel and Eliza found themselves inmates.

Workhouses became 'Infirmaries' where the sick and elderly were taken care of. The inmates were now called patients and did not have to work.

Today there are no infirmaries; we have the National Health Service that cares for us all in hospitals and in our own home when we are ill.

In Memory of Peter Archer

Artist

1933 - 2018

Other Victorian
'Cowntown' Characters'



The Reverend Cary (Vicar of St Mary's) with his son Jaheel



A Wealthy Woman
and her Daughter



The Doctor



The Doctor's Wife



The Housemaid



The Milkmaid



The Gamekeeper



The Chimney Sweep
and His Boy



The Blacksmith



The Donkeyman



The Farmer



The Shepherd



The Drover's Boy



Poor Children

Ring of Bells Inn



Revellers in the Ring
of Bells Inn



Villagers Drinking
Tea



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