

In the Workhouse

Words and Music: Nigel Harbron

The musical score is written on two staves in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The first staff contains the melody for the first line of lyrics, with chords Bm, A, and Bm. The second staff contains the melody for the second line of lyrics, with chords Bm, Em, A, F#m, and Bm. The piece ends with a double bar line.

When you're down on your luck with nowt to your name, You're
hea-ding for where life won't ev - er be the same, *In the work - house.*

When you're down on your luck with nowt to your name,
You're heading for where life won't ever be the same -
In the workhouse.

You'll lose your clothes and all they can find;
If you're not very careful you'll soon lose your mind -
In the workhouse.

If you go with your wife, they'll send her away;
If you go with your child, they're sure to make you pay -
In the workhouse.

They'll give you a bath and crop your hair,
Then one set of clothing is all you will wear -
In the workhouse.

They give you food so you can't say they're cruel,
But all you get is bread, cheese and gruel -
In the workhouse.

You rise at five to the sound of a bell,
Don't try to lie in or they'll really give you hell -
In the workhouse.

If you turn up your nose at pounding stones,
They'll very soon put you to breaking bones -
In the workhouse.

Now oakum-picking's the job we abhor,
For it leaves your fingers bleeding and raw -
In the workhouse.

If you chance to fall ill it's upstairs you'll go,
Where the bed's just as hard, but the coals never glow -
In the workhouse.

You have to say prayers at least twice every day,
But whether God's listening, I daren't for to say -
In the workhouse.

The workhouse is only one step from hell,
Where you sell your life for life in a cell -
In the workhouse.



Carlisle Workhouse/The City General Hospital/The University of Cumbria

In the 19th century, every city and large town had a workhouse, and many workhouses were still going strong as late as the first quarter of the 20th century. 'Oakum-picking' is nothing to do with banjos, but refers to the business of un-knotting tarred ropes - not a job for the faint-hearted - although I'm sure they took heart from the fact that they were re-cycling them!

My daughter was born in the workhouse, or, as it was then known, the City General Hospital, Carlisle. It is now part of the University of Cumbria.