

# RESOURCES FOR TEACHING

## BIRMINGHAM AND THE BLACK COUNTRY



### The Poor Law in Birmingham, 1834-55.

There is a good short history of the administration of poor relief in Birmingham, from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, in Victoria County History Warwickshire, Vol. VII, by C.R. Elrington.

Expenditure on poor relief in Birmingham amounted to £329 in 1676, £1,168 in 1750, and £22,000 in 1810. In the early eighteenth century, overseers' expenses accounted for two thirds of the total expenditure. In 1733 the first workhouse was built, in Lichfield St., on the site of the Victoria Law Courts, and a salaried workhouse master appointed. Poor relief remained under vestry control until the local 1783 Act allowed ratepayers to elect 108 guardians of the poor. (Possibly this local venture arose as a result of the more general, but little-applied, Gilbert's Act of 1782). It is worth noting that Birmingham, like other big towns, thus anticipated the provisions of the 1834 Poor Law concerning guardians by many years. Both overseers and guardians seemed to find difficulty, particularly in the early nineteenth century, in raising enough money, by the poor rates, to cover expenditure. Therefore two more local acts were obtained, in 1819 and 1831, to rate small houses, previously deemed too modest, (assessed below £10 p.a.), to bear rates.

In 1766 an infirmary had been added to the workhouse, and a workshop wing in 1789. Although the workhouse had been built in 1733, to contain 600 inmates. The actual number fluctuated according to local conditions; in Summer 1801, there were over 1,000, but less than half that number by 1802. The workhouse was replaced in 1852, when the new Workhouse, in Dudley Road was opened; the present-day hospital there occupies the same site and many of its buildings!

In 1797 an 'asylum' for 300 children had been opened; as in other areas, they worked at jobs such as heading pins, and working lace. Efforts to employ the adult paupers were intermittent; in 1832 corn was being ground and shoes repaired in the workhouse. The Birmingham guardians also faced a very large administrative task in organising outdoor relief; the number in receipt of this averaged 2,000 per week between 1830 and 1850, and in bad times (e.g. 1836-7) rose above 3,000. Each case represented about two and a half people on average.

Yet the mass of written records in Birmingham Local Studies Library (and Archives), the scores of rate books and volumes of committee minutes testify to the efforts of the Birmingham Guardians to grapple with these human problems. By 1841 the work of the board of guardians was done mainly by five committees: the relief, workhouse, asylum, estate and law, and auditing committees. Having secured its own act in 1783, Birmingham formed one single union, composed, in the nineteenth century of the large parishes of St. Martin's and St. Philip's, and the smaller parishes of St. George's, St. Thomas' and All Saints'. Whatever effect the 1834 Act had on neighbouring unions, it had little direct effect on the Birmingham union, which already had a workhouse and guardians; (however, it undoubtedly indirectly stirred the guardians to greater efforts, which can be especially noticed in the Chadwickian lay-out of the 1852 workhouse). In 1910 the Birmingham Union amalgamated with Aston, King's Norton, Northfield and part of Solihull.

Elrington concludes that, 'the Poor Laws seem to have been administered in Birmingham with comparative benevolence'. It is interesting therefore, to see what the 1834 commission on the poor law thought. The sub-commissioner who reported on Birmingham was C.P. Villiers. His report, extracts of which

follow, indicates that he found that Birmingham had a high reputation for such things as its dispensary relief, and its treatment of pauper children. However, Villiers himself in 1832-3 reached the view that many parts of the Birmingham system were open to abuse. He found that, as in many other parts of the country, the able-bodied were not distinguished from other paupers, that the expectation of parish assistance encouraged the payment and receipt of unnaturally low wages, that there was insufficient thrift among the working-classes ('men of very remarkable intelligence and information'), and that (a familiar cry!), the food in the workhouse was too good! Birmingham, 'can hardly be said', he concluded, 'to afford any very striking contrast to the system of management in other places.'

Villiers was the sub-commissioner responsible for several Midland Counties - and Devonshire. He soon became a prominent local and national figure; he was M.P. for Wolverhampton and South Wolverhampton 1835-98, President of the Poor Law Board, 1859-66, and a leading parliamentary campaigner against the Corn Laws.

His report on Birmingham may be found in the Report from His Majesties Commissioners for Inquiring Into The Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws; Appendix (A), Reports of Assistant Commissioners, Part II, (1834), pp. 5a, 7a, 8a, 31-3a.

From the Report of a self-supporting dispensary, established at Birmingham, the following results are stated: "By the report of the surgeons, it appears that 1,406 cases have been attended; of this number 34 are midwifery, and 1,372 sick; and that more than six-sevenths are independent patients, who have paid their own expenses. On the year preceding, the total number was 833, of which 642 (nearly four-fifths) were independent. The committee state, that the income of the year has been fully equal to the current expenditure. In the parish of Aston, adjoining Birmingham, the number of patients admitted from June 1830 to March 1831, had been 707, of which 553 are free members, supporting their own expenses, and 128 charity patients; of these there have been cured 469; relieved, 39; died, 24; under treatment, 149. The committee state themselves perfectly satisfied with the institutions. At Atherstone, 874, of which 765 are free members; 589 of whom have been discharged cured; 15 dead. The committee in their Report state, that in tracing the progress of the institution, from the commencement to the present time, they have only to express unmixed satisfaction.

Upon inquiry in many parishes, whether any provision was made for the education of pauper children, it was usually said that there was a school in the house. This I observed to consist of a small outhouse attached to the workhouse, where a certain number of children of both sexes, from the ages of three to twelve, might be seen sitting on a bench, attended by an old male or female pauper, who having the reputation of being able to read, is expected to instruct the children. It was not often pretended that they learnt much, or often denied that they chiefly associated with the other inmates. In other cases these children are sent to the National School, where also reading is taught.

Birmingham alone affords an instance of superior and intelligent management with regard to the infant poor; in large districts this provision of the law can be executed, with good results both as regards society and the children. An Asylum is established for this purpose, which is able to hold upwards of 400 children; these are chiefly such as are without parents at all, or whose parents profess their inability to support them. The children are instructed in sundry trades, to which they may be afterwards bound; and a certain number of hours is set apart in each day for attending a school in the house, where they are taught to read and write. At the proper age they are apprenticed to masters in different trades, to whose character the greatest attention is paid; and the governor is required to visit and examine the masters and apprentices periodically, as a means

of ascertaining the conduct of each. The children are thus maintained, while in the Asylum, at the rate of 2s.6d. a head, including all expenses. The result has been proved by experience to be extremely favourable to them in after life. Mr. Knight, was of opinion that the practice of maintaining the children separately from their parents, who seek relief on account of their families, was attended with advantage. He knew of many cases where applicants had discovered means of supporting their children when this mode of relief had been proposed to them, and he had in consequence attempted to procure the insertion of a clause in the late Act, providing that the infants of persons applying for relief should be placed at infant schools during the day, thus affording an opportunity to the mother to procure some daily employment, which in a large town is often to be obtained. This clause, however, was rejected, the words "Infant School" being considered too indefinite by the Lords. Mr. Knight observes, however, that the charge of an infant family is a common plea, and one usually allowed for claiming relief without work, and that placing the children in these schools might have the double advantage of affording a test of the real indigence of the applicants, and as a means of giving some education to children who otherwise are living under every disadvantage. He had calculated that infant schools, providing one meal in the day, might be supported at an extremely low rate, and in the event of inadequate funds provided by the poor themselves, was precisely the kind of institution to attract voluntary subscription; and it is his opinion that there are many well-intentioned persons among the poor who would willingly save their independence, by contributing themselves to such a means of disposing of their infant families during the day; while, he said, it would be the means of defeating the object of the idle and worthless, in keeping their children at home to strengthen their own claim to relief.

Much importance is attached by many persons in this town to the education of children, which by tending to raise the moral feeling of the working classes, affords the best check to pauperism in future, and this would perhaps be best accomplished by a separate maintenance of the children.

In manufacturing towns like Birmingham, children may be a source of profit to the parent; and under these circumstances the offer to maintain them separately may afford some test of the real condition of the parent; but in other places it might act as encouragement to improvidence, in relieving persons from the charge of supporting children to whom they have given or may give birth.

Dr. Johnstone, of Edgbaston, whose benevolent interest in the welfare of the poor is well known at Birmingham, had paid great attention to this subject. He stated his belief that a large proportion of juvenile offenders had been parish apprentices bound to bad masters.

#### Birmingham

The last important town in Warwickshire that I visited was Birmingham. The Poor are commonly said to be provided for here under a management superior to that of other places. The disorder visible in other parishes is not to be observed here; but upon closer examination, necessarily restricted from want of authority, some of the evils which result from a misapplication of the Poor Laws might also be seen in operation here.

What is now called the parish of Birmingham, including the two parishes of St. Martin and St. Philip, is subject in the conduct of its affairs to the provisions of a private Act (passed in the 32d of Geo. III.) and lately amended in the 2d of Will. IV.; 108 guardians are therein directed to be chosen to serve for three years, who are invested with power to appoint any number of overseers of the poor. The town has been divided into 12 districts, and an overseer is appointed to each, whose duty it is to collect the rates, and visit the poor.

The accounts are kept by the vestry-clerk at an office in the workhouse; the expenditure in and out of the house is entered under different heads, and the whole is annually published on a single sheet. By this it appears that 4,283 cases were relieved last year; I was informed at Birmingham,

that a case included upon an average four persons; it is said by some persons to be less; these however do not include the inmates of the house or the asylum. The number therefore more or less dependent upon the parish, must be reckoned at between 16,000 and 17,000; the annual expenditure of the parish exceeds £55,000; the population in 1831 is 110,914; the annual value in 1815, 247,058.

The workhouse contains 439 persons.

	<u>Under 7.</u>	<u>From 7 to 24.</u>	<u>Upwards of 17.</u>	
Males	16	29	185	} -- 439
Females	9	23	177	

Their previous occupations, chiefly in manufactories, are so various as to be impossible to specify those to which each belonged. The house is superintended by a governor and a matron; the sexes are separated at night; employment is found for the men within, in grinding corn, and in supplying the wants of the house, but no regular work is provided for the women. The average expense a head per week is 3s.4<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>d, which includes the governor's board, and that of the resident apothecary. The two circumstances which are said to distinguish the management of the poor at Birmingham, are, 1st, work by the piece being made a condition of relief to able paupers, and 2ndly, instead of placing small sums of money at the disposal of men with families, the children are maintained separately in the Asylum. The following extracts however from the Replies written by the vestry-clerk, show that this experiment has not yet been fairly made. He says, "There are no books distinguishing able-bodied from other paupers." "That the overseers at Birmingham have always been unwilling to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children, by withholding relief when distress really exists." "That relief is given occasionally according to the number of children, but not given to eke out the wages of able-bodied persons wholly employed." No rule therefore with regard to relief is uniformly or exclusively adopted; and it appeared upon further inquiry, that some persons having families, were always relieved in money, and that others might receive it upon two or three occasions, before they are employed in the regular mode, which is in wheeling sand from a mine to a certain distance, at the rate of 1d. per barrow. That relief of various sorts is also distributed to out-paupers, in the shape of clothes, shoes, &c. without work done for the parish; and upon inquiring the meaning of the words "not wholly employed," it was explained to refer to those persons whose masters had certified that they only enabled them to earn a half of the average rate of wages in any branch of manufacture. The latter system being obviously open to great abuse, I inquired what security was provided against it. This was said to consist in the poor being visited at their own houses, to ascertain their real condition; this however, to be effectual, appears to depend upon the character of the work in which they are engaged, since there are many employments which only require such implements as might be carried upon the person, and concealed on the approach of the overseer. On this subject Mr. Lewis, the governor of the workhouse at Erdington, who has the management of the poor at Aston, the immediately adjoining parish to Birmingham, and now included within the borough, stated that he was in a manufacturing house for 15 years at Birmingham, and that he is well acquainted with the practices of different masters, and that from his own knowledge he can state that what are termed "small masters" in this town, i.e. those employing one or two journeymen, and who also work for some of the other masters, were in the constant habit of employing men who were receiving allowances from the parish, and that many in consequence were able to undersell other masters who were paying the full wages themselves; he could not say whether the practice was continued, but that the inducement to it was perhaps greater than ever, since the demand for cheap labour and cheap productions was never so general as in Birmingham at present.

This was a fact to which my attention was directed by some of the mechanics themselves, saying that the race for cheap production was never so great as at the present time, and that many shifts in making articles of inferior materials were resorted to for this purpose. It is therefore not improbable that many are now induced to accept low wages, in the expectation of assistance from the parish, either for themselves or their families. The certificate of a master does not offer much security against the practice, and men might possibly be receiving work from more than one master, of which the parish would know nothing. If this is carried to any extent, there is no reason why it should not be followed by all the mischief, in a district like Birmingham, which it is known to occasion in the country parishes. It may degrade the mechanic, as it does the labourer, it may render him equally improvident and reckless in his habits, it may thereby give a stimulus to population, and ultimately reduce the rate of wages in all employments where particular skill is not required. How far this system is in operation at present, or what evil it has already produced, it is not easy to ascertain; the condition of a large portion of the people, however, is far from satisfactory. The population has outreached the capital, which is necessary for its profitable support. The trade, it is said, has been more depressed within the period of the two last censuses than within the preceding one; yet the following returns show that the ratio of increase in the people has been greater during the last period than during the former:-

<u>1811.</u>	<u>1821.</u>	<u>1831.</u>
70,209	85,416	110,914

The pauperism in the town is very extensive, as appears by the number of cases relieved during the past year, and a very large proportion of the people are now brought within the influence of any system of public relief.

In one of these reports it was stated that some men were found to be living upon 8s.6d. a week, having three, four and five children to maintain; that some others were living upon 4s.3d. a week; that some widows were living on 3s. a week, earned by themselves, and others were living by what work they were able to procure, and they were reported to be submitting to their privations with patience, and as having hitherto abstained from parish assistance. Another report stated, that men, who had been earning 14s. a week and upwards, were contemplating a dependence upon the parish, and that some tradesmen were falling into the rank of journeymen. To another report was appended a letter by one of the reporters, stating, that in some parts of the town the condition of the people was good, and that much of the distress in others had been occasioned by idleness and absence from work.

The different condition of the working classes at the same time is not unusual at Birmingham; general distress from trade here can hardly occur. The manufacturers are so various, that the causes for depression in particular ones are seldom in operation together; and though wages in one trade may be greatly reduced, they may, in others, be exceeding the average rate. And there are doubtless many causes to account for pauperism and distress in this large district besides those public ones to which they are generally referred. A medical gentleman, stated, that he had constant occasion to observe their want of economy and good management, and that in the provisions which they purchased, and the places where they procured them, neither the money which they received from the parish nor their earnings went near so far as they might otherwise do. He also observed upon the practice among the poorest persons of keeping dogs. He thought that much useful benevolence might be exercised in directing the poor as to the best method of economising their means. Dr. Johnstone, of Edgbaston, considers that there are now not less than between 6,000 and 7,000 persons who have not partaken in the least degree of the great moral improvement wrought in this town during the last 20 years, and who are in a state of great debasement, perfectly uninstructed, and reckless and dissolute in their habits, and this, he considers, must account for a great

portion of the misery and pauperism to be found in the town. To remedy this, he thinks that much might be done by publicly providing for their instruction, by a more judicious mode of relieving their necessities, and by a more effective administration of the criminal law. He dwelt much upon the connexion between pauperism and crime, and of the encouragement which the latter received from the tardy and demoralizing character of criminal proceeding. The committal to the county gaol, the interval between that and the assize, and the associates met with during confinement, all tend, in his opinion, to an effect opposite to that for which punishment is intended. Cases, he said, were not unfrequent of persons deliberately committing offences for the purpose of being lodged in the county gaol, for the sake of the society, and that when the wives and families of criminals once become chargeable to the parish, they usually remained paupers for life.

Upon examining some of the higher class of mechanics themselves, men of very remarkable intelligence and information, as to their opinion of the general influence of the Poor Laws upon the habits of the people, they did not scruple to state, in regretting the fact, that there were many even among themselves who were much disposed to be extravagant and careless of their earnings; that many preferred making a display in their dress or in their lodging at present to providing for their future necessities; and though they said that there was nothing like a calculation ever made, with a view to any advantage from depending upon the parish, yet that many of them, when they wasted their wages, or omitted to save them, had the idea, that if they should come to the workhouse, it was not the worst thing that could happen to them, and that as good men as they were had gone there before them. I learnt from these men, that they had at times ample means of saving; that many did at present belong to clubs or societies, to which they made some contribution, either monthly or annually; and one informed me, that he and a few of his friends had withdrawn £300 from the bank in May last (1832), under some apprehension of danger from the state of the country when the Ministry resigned; and the actuary of the savings banks states, that at that time he received notice to withdraw £16,000 which he considered to belong chiefly to the working class.

Much of the population are under circumstances in which the parochial system of relief may exercise a powerful influence upon their habits and character. And when it is considered that the 108 guardians, who are the distributors of a sum exceeding £50,000 are elected by the rate-payers at large, it is to be feared that many of the poor may expect to find among them ill-judging favourites and partizans. The negligence which had been shown for many years by the rate-payers in appointing the guardians, and by the guardians when appointed, had led, a few years since, to the formation of a party to secure a better and more regular system of election. But there is no security for the continuance of this party.

The condition of paupers can hardly be expected to operate in deterring those, who are represented in the reports as earning between 4s. and 8s. a week, from throwing themselves on the support of the parish. The following is the table of diet at the workhouse.

Table of Diet for the In-poor of the Birmingham Workhouse.

Ordinary Diet.

	<u>Breakfast</u>	<u>Dinner</u>	<u>Supper</u>
Sunday	Rice Milk.	Beef, Vegetables & Beer	Broth with Bread put in it.
Monday	Milk Porridge & Bread.	Bread, Cheese & Beer.	Milk Porridge & Bread
Tuesday	As Monday	As Sunday	As Sunday

Wednesday	As Monday	Pea-soup or Irish Stew with an allowance of Bread	As Monday
Thursday	As Sunday	As Sunday	As Sunday
Friday	As Monday	As Monday	As Monday
Saturday	As Monday	As Wednesday	As Monday

Sick Diet

The same as the ordinary diet, only that mutton is allowed for dinner in the place of beef, and rice pudding instead of bread and cheese or scup.

Low Diet.

	<u>Breakfast</u>	<u>Dinner</u>	<u>Supper</u>
Every day in Week	Milk Porridge and Bread	Bread, Broth & Pudding.	Gruel or Milk Porridge and Bread.

Barley water or imperial, as a beverage ad libitum.

N.B. - Wine, &c. as prescribed by the surgeons.

It appeared that some men were allowed to earn 1s.6d. a day in wheeling sand; and I was informed that this work operated very unequally upon the different persons to whom it was assigned. It is said to be not disliked by men who have been accustomed to hard labour out of doors. It is in a healthy situation, and men have been known voluntarily to remain some years in the employment; but where the pauper has been used to the finer sort of mechanical work and close confinement, it operates with peculiar severity: for this reason, as well as from no distinction being ever made by the parish between those who have fallen by vice or by misfortune, the persons employ'd at this work appeared to excite great sympathy in the town.

Upon reviewing the system at Birmingham, therefore, though much evil is prevented by the respectability of many of the guardians, and the publicity given to the accounts, still, with the exception of its mode of treating the infant poor, referred to in another place, it can hardly be said to afford any very striking contrast to the system of management in other places.