Mary Amelia Kay

There is an IGI Record of a Mary Amelia Kay being christened on 16th October 1837 at Manchester Cathedral, Lancashire, with her parents being listed as Edward and May Kay.[i] She is listed in the 1851 and 1861 census returns as living at home with her mother.[ii] She was mentioned, along with her brothers, in the will of her Great Uncle John Fretwell, by which she was to receive after his death (in 1851) a bequest of £25 and for her ongoing maintenance and support, an amount of a ¼ part of the proceeds of the sale of the Talbot Estate.

> *To Mary Amelia Kay, Charles Kay, Edward Kay the younger, and John Fretwell Kay the other children of my said nephew Edward Kay £25.*
>
> *And the remainder of such fourth part I give to the maintenance and support of my Nephew Edward Kay now of unsound mind and Mary his wife and their children James, Mary Amelia, Charles, Edward and John Fretwell Kay.*[iii]

However, Mary Amelia seems to have been located in the 1871 census as a Pauper at the Leeds Workhouse under the governorship of Mr. Henry Douglas.[iv]

Mary Amelia Kay	Pauper Inmate	U	34	Sewing	Salford, Lancashire.

If this is 'our' Mary Amelia, it raises the question of what happened to her in the intervening 10 years, and, presumably more specifically, after the death of her mother and why none of her family seemed to have come to her assistance. A comprehensive website on work houses provides a grim picture of life (or more appropriately 'existence') in a workhouse from which the following extracts are sourced.[v]

Why Did People Enter the Workhouse?

People ended-up in the workhouse for a variety of reasons. Usually, it was because they were too poor, old or ill to support themselves. This may have resulted from such things as a lack of work during periods of high unemployment, or someone having no family willing or able to provide care for them when they became elderly or sick. Unmarried pregnant women were often disowned by their families and the workhouse was the only place they could go during and after the birth of their child. Prior to the establishment of public mental asylums in the mid-nineteenth century (and in some cases even after that), the mentally ill and mentally handicapped poor were often consigned to the workhouse. Workhouses, though, were never prisons, and entry into them was generally a voluntary although often painful decision. It also carried with it a change in legal status — until 1918, receipt of poor relief meant a loss of the right to vote. Admission into the workhouse first required an interview to establish the applicant's circumstances. This was most often undertaken by a Relieving Officer who would visit each part of the union on a regular basis. However, the workhouse Master could also interview anyone in urgent need of admission. Formal admission into the workhouse proper was authorised by the Board of Guardians at their weekly meetings, where an applicant could summoned to justify their application. This would no doubt have been an intimidating experience — the heroine of the novel 1840s novel Jessie Phillips collapsed on the board-room floor. Half a century later, however, a cartoon in Punch showed how times and attitudes had changed. Prior to heir formal admission into the main workhouse, new arrivals would be placed in a receiving or probationary ward. There the workhouse medical officer would examine them to check on their state of health. Those suffering from an illness would be placed in a sick ward. Upon entering the workhouse, paupers were stripped, bathed (under supervision), and issued with a workhouse uniform. Their own clothes would be washed and disinfected and then put into store along with any other possessions they had and only returned to them when they left the workhouse.

Workhouse Uniform

Originally, the Poor Law Commissioners expected that workhouse inmates would make their own clothes and shoes, providing a useful work task and a cost saving. However, they probably failed to realise the level of skill required to perform this and uniforms were more usually bought-in. Uniforms were usually made from fairly coarse materials with the emphasis being on hard-wearing rather than on comfort and fitting.

Classification and Segregation

After 1834, workhouse inmates were strictly segregated into seven classes:

Aged or infirm men.
Able bodied men, and youths above 13.
Youths and boys above seven years old and under 13.
Aged or infirm women.
Able-bodied women and girls above 16.
Girls above seven years old and under 16.
Children under 7 seven years of age.

Each class had its own area of the workhouse. Husbands, wives and children were separated as soon as they entered the workhouse and could be punished if they even tried to speak to one another. From 1847, married couples over the age of sixty could request to share a separate bedroom. Children under seven could be placed (if the Guardians thought fit) in the female wards and, from 1842, their mothers could have access to them "at all reasonable times".

Parents could also have an "interview" with their children "at some time in each day".

Inside the Workhouse

The workhouse was like a small self-contained village. Apart from the basic rooms such as a dining-hall for eating, and dormitories for sleeping, workhouses often had their own bakery, laundry, tailor's and shoe-maker's, vegetable gardens and orchards, and even a piggery for rearing pigs. There would also be school-rooms, nurseries, fever-wards for the sick, a chapel, and a dead-room or mortuary. Once inside the workhouse, an inmate's only possessions were their uniform and the bed they had in the large dormitory. Beds were simply constructed with a wooden or iron-frame, and could be as little as two feet across. Bedding, in the 1830s and 1840s at least, was generally a mattress and cover, both filled with straw, although blankets and sheets were later introduced. Bed-sharing, particularly amongst children, was common although it became prohibited for adult paupers. For vagrants and casuals, the 'bed' could be a wooden box rather like a coffin, or even just be a raised wooden platform, or the bare floor. In some places, metal rails provided a support for low-slung hammocks. The inmates' toilet facilities were often a simple privy — a cess-pit with a simple cover having a hole in it on which to sit — shared perhaps by as many as 100 inmates. Dormitories were usually provided with chamber pots or, after 1860, earth closets — boxes containing dry soil which could afterwards be used as fertiliser. Once a week, the inmates were bathed (usually superintended — another assault on their dignity) and the men shaved.

The Daily Routine

Half an hour after the workhouse bell was rung for rising, the Master or Matron performed a roll-call in each section of the workhouse. The bell also announced meal breaks during which the rules required that "silence, order and decorum shall be maintained" although from 1842 the word "silence" was dropped. Communal prayers were read before breakfast and after supper every day and Divine Service performed every Sunday, Good Friday and Christmas Day.

Rules and Regulations

One source of insight into life in the workhouse comes from the lists of rules under which workhouse operated. These were often printed and prominently displayed in the workhouse, and also read out aloud each week so that the illiterate could have no excuse for disobeying them. The rules for Aylesbury parish workhouse from 1831(shown on the following page) outline the daily regime. After 1834, the Poor Law Commissioners issued detailed orders about every aspect of the running of a poor law union and its workhouse. In 1847, 233 separate regulations or 'articles' were brought together as part of the Consolidated General Order which governed workhouse operation and administration for the next sixty years. For example:

ART. 119.—No written or printed paper of an improper tendency, or which may be likely to produce insubordination, shall be allowed to circulate, or be read aloud, among the inmates of the Workhouse.

ART. 120.—No pauper shall play at cards, or at any game of chance, in the Workhouse; and the Master may take from any pauper, and keep until his departure from the Workhouse, any cards, dice, or other articles applicable to games of chance, which may be in his possession.

ART. 121.—No pauper shall smoke in any room of the Workhouse, except by the special direction of the Medical Officer, or shall have any matches or other articles of a highly combustible nature in his possession, and the Master may take from any person any articles of such a nature.

Misdemeanours and Punishments

After 1834, the breaking of workhouse rules fell into two categories: *Disorderly* conduct, which could be punished by a withdrawal for food "luxuries" such as cheese or tea, or the more serious *Refractory* conduct, which could result in a period of solitary confinement. The workhouse dining hall was required to display a poster which spelt out these rules. Workhouse punishment books record the severity of punishments meted out to inmates. Some chilling examples of this can be seen in the "Pauper Offence Book" from Beaminster Union in Dorset. Offences against property, for example breaking a window, received particularly harsh punishment:

Name	*Offence*	*Date*	*Punishment*
Elliott, Benjamin	Neglect of work	31 May 1842	Dinner withheld, and but bread for supper.
Rowe, Sarah	Noisy and swearing	19 June 1842	Lock'd up for 24 hours on bread and water.
Aplin, John	Disorderly at Prayer-time	22 July 1842	Lock'd up for 24 hours on bread and water.
Mintern, George	Fighting in school	26 July 1842	No cheese for one week.
Greenham, Mary and Payne, Priscella	Quarreling and fighting	14 Dec 1842	No meat 1 week.
Bartlett, Mary	Breaking window	21 Mar 1843	Sent to prison for 2 mths.
Park, James	Deserted, got over wall	4 Sep 1843	To be whipped.
Hallett, Isaac	Breaking window	25 April 1844	Sent to prison for 2 months hard labour.
Staple, John	Refusing to work	7 Jany. 1856	Committed to prison for 28 days.
Johnson, John	Refusing to work	19 Oct 1858	Cheese & tea stop'd for supper. Breakfast stop's altogether.
Soaper, Elizabeth	Making use of bad language in bedroom. Trying to excite other inmates to insubordination. Refusing to work.	17 Jany. 1863	Taken before the Magistrate & committed to prison for 14 days hard labour.

Being "lock'd up" might well mean a spell in the "refractory cell" - this was often underground in one of the workhouse

cellars.

Workhouse Diet

The diet fed to workhouse inmates was often laid down in meticulous detail. From 1835 onwards, the Poor Law Commissioners issued six sample dietary tables for use in union workhouses. Each Board of Guardians then used one of these tables as the basis for the particular diet in their own workhouse, subject to the agreement of the Poor Law Commissioners. For example, here is the dietary used at Children and the aged or infirm had a slightly different diet, usually with more meat-based meals, and with inclusion of milk or tea. From 1856, special diets could also be provided for children aged from two to five, and from five to nine. Special or medical cases might require extra or alternative food. Thus, each workhouse had to cope with at least seven classes of diet for the various categories of inmate, each carefully measured to comply with the regulations. On admission, each inmate was assigned to a particular class of diet. The designations varied over the years - from 1900, the following scheme was used:

Class 1	Men not employed in work
Class 1A	Men employed in work (as 1 but with an additional meal on weekdays)
Class 2	Infirm men not employed in work
Class 2A	Infirm men employed in work (as 1 but with an additional meal on weekdays)
Class 2B	Feeble infirm men (as 1 but with an additional meal on weekdays)
Class 3	Women not employed in work
Class 3A	Women employed in work (as 1 but with an additional meal on weekdays)
Class 4	Infirm women not employed in work
Class 4A	Infirm men employed in work (as 1 but with an additional meal on weekdays)
Class 4B	Feeble infirm men (as 1 but with an additional meal on weekdays)
Class 5	Children aged from 3 to 8
Class 6	Children aged from 8 to 15
Class 7	Children under 3
Class 8	Sick diets

The main constituent of the workhouse diet was bread. At breakfast it was supplemented by gruel or porridge — both made from water and oatmeal (or occasionally a mixture of flour and oatmeal). Workhouse broth was usually the water used for boiling the dinner meat, perhaps with a few onions or turnips added. Tea — often without milk — was often provided for the aged and infirm at breakfast, together with a small amount of butter. Supper was usually similar to breakfast. The mid-day dinner was the meal that varied most, although on several days a week this could just be bread and cheese. Other dinner fare included:

pudding - either rice-pudding or steamed suet pudding. These would be served plain. In later years, suet-pudding might be served with gravy, or sultanas added to make plum pudding particularly when served to children or the infirm.

meat and potatoes - the potatoes might be grown in the workhouses own garden; the meat was usually cheap cuts of beef or mutton, with occasional pork or bacon. Meat was usually boiled, although by the 1880s, some workhouses served roast meat. There was some scope for local variation, for example some unions in Cornwall were allowed to substitute fish for meat. From 1883, all workhouses could if they wished serve a fish dinner once a week.

soup - this would usually be broth, with a few vegetables added and thickened with barley, rice or oatmeal.

RULES & ORDERS

TO BE OBSERVED BY

The Poor of the Parish Workhouse of Aylesbury,

IN THE COUNTY OF BUCKS.

I. That the Master and Mistress live in the House, and see that the following Rules be observed.

II. Every Person in health shall rise by six o'Clock the summer half year, and by seven the winter half year, and shall be employed in such labour as their respective age and ability will admit, and commence their work by six o'Clock in the Morning, and work till six o'Clock at Night, from Lady-day to Michaelmas; and from seven o'Clock till dark, from Michaelmas to Lady-day, allowing half an hour for breakfast, one hour for dinner, and half an hour for supper; and any one refusing to work, shall for the first offence go without their next meal, and for the second offence be reported to the Overseers, that they may otherwise be punished.

III. That all the poor in the House go to bed by eight o'Clock the summer half year, and by seven o'Clock the winter half year, and that all candles be put out by that time.

IV. That the poor shall have their provisions in a clean and wholesome manner, their breakfast by eight, their dinner at twelve, and their supper at six o'Clock; that no waste be made, nor any provisions carried away; and that Grace shall be said before and after dinner, and none may depart until Grace is said; and their dinner three times a week to be hot meat and vegetables properly cooked.

V. That the House be swept from top to bottom every morning and cleaned all over once a week, or so often as the Master and Mistress think necessary; and the windows be opened daily.

VI. That none absent themselves from the House without leave, nor stay beyond the time allowed them, on pain of losing their next meal, or of some other punishment; nor may any one be admitted into the House without leave of the Governor.

VII. Any of the poor guilty of stealing, selling their provisions or clothing, or of drunkenness, swearing, quarrelling, fighting, or in any other way disturbing the peace of the House, or of being in any way saucy or abusive to the Master or Mistress, shall be punished with the utmost severity of the law.

VIII. That all in the House who are able, and can be spared from the duties thereof, shall attend Church or some other Place of Worship twice every Sunday; and those who refuse or neglect to attend, or do not return as soon as Service is over, shall go without their next meal, or be punished in some other way, as the Overseers shall think proper.

IX. No person shall be permitted to bring spirituous liquors into the House, or smoke in any part of the premises, except the hall. Those found transgressing, shall lose their next meal, or be otherwise punished.

X. Workers shall be allowed 2*d*. in every shilling they earn; Cook 4*d*. per week; Doctor's Nurse from 1*s*. Washerwomen half a pint of ale each per day, and tea in the afternoon.

XI. Any of the poor acting in disobedience of the orders of the Master or Mistress, or in contempt of these Orders, shall be taken before a Magistrate, and punished as the law directs.

XII. That these Orders be placed in the hall, dinner-room, or in any other place that the Overseers may direct; and that they be read on a Sunday at dinner-time by the Master or Mistress, so that the poor may not plead ignorance of the same.

XIII. If any of the poor are found defacing or destroying these Rules, they shall be punished by being fed on bread and water only for two days.

JOHN KERSELEY FOWLER,
JASPER JACKSON,
WILLIAM HOMEMAYER, } Churchwardens.

ROBERT READ,
JOSEPH SHAW, } Overseers.

27th JANUARY, 1831.

		Breakfast.		Dinner.				Supper.	
		Bread. oz.	Gruel. pints.	Cooked Meat, with Vegetables. oz.	Soup. pints.	Bread. oz.	Cheese. oz.	Bread. oz.	Cheese. oz.
Sunday	Men	7	2	5	..	..	..	7	2
	Women	5	2	5	..	..	..	5	1½
Monday	Men	7	2	..	2	7	..	7	2
	Women	5	2	.. Bacon.	2	5	..	5	1½
Tuesday	Men	7	2	4	..	..	..	7	2
	Women	5	2	4	..	..	..	5	1½
Wednesday	Men	7	2	..	2	7	..	7	2
	Women	5	2	..	2	5	..	5	1½
Thursday	Men	7	2	..	..	7	2	7	2
	Women	5	2	..	..	5	1½	5	1½
Friday	Men	7	2	4	..	..	..	7	2
	Women	5	2	4	..	..	..	5	1½
Saturday	Men	7	2	..	2	7	..	7	2
	Women	5	2	..	2	5	..	5	1½

Sample Workhouse Diet Abingdon workhouse.

Although healthy in some respects, for example sugar was rare in the workhouse diet until the 1870s, it was often created from the cheapest ingredients. Milk was often diluted with water. Fruit was a rarely included. Meals were usually eaten in a large communal dining-hall which often doubled-up as a chapel. In larger workhouses, inmates commonly sat in rows all facing the same way, with separate men's and women's dining halls. Dining halls were equipped with scales so that inmates could get their food weighed if they thought it was below the regulation weight. However, practice did not always match theory and stories abounded about the quality and quantity of food in the workhouse diet. The "gruel cauldron" was blamed for outbreaks of diarrhoea amongst inmates. The horror of conditions in some workhouses came to public attention in 1845 when inmates at Andover workhouse were discovered to have been fighting over scraps of decaying meat on the bones they were meant to be crushing.

Work

Inmates were given a variety of work to perform, much of which was involved in running the workhouse. The women mostly did domestic jobs such as cleaning, or helping in the kitchen or laundry. Some workhouses had workshops for sewing, spinning and weaving or other local trades. Others had their own vegetable gardens where the inmates worked to provide food for the workhouse. In 1888, a report on the Macclesfield workhouse found that amongst the able-bodied females there were 21 washers, 22 sewers and knitters, 12 scrubbers, 12 assisting women, 4 in the kitchen, 4 in the nursery, and 4 stocking darners. On the men's side were 2 joiners, 1 slater, 1 upholsterer, 1 blacksmith, 3 assisting the porter the tramps, 6 men attending the boilers, 3 attending the stone-shed men, 4 whitewashers, 4 attending the pigs, 2 looking after sanitary matters, 1 regulating the coal supply, 18 potato peelers, 1 messenger, 26 ward men, 2 doorkeepers. There were also 12 boys at work in the tailor's shop. In rural areas, inmates were sometimes used for agricultural labour. Other more menial work included:

Stone-breaking — the results being saleable for road-making
Corn-grinding — heavy mill-stones were rotated by four or more men turning a capstan (the resulting flour was usually of very poor quality)
Bone-crushing — this was abolished after the Andover scandal)
Gypsum-crushing — for use in plaster-making
Oakum-picking
Wood-chopping

No work, except necessary household work and cooking, was performed by inmates on Sunday, Good Friday, and Christmas Day.

Leaving the Workhouse

Any pauper could, on giving three hours notice, leave the workhouse. In the case of a man with a family, the whole family would have to leave if he left. Short-term absence could also be granted to an able-bodied pauper seeking work. It was not unknown for a pauper to discharge himself in the morning and then return demanding re-admission the same evening, possibly the worse for wear from drink. Various attempts were made to deal with these "ins and outs", for example by lengthening the amount of notice required. There was actually little to prevent a pauper from walking out of the workhouse, although delaying the return of his own clothes could be used to achieve this - if he left wearing workhouse clothes, he could be charged with theft of workhouse property and brought before the magistrates. Many inmates were, however, to become long-term residents of the workhouse. A Parliamentary report of 1861 found that, nation-wide, over 20 percent of inmates had been in the workhouse for more than five years. These were mostly consisted of elderly, chronically sick, and mentally ill paupers.

Medical Care

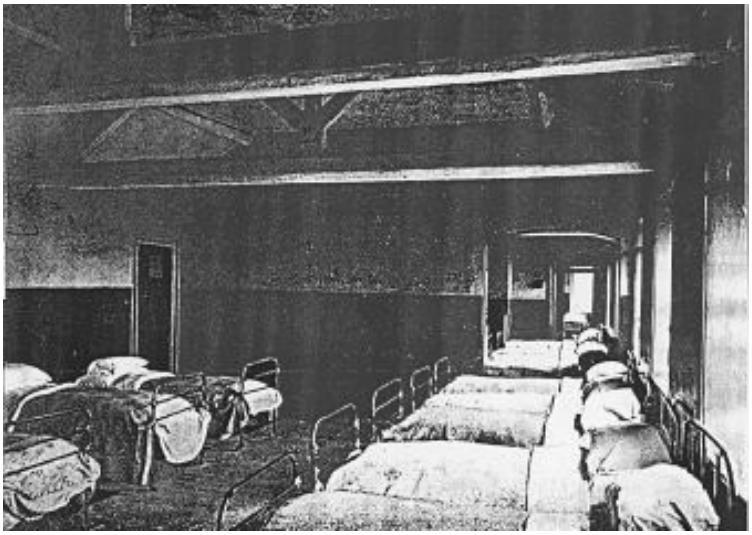
Virtually all workhouses had at least a small infirmary block for the care of sick inmates. However, with the exception of the medical officer, early nursing care in the workhouse was invariably in the hands of female inmates who would often not be able to read - a serious problem when dealing with labels on medicine bottles. Before 1863, not a single trained nurse existed in any workhouse infirmary outside London. In the 1860s, pressure began for improvements in workhouse medical care. Some of the most notable campaigners were Louisa Twining, a prominent figure in the Workhouse Visiting Society, Florence Nightingale, and the medical journal The Lancet. In 1865, The Lancet began a serious of detailed reports about conditions in London's workhouse infirmaries. Its description of St George the Martyr in Southwark was typical of what it uncovered:

Each ward had an open fireplace; a lavatory and water-closet in a recess or lobby; in some instances the latter served for two or three wards. In several cases the grossest possible carelessness and neglect were discovered in some of these wards. Take the following in illustration:-Thirty men had used one closet, in which there had been no water for more than a week, and which was in close proximity to their ward; and in an adjoining ward so strong was the ammoniacal smell that we had no doubt respecting the position of the cabinet, which we found dry. In No. 4 ward (female), with 17 beds, the drain-smell from a lavatory in a recess of the room was so offensive that we suspected a sewer-communication, and soon discovered that there was no trap; indeed it had been lost for some considerable time. Apart from this source of contamination of the

Before the Board (from Jessie Phillips by Frances Trollope (1844)

Inquisitive Guardian. "By the way, have you any Children?"
Applicant for Relief. "No."
Guardian. "But—er—surely I know a Son of yours?"
Applicant. "Well, I don't suppose you 'd call *a Child* Children!"

Guardians' Interrogation (from Punch, 1899)



Dormitory at Hunslet old workhouse c.1903

Hunslet Refectory

ward, there were several cases with offensive discharges: one particularly, a case of cancer, which, no disinfectant being used, rendered the room almost unbearable to the other inmates.

As a result of such reports, the government was forced into action and in 1867 the Metropolitan Poor Act was passed, requiring London workhouses to locate their hospital facilities on separate sites from the workhouse. The Act also led to the creation of the Metropolitan Asylums Board which took over the provision of care for the sick poor across the whole of the capital. It set up its own institutions for the treatment of smallpox, fever, tuberculosis, and venereal diseases, effectively laying the foundations for the National Health Service. Florence Nightingale's campaigning also led to improvements in the standard of nursing care, particularly with the founding in 1860 of the Nightingale Fund School at St Thomas's Hospital.

Outside of London, Liverpool pioneered the use of trained nurses through an experiment in 1865 funded by local philanthropist William Rathbone. He financed the placement in the workhouse infirmary of twelve nurses trained at the Nightingale School. These were assisted by eighteen probationers and fifty-four able-bodied female inmates who received a small salary. Although the experiment had mixed results - the pauper assistants needed constant supervision and obtained intoxicants at the slightest opportunity - it was generally perceived overall to have been a success, in large part due to the efforts of the infirmary superintendent, Agnes Jones. Eventually a skilled nursing system spread to all Union infirmaries in the country.

One particular burden that workhouse infirmaries had to bear was that of patients with venereal diseases. Such cases were often refused admission to charitable and subscription hospitals, or would be offered only one course of treatment. Many workhouse infirmaries had special sections - the foul wards - set aside for this type of patient.

Death in the Workhouse

If an inmate died in the workhouse, the death was notified to their family who could, if they wished, organize a funeral themselves. If this did not happen, which was often the case because of the expense, the Guardians arranged a burial in a local cemetery or burial ground - this was originally required to be in the parish where the workhouse stood, but later rules allowed it to be the deceased's own parish if they or their relatives had expressed such a wish. A few workhouses had their own burial ground on or adjacent to the workhouse site. The burial would be in the cheapest possible coffin and in an unmarked grave, into which several coffins might be placed on the same occasion. Under the terms of the 1832 Anatomy Act, bodies unclaimed for forty-eight hours could also be disposed of by donating them for use in medical research and training - this was not specific to workhouses, but applied to any institution whose inmates died while in its care. Deaths were, however, always registered in the normal way. In some places, the workhouse had a special coffin for transporting bodies to the cemetery.

Changing Times?

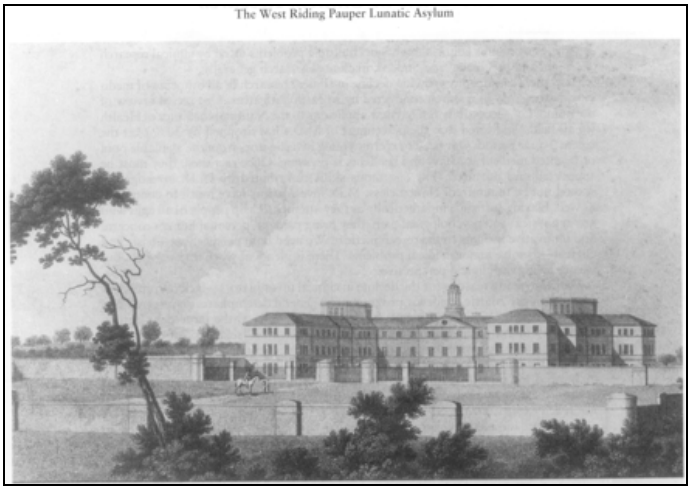
Life in the workhouse was not entirely bad, however, and slowly got more tolerable as time went on. Some of the changes were brought about by the efforts of organisations such as the Workhouse Visiting Society and the election of female and working-class members to the Boards of Guardians which ran each union. Relaxations very gradually began to creep in from the 1870s including the allowance of books, newspapers and snuff for the elderly, toys for the children, and tea-brewing facilities for deserving inmates. Living conditions were often healthier than existed in much poor housing of the time. Although monotonous, the food was regular and reasonably wholesome. The staff in many institutions were kindly, and the brutal treatment that was sensationalized in the press was probably much the exception. It was not until 1930 that workhouses were officially abolished.

With the lack of any other reference found to date I am assuming that this Mary Amelia Kay, is the daughter of Edward and Mary Kay. I have checked the 1881 census return for the Leeds Workhouse, and she does not feature there.[vi] One reason for a person entering a workhouse was that many of them had infirmaries attached which could be the only means some people had of getting medical assistance.

Even if she died in the workhouse, and was buried in a paupers' grave, her death should have been registered, and no record has yet been found of this. However there is a 'sighting' of a marriage of a Mary Amelia Kay for the 1871 Oct-Dec quarter at Oldham, Lancashire.[vii] The 1871 census was conducted in April of that year, so perhaps Mary found rescue in a marriage – and, however dubious, this reference has been checked out and, as expected, proved to be incorrect.

However, a further possible reference was found for the death of a Mary Amelia Kay in 1873 at Wakefield.[viii] And following up on this has solved the mystery, even if the documentary evidence makes grim reading. The death certificate records that Mary Amelia Kay, aged 34, and a Sewer from Leeds, died at the Stanley Lunatic Asylum on 9th May 1873. The cause of death was Epilepsy of 24 years duration. Herbert C. Major, in attendance at the Lunatic Asylum when she died certified the death, which was not actually registered until 20th May.[ix]

So some time between the 1871 census and 1873 Mary Amelia had been relocated from the Workhouse to the Stanley Lunatic Asylum. For the first 30 or so years of her life, Mary Amelia must have been cared for by her mother Mary. But it is apparent now, that after Mary's death in 1867, no other members of the family wished to, or were capable of caring for an epileptic.



The West Riding Asylum opened on 23rd November 1818 and looked after the "insane-poor". The building was H shaped and cost a total of £36,448.4.9.1/4d to construct. It was the sixth asylum to open in the whole of the country and Dr Ellis was the first Superintendent with his wife acting as matron. Initially built for 150 patients, by 1900 there were 1469 patients from all over West Yorkshire. The asylum was a separate world where patients were kept apart from the rest of society - there were high railings around the grounds, locked wards and even look out points built into the staircases so that staff could survey the corridors and day rooms.

However seen within the context of the era the asylum was a more civilised way of treating people with a mental illness than in previous times. In the 14th and 15th centuries they were seen as witches and persecuted. There were many myths surrounding them and they were often laughed at or physically abused. Poor people would have had no means to feed or support themselves and some would have been dependent on relatives who would exploit or mistreat them.

The 1868 report of the Medical Superintendent describes how the asylum is well ordered and gives proper attention and kindness to "lunatics". It describes how false ideas and negative attitudes about insanity have led to cruel treatment in the past. Corporal punishment and straight jackets are never used and books, games and concerts were found to be an essential part of treatment. Inmates would have been well fed with a diet of bread, milk, meat, yeast dumplings, potatoes and beer. They would also have had the chance to learn a trade or even take reading and writing classes. A report of an inspection by the Commissioners in Lunacy in 1868 found the patients clean and well dressed and in a "quite and orderly state". Women were knitting, sewing, working in the bake house and laundry. Men could learn how to be tailors, weavers, bookbinders and shoe makers.

The following case study relates to a young girl who, like Mary Amelia Kay, suffered from epilepsy :

> The notes written about patients can seem strange or cruel today. In Book 60 a five- year old girl called Edith Annie Craven was admitted due to epilepsy and separated from her parents … Edith was epileptic and would have had seizures. Her case notes describe her as dejected and restless, climbing on tables and chairs and 'throwing herself on the floor in a passion when displeased.' A doctor diagnoses her with 'idiocy' and states that her case is 'hopeless'.[x]

Despite the more humane treatment of those designated as ‘lunatics’, the last years of Mary Amelia’s life must have been very cheerless.

[i] IGI Record CO97897 1836-1938.
[ii] HO107/2321/p3; RG9/3357/p15.
[iii] Copy of Will in family records.
[iv] RG10/4558/p26.
[v] www.workhouses.org.uk.
[vi] List of 1881 inmates on file.
[vii] FreeBMD Marriage Index.
[viii] Free BMD Death Index.
[ix] Certified copy of Death Certificate DYB492470.
[x] The notes on the Lunatic Asylum and the case study are taken from the website From History to her Story – Yorkshire Women’s’ Lives On-Line, 1100 to the Present, www.herstoryuntold.org.uk.