



THE WORKHOUSE AND INFIRMARY, SOUTHWELL



by Lucy Williams

Sitting on the edge of Southwell, Nottinghamshire, just 40 minutes from Grantham by car, sits one of the best-preserved examples in Britain of the Victorian workhouse system. The Workhouse and Infirmary stand together as one of the most significant surviving workhouses in the country. This is namely due to its preserved state and maintenance by the National Trust, and its overall reflection of how poverty and welfare were managed in Victorian era England and influenced upon up until the 21st century.

The Victorian Workhouse system, as its infamously known, was brought into practice by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, 10 years after the Workhouse in Southwell was initially built. The law overhauled the system of providing support to the poor, meaning that conditions within the workhouses were deliberately made with poor living conditions to ensure that only the most vulnerable were truly in need of help. Families brought into such workhouses were immediately split up, and lived in monotonous and dangerous

labour-filled days.

The workhouse itself in Southwell combined the resources of 62 local parishes to provide relief for the poor, accommodating approximately 160 inmates. Later in 1871, a separate Infirmary was built to provide improved medical care and sanitation. It functioned as an evolving place of refuge for around 166 years following the changing views of social welfare during the 20th century.

The National Trust finally acquired the site in 1997 to prevent redevelopment and preserve the workhouse,

opening to visitors in 2002 alongside its extensive restoration.

The museum, open from Wednesday to Sunday for visitors, provides guided tours and real-life stories from former inmates, explaining how welfare developed from the Poor Law system to the modern welfare state from the 19th to the 20th century. It stands as the best-preserved workhouse in the country, providing a guided look and ever-needed reminder into the extensive history of poverty and welfare in Britain.