

IX: THE ESTABLISHMENT AND EARLY ADMINISTRATION OF THE
NEW POOR LAW IN THE BRIDGE UNION

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THE NEW POOR LAW

Any study of the New Poor Law must first encompass a description of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which laid down the principles governing the treatment of the poor for the rest of the nineteenth century. Prior to 1834 there was no national system of poor relief. Instead different parts of the country administered different kinds of workhouse or provided various payments of cash or kind, which supplemented the low incomes of the poor. The most famous type of outdoor relief was the 'Speenhamland System'. As pauperism and outdoor relief increased so too did poor rates. It was alleged that the Speenhamland payments encouraged laziness and were a positive disincentive to work. For these reasons it was thought advisable to devise a new and national system of poor relief.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 abolished outdoor relief to the able-bodied, who on applying for relief were to be offered maintenance in a workhouse where their lives would be regulated and made less comfortable than had they chosen to stay outside and fend for themselves (1). This principle of 'less eligibility' had the attraction of being a self-acting test of destitution. Only those persons who were genuinely in dire need would accept the workhouse rather than starvation, particularly since on entering the workhouse they lost all the rights and privileges they were entitled to in the outside world. Those who were not in such straits would prefer to remain independent and thus avoid contracting the morally wasting disease of pauperism (2).

The New Poor Law was seen as a positive solution to an increasing problem of pauperism, which would work wonders for the moral character of the working man, and reduce poor rates, since it would be cheaper to administer than the old systems of outdoor relief. For these reasons the Government accepted the principles of the New Poor Law even though they involved a greater degree of bureaucratic centralisation than would have been acceptable to them under normal circumstances. Under the 1834 act overall responsibility for the poor law passed into the hands of three Poor Law Commissioners at Somerset House, whose rulings were transmitted to Boards of Guardians in different areas by Assistant Poor Law Commissioners. The country was divided up into Poor Law Unions, for each of which a Board of Guardians was appointed with complete control of local administration. Each Poor Law Union was composed of several parishes. Boards varied in terms of administrative detail and in how they interpreted the legislation of 1834. Some stuck to the letter of the Poor Law Amendment Act, while others proved to be more flexible. Boards of Guardians were elected annually and each Guardian represented a constituent Parish within his Poor Law Union.

The implementation of the New Poor Law was not as uniform as its promoters had hoped for. For a few years several Boards of Guardians in Northern Counties merely administered the Registration Act of 1836 (3), and even when they were persuaded to assume responsibility for the poor law in place of the parish authorities they were allowed to continue the payment of outdoor relief to the able-bodied. Having permitted such a concession, the central authority experienced difficulty in withdrawing it. Moreover the workhouse test was never enforced in the industrialised Unions of

Lancashire and the West Riding and Boards of Guardians even ignored the stipulation that able-bodied male applicants for relief be subjected to some form of task work. They demanded instead that their Guardians be given full discretion to relieve their poor as they thought fit, so that outdoor relief to the able-bodied continued, and even took the form of allowances in aid of inadequate earnings (4). Initially the central body lacked the power to enforce anyone to do anything, and yet much was achieved prior to the first great administrative change of 1847, whereby a new Poor Law Board replaced the three Poor Law Commissioners as a governing and ministerial rather than a reforming authority (5).

For thirteen years between 1834 and 1847 the three Poor Law Commissioners, with Edwin Chadwick as their secretary, administered the early years of the New Poor Law, but under constant pressure from Parliament and from hostile agitation in the industrial areas they failed to achieve national uniformity in poor law administration or the abolition of outdoor relief. During the 1840's they both formally permitted a considerable degree of outdoor relief, even to the able-bodied, and relaxed their supervision of local administration. Chadwick, after a number of quarrels, increasingly turned his attention to the sanitary problems raised by his report of 1842, and from 1847 was no longer involved in poor law administration. 1847 also produced a major scandal surrounding the Andover Workhouse, where paupers who had been so badly fed on being set to work on grinding bones for fertiliser fought for any scraps of food which still clung to the half-rotten bones (6). This case exposed a slackening of control from the centre and promoted a parliamentary storm out of which the Poor Law Board emerged as a minor government department. Under a new Act, which was passed at the same time, an inspectorate was established and some improvements in workhouse conditions were promised (7).

Inadequate levels of outdoor and indoor relief have been blamed on the meanness of Boards of Guardians who, it is alleged, cared more for the rates than the poor under their control. Given a failure to reform the rating system in 1834, some of this parsimony is understandable. Prior to 1865 each parish remained responsible for the cost of relieving its own paupers, and until 1861 the contribution of each parish to the common expenses of the Union was assessed on the basis of its relief expenditure and not its rateable value; in other words, on its poverty rather than its property. Parishes with large working class populations experienced great difficulties in collecting poor rates in periods of trade depression, and so were unable to meet the financial demands imposed upon them by their Boards of Guardians, who, in turn found their financial resources dwindling at times when calls upon them were at their greatest. Under the Union Chargeability Act of 1865 the entire cost of poor relief was placed on the Union, rather than on the parish, thereby redressing an unequal burden between rich and poor parishes within the same Union (8).

The Bridge Poor Law Union in comparison with more extreme examples was a model union. While it did not adhere strictly to the principles of the Poor Law Amendment Act, it was certainly more co-operative than many unions in the North of England.

THE MINUTE BOOKS OF THE BRIDGE GUARDIANS

The main historical source for this chapter exists in the minute books of the Board of Guardians of the Bridge Poor Law Union, of which there are twenty-one spanning the years from 1835 to 1930. They can be consulted in the County Archives Office in Maidstone. Entered in these books were the

weekly meetings, decisions and reports of the Bridge Board of Guardians. The books themselves are very large measuring approximately eighteen inches in length and ten inches in width. One single volume can contain entries for three years. They are all beautifully written in fine copperplate hand-writing.

The procedure at each meeting followed the normal pattern of any committee meeting, commencing with a list of those Guardians who were present. Normally the Guardians turned their attention firstly to the weekly financial accounts, as submitted by the two Receiving Officers of the Bridge Union, which usually showed how much had been paid in Out Relief over the previous week. Items discussed thereafter varied from one meeting to another, but might include the acceptance or rejection of tenders from local tradesmen, who competed with each other in supplying provisions and other necessities to the Workhouse; petitions for out-relief from paupers who resided in the Union; and matters of daily routine in the running of the Workhouse, such as new appointments, salaries, the diets of inmates and new pauper admissions. Queries on any point of administration were sent to the Poor Law Commissioners.

The minute books provide a clear and lengthy account of the day to day running of the Bridge Poor Law Union. They also yield much valuable and useful information in such areas as the quarterly cost of poor relief, or the cost of poor relief for individual parishes. Unfortunately, however, there are gaps in this sort of information, which therefore cannot be followed through on a year by year basis. With respect to Bridge itself the Minute books portray the parish and village as one part of the Poor Law Union. Intermittently figures appear which show Bridge's share of the poor rate, or the numbers of paupers from this particular parish who were receiving outdoor relief or staying in the Workhouse.

Despite gaps in information, lack of consistency and problems of interpreting other people's handwriting, those minute books which have been consulted have proved to be an interesting and informative source.

THE BRIDGE POOR LAW UNION AND THE FIRST MEETING OF THE GUARDIANS

The first meeting of the Bridge Union Board of Guardians was held on 22 April 1835, "by order and by declaration of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales dated 27 March, 1835" (9). It was held at the White Horse Inn in Bridge. The Guardians were joined by Sir Francis Head, as Assistant Poor Law Commissioner for the East Kent Area, and by the following Ex Officio-Guardians: the Rev. C. Hughes-Hallett, George Gipps Esq., and Robert Ballard-Johnstone Esq. There were nineteen Parish Guardians: (10)

<u>Name</u>	<u>Parish</u>
Richard Brice	Bridge
John Bushell	Ickham
Henry Collard	Patricxbourne
John Sankey	Lower Hardres
John Marsh Hood	Kingston
Stephen Fuller	Harbledown
Stephen Gambill	Waltham
John Howard	Upper Hardres
John Harvey	Bishopsbourne
Nathaniel Maynard	Fordwich

<u>Name</u>	<u>Parish</u>
Thomas Byng	Wickham
Thomas Sladden	Adisham
Edward Collard	Stodmarsh
Richard Peckham	Bekesbourne
Denne Denne	Littlebourne
Henry Mount	Nackington
Robert Lathe	Thanington
Benjamin Harrison	Womenswold
Robert Owann	Westgate.

There were two guardians who were absent and they represented Barham and Petham. Thus the Bridge Poor Law Union was established on the basis of twenty-one parishes. The first meeting was largely concerned with settling the administration of the Union. Richard Peckham of Bekesbourne was elected Chairman and Nathaniel Maynard of Fordwich was elected Deputy Chairman. It was resolved that meetings should be held every Thursday morning at eleven o'clock at the White Horse Inn in Bridge. Herbert Collard was elected Clerk of the Union at a salary, to be recommended to the Poor Law Commissioners, of £40 per annum.

The Union was divided into two districts, each of which had one Receiving Officer. Captain Samuel Beachcroft, who was a half pay Officer of the 14th Regiment, was recommended as the Receiving Officer for the first district at a salary of £50 per annum which had also to be recommended to the Poor Law Commissioners. Henry Illsby was appointed Receiving Officer for the 2nd District. The twenty one parishes were apportioned to the two districts as follows:

<u>1st District</u>	<u>2nd District</u>
Bridge	Nackington
Womenswold	Upper Hardres
Barham	Lower Hardres
Kingston	Petham
Patricxbourne	Waltham
Bishopsbourne	Thanington
Adisham	Harbledown
Bekesbourne	Westgate
Littlebourne	Fordwich
Ickham	
Wickham	
Stodmarsh	

Four districts were created for purposes of medical assistance:

<u>1st District</u>	<u>2nd District</u>	<u>3rd District</u>	<u>4th District</u>
Bridge	Adisham	Nackington	Harbledown
Womenswold	Bekesbourne	Upper Hardres	Fordwich
Barham	Littlebourne	Petham	Thanington
Kingston	Ickham	Lower Hardres	Westgate
Bishopsbourne	Wickham	Waltham	
Patricxbourne	Stodmarsh		

The subject of a Workhouse was also discussed at the first meeting. It was agreed, subject to the approval of the Poor Law Commissioners, to provide accommodation for no more than 500 able-bodied paupers. A committee was established to find a suitable site for the Workhouse,

THE COUNTY OF KENT
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