Cross Houses Community Allotments,

Until recently, the village of Cross Houses, some six miles south of Shrewsbury, had one notable institution - Cross Houses Hospital, a former workhouse cum hospital whose origins date back to the Atcham House of Industry established there in 1792-94. In the hospital's last working years, administrators of the regional health authority occupied a small portion of the better preserved buildings until finally the property was sold for development in 2003, the fate of many older NHS establishments, particularly those that had been Poor Law institutions.

Because of the historic significance of the buildings at Cross Houses, the planning brief for the development of the site required preservation of the original workhouse, now converted into flats; the original infirmary (a laundry/kitchen block by the 19th century) which has been converted into offices; and the workhouse chapel dating to the 1870s, which is now the community centre for a village that formerly did not have one.

One final component of the workhouse landscape was preserved for the people of Cross Houses, as the result of local demand. This is the kitchen garden, also dating to the 1870s - a period of expansion of the workhouse site and buildings. In the later 18th and through the 19th century most workhouses were built on peripheral or rural sites like that at Cross Houses, and these would all have been provided with a vegetable garden to allow the workhouse to be as self-sufficient as possible. Working in the garden was thought to be an improving activity, particularly for children who could not do the heavy work that the adult inmates were given to do, and one which would teach them a valuable skill which might prevent them from being a burden on the parish in adulthood.

Up until the 1870s, the garden of the Atcham Union Workhouse, as it became in 1836, had been located at the front of the main building in beds either side of the main entrance, a common location for workhouse gardens of the end of the 18th century. The tithe map of 1844 shows that on the west side of the main block there was also a ‘pleasure ground', or playing field for the use of the pauper children.

In the 1870s, when a chapel was built opposing the main door of the workhouse, the gardens along the main workhouse frontage became more formal. Lord Hill allowed the workhouse guardians to expand into land formerly part of his Attingham estate to create a new vegetable garden in a field to the rear of the yard behind the main workhouse block. This plot lies alongside the Cross Houses to Atcham road, and a brick wall was then constructed between the road and the garden to prevent workhouse inmates labouring in the kitchen garden from fraternising with local people using the road, and probably also to discourage absconding.

The 1882 Ordnance Survey map shows the 1870s kitchen garden (plot 246 - originally just over half a hectare and now just under) as laid out in square and rectangular beds. The paths were made initially of rammed crushed brick, derived from the large-scale building work of the early 1870s, and were subsequently repaired with clinker and cinders, a by-product of the boiler house and on-site blacksmith, and this sequence is occasionally seen in digging on the allotments. By comparing records of what was purchased for the kitchen to records of the meals provided, it looks as though the main crop was potatoes, though some other root crops were grown in much smaller quantities. Many of the products of the wider landscape of the workhouse (some three hectares) were sold to generate income to offset the cost to the parish of supporting the paupers: livestock, bran, tallow, hay, and butter.

There is no evidence to suggest that the limited range of produce grown at the workhouse in the later 19th century changed until around the 1930s. The workhouse aspect of the establishment was wound down in the early years of the 20th century and ceased to operate in 1919. The buildings were a war hospital during World War 1, and the hospital was then closed for a period of years before reopening as Berrington Hospital in 1927 and renamed Cross Houses Hospital in 1948.

During the mid-20th century the health authority employed gardeners to work the kitchen garden, and the produce from it was supplied to all the hospitals in the Shrewsbury area. A large number of cooking apple trees on the allotments date to this period and indicate the frequent appearance of traditional puddings such as apple crumbles on the hospital menus. There was also a separate orchard along the eastern boundary of the workhouse grounds which had a wider range of apple types. Sadly this was lost in the recent redevelopment of the site. A glasshouse is also known to have been on the kitchen garden plot in the mid-20th century.

In the late-1980s the health authority no longer wished to employ gardeners at Cross Houses and decided to divide the garden into allotments for the use of members of the employee's social club. It had, however, become clear to the health authority that the historic buildings were not suitable for continued use as a modern hospital. Knowing that they would sell the site, no maintenance went into the allotments after their initial creation. The number of plot-holders dwindled and much of the garden became overgrown. Fortunately, when the health authority's plans to sell the site became public, there was a still a small core of plot-holders cultivating their allotments - enough, in conjunction with a clear desire for plots from other local people, to argue successfully for the retention of the allotments for the community, which had little in the way of facilities.

**Site timeline**

1792 to 1794: The Atcham House of Industry was established on the site.

1836: The site became the Atcham Union Workhouse.

1870 to 1879: A new kitchen garden was laid out to the rear of the workhouse, replacing beds at the front which then became more formal.

1914 to 1918: The buildings were a war hospital.

1919: The workhouse ceased to operate.

1927: The site re-opened as Berrington Hospital.

1948: The site was re-named Cross Houses Hospital.

1985 to 1989: In the late-1980s the garden was divided into allotments for the use of hospital employees.

After 1995: The allotments became available for the use of the local community in the late-1990s.

2003: The buildings were sold for development.

**Features**

**path**

The paths have been reinstated in crushed brick.

**garden bench**

Public benches have been added.

**Record created:** 13/10/2009