

THE POOR -

AS ILLUSTRATED BY THE STOW-ON-THE-WOLD GUARDIANS'

MINUTE BOOK JANUARY TO OCTOBER, 1836

In 1836 the population of Stow-on-the-Wold was scattered among twenty-four small villages, Bourton-on-the Water which was significantly larger and the little town of Stow-on-the-Wold, but there were twenty-eight civil parishes. The Union was divided into two districts with populations of 4481 and 4358 centred on Stow and Bourton respectively, but the Guardians' weekly meeting was regularly held at the White Hart, Stow. Some parishes were very small, four had populations of less than a hundred in 1851 and in three of them the population declined during the first half of the nineteenth century although there was a marked increase in the Union as a whole.

The first minute book of the Stow Guardians presents a record of their unflagging and businesslike effort to establish a new administrative order, subject to the statutory guidance of the Commissioners for the Poor Law. Behind the definite entries recording the meetings there must have been considerable discussion and preparation as decisions were taken quickly and acted upon effectively, but much remains hidden or only hinted at.

The apparently full lists of cases do not reveal the total number of people receiving relief. These lists were kept by the two Relieving Officers and even at the outset the Guardians did not record the numbers they were dealing with. Nor can the fluctuation in the numbers on relief be estimated by comparing the weekly records in the Minute Book, as there was no great reduction at the time of year when

employment was more readily come by. In fact more cases were being considered as it became more possible to discontinue relief, even if temporarily. On 11th August there was an abnormally long list of forty-nine cases and on 30th June there were thirty-seven of which five were discontinued because the recipients had secured work. The other longest lists included forty-eight, forty and thirty-nine cases, two in April and one in October. Out of forty-eight, ten cases were dismissed or discontinued and in October the benefits of seasonal work were clearly ending. Most of the weekly lists were appreciably shorter and all were concerned with those cases which were thought to need review for various reasons, new cases and irregular assistance. The majority of cases had been granted relief "until further orders" and so were not recorded until their circumstances changed: they were the inescapable responsibility of their respective parishes. New cases were carefully analysed and the total family was listed. Those already known or being assisted were often mentioned under the name of the head of the family only so there is no means of knowing exactly how many people the varying amounts of relief were to support, although there was some regularity about the provision made. Some indication of the size of the problem is given on 6th October when the first record was made of the number of loaves provided during the preceding week. The list shows orders for eighteen loaves, but altogether five hundred and eighty-nine were supplied and this is only a little higher than for the next three weeks. Moreover the established pattern was for considerably more to be

provided in cash than in kind. Nevertheless there is valuable information to be found in the weekly record of pauper cases which was discontinued early in October, 1836 when the system of keeping the books was changed.

The lists illustrate the sections of society most at risk, the infirm and elderly, the family with several young children especially when the main breadwinner fell ill, the chronic sick, the orphan, the illegitimate child and his mother and the widow with dependent children, the blind, the crippled, the weakminded and the deranged. The largest single group was made up of the chronic sick and those who were more seriously ill. For instance on 28th April sixteen out of forty-eight cases were sick and the following week there were nineteen out of thirty-six. Even in late August when the effects of summer weather and better prospects of employment at harvest time must have eased matters there were eight listed as "no better" and ten others involving one or more sick folk out of a total list of thirty cases.

The causes of sickness are seldom recorded. Although it is never mentioned undernourishment must have been a major factor in many cases judging by the relief granted and the nature of some of the disabilities which are mentioned, lameness of legs and arms, inflammation, rheumatism (2), consumption (1), scrofula (1) and cancer. Apart from this, accidents occurred, a few broken limbs, someone was ~~k~~icked by a horse, another fell from a ladder and a third was injured by a threshing machine. The Medical Officers reported that they had

attended five confinements in the first three months. The chronic ailments did not result in many deaths, some weeks none were recorded and usually not more than one. The area was fortunate to have plentiful supplies of clean water.

Women were more liable to become chargeable for various reasons, in particular their wages were very much lower than those of men. 5s. a week was well above the usual wage recorded, most frequently it was 3s., as against 8s. for men in full employment. The woman's wage was an essential supplement, but when the man fell ill, even if the wife was able to continue work the family needed relief as in the case of a family of seven, which was "in distress" as the father (78) was old and lame since the previous harvest. His wife earned 3s. and they had two boys at home (15 and 9) who had no recorded earnings, as well as three daughters away in service (18, 14, 13).

Apart from this the women seemed to find it rather more difficult to find work. This was more apparent after harvest when they had been able to find temporary work and were the first to be stood off. On 8th September three women were in this position, then the next week two women, two men and three families came on to the parish for the same reason. Dependent children added to the women's burdens when they were left singlehanded, either due to widowhood, a husband in prison or transported or who had "absconded". One with an illegitimate brood of four had received six loaves a week before she was found dead. Perhaps she had starved. Then the grandmother accepted the responsibility and she was allowed four loaves and 4s.

but this was raised to 5s. The able bodied but unsupported women with children were taken into the temporary workhouse first in October, 1836, as there was work for them there. No distinctions were made between the relief for women with bastards and legitimate children. However, one woman was treated differently. Her young children were ill and so she could not earn their living as usual by keeping her little school open. She was allowed 5s. and not offered any bread, which would appear relatively generous and saved her from the indignity of relief in kind.

Old people were not allowed the equivalent of a pension due to age. If they were able to work it was expected of them. A couple of 70 and 72 received relief again after harvest. In another case a man of 72 had been working on the roads earning 4s. a week but both he and his wife had fallen ill. Yet others of 74 and 71 were helped with two loaves as they did not earn enough to support themselves. Temporary relief was allowed for a week to a woman of 73 while parish work was found for her. Those in their sixties became unemployed more frequently than younger people and women in their fifties were in a similar position. The applicants for relief after the harvest illustrate this problem, but there were some younger people in the same plight.

There were more who could not support themselves and there seem to have been a fairly high proportion of single elderly and infirm people. Of the thirty-one cases dealt with on 14th April at least twelve fell into this category, and on 28th April among six widows

there were two whose ages were given as 72 and 52. The Guardians were impressed by one old lady of 77 who had been living on charity and the proceeds from the sale of her furniture before applying for relief. She was living with her sister-in-law who was infirm and already on the parish. Help was granted "until further orders". In two other cases old women were moved to live with others needing care. The Guardians had to put pressure on them, in one instance they temporarily cut off relief.

Children were also expected to work for wages as early as possible. The youngest recorded was a 7 year old girl at harvest, but this was exceptional. The Relieving Officer considered two of 8 and 10 should have been at work in August. Two other boys of 9 and 7 were at school in Moreton. Boys of 10 were recorded as earning nothing whereas below this, the age was given without comment. A boy of 10 earned 1s. 6d. in late July, another of 9 earned 1s., as did a girl of 12. Boys of 11 to 14 earned 2s. a week, and a 14 year old was exceptional earning 3s. 1s. 6d or 2s. was not considered sufficient to maintain a self-supporting child and so limited help was allowed. An orphan left his master and was reported to have said he had "no need to do such work". His relief was discontinued. A girl of 13 had earned nothing for a year due to ill health, but there is less evidence of girls' employment below this age when they were old enough to go away into service. Several children lived with their grandmothers. There was an illegitimate child with his mother who was in service, another was boarded out by the parish as his mother was not able to keep him with her.

There were at least three people maintained as lunatics, two in the Gloucester Asylum and one at a private institution in Lower Slaughter. Four others were sent to Gloucester Infirmary. The occasional references to the weakminded probably do not reflect the incidence of this burden as they were more likely to be permanently chargeable.

The amount of relief granted would have barely kept body and soul together, for instance a quarter loaf and 1s. 6d or 1s. was quite common and appeared to be the usual allowance to a single person dependent on relief. A family of seven, including five young children was reported to have "nothing to eat" and that the mother could "earn nothing". They had been tided over with four loaves and were granted 4s. and eight loaves: this was the full allowance but the total value of their relief was just less than 8s. a week. Such cases were expensive however carefully the relief was assessed as it was liable to continue for some weeks. For instance, twelve loaves, and 4s. and twelve loaves were ordered for two families one week. Limited relief was allowed in aid of inadequate wages. Two men (30 and 18) were earning 5s. a week in late July and were helped. In August a man was relieved as he had not been able to find more remunerative work. This ran counter to official policy and the declared purpose of the Stow Guardians but it appeared the most practicable in the circumstances. Relief was reduced promptly when people found work, even if it was not enough to support them independently. At the end of August two women's allowances were cut substantially for this reason,

although the work was seasonal. On 30th June there were 3 other cases, including a widow with two children who earned 4s. between them, as she had found some work, her relief was reduced by 1s. 6d to three loaves only. The total value of relief amounted to less than the recipient would normally earn, as in the case of a family of four which included two children (5 and 3) and parents (31 and 30) who were both sick. Their income had been 8s. and the relief allowed was 4s. and four loaves which was the equivalent of 6s. altogether. Few were granted relief more generously, and only when there was some special circumstance to justify it.

Medical relief was the next most frequent provision, but only a minority of cases required it and not all those applying were granted their requests. A confinement attended by a Medical Officer cost 10s. 6d and was not allowed without careful consideration. There were four applications in July, of these two were allowed, one was refused and the fourth allowed only as a loan. Earlier, a woman (49) already reported to be very ill was only allowed attendance as a loan as her husband was "dissolute". The Relieving Officer suggested this way of helping her without encouraging the husband to continue in the evil ways which had brought them to destitution even though he was earning 8s. a week. In July the Guardians decided that unless it was otherwise stated this form of relief would only be allowed as a loan, thus tightening up their provision.

The Medical Officers' main duty was attending the very sick and for them they frequently ordered 2lbs. mutton, and much more rarely

ale or porter in addition. In three months the doctors prescribed medicine on a hundred and fifty-two occasions. Nursing and "necessaries" were sometimes accepted as essential expenses on the doctors' recommendation. In May a sick person was allowed 7s. for constant attendance as well as mutton for at least two weeks, which was an unusually expensive case, but less costly cases were not very rare. On one occasion the Guardians refused to allow the recommended medical relief. The most expensive and most urgent matter which required and received prompt attention was an outbreak of smallpox at Evenlode and Chastleton (in the Shipston Union). There were eight cases, four in each village and the two Unions divided the cost of £11. 1s. 1d between them. On 11th August vaccinations were ordered to prevent the infection spreading, those affected were compulsorily removed to an isolated house taken over for the purpose in Broadwell. The trouble was all over before the end of September.

A limited amount of miscellaneous help was given to provide rent, washing, clothes, especially shoes and shirts (about 2/3d). One week several successful claims were made for children's shoes at Wick Rissington, but the authorities were not to be caught a second week running. £1 was allowed for an orphan's clothing and for another £1. 5s. 0d. spread over ten weeks, as well as 1s. 6d. maintenance. Funeral expenses were sometimes paid. In one instance a shroud was provided and not the recommended expenses. The Union had a contract with Blizzard of Stow, one of the two partners who later secured the contract for building the workhouse, for the supply

of elm coffins "without letters" at 4s. 6d., 7s. and 12s. according to size for different age groups.

The standard reasons for refusing relief were that applicants failed to present themselves at Stow before the Guardians if they were capable of attending, and that the means of the whole family were considered sufficient to support those in need. The week the temporary workhouse was opened three people failed to put in an appearance and their cases were dismissed. A man of 74 was refused help and his sons were required to support him. The means and whereabouts of the relatives were recorded even when relief was allowed. Once the sick appeared to be "better able to work" relief was discontinued and no mention was made of their having found or returned to work, whereas this reason was given in some cases. Some the Guardians suspected were not entirely genuine, were undesirable or did not help themselves sufficiently. These received limited or no relief. The Guardians appear harsh and censorious in dealing with these people but they were not likely to be considered generally unjust by the majority who tried to earn their living and survive on depressed wages. A claim for 10d. for washing was refused and "very right" was the marginal comment. The same week a woman appealed unsuccessfully for additional relief as she could not "live on 1s. 9d. and one loaf". A family's relief was disallowed on the grounds that the wife was "now supposed to be reaping". An unemployed man just home from prison was only provided with relief as a loan and another who returned home after unexplained absence was given no relief

although his wife was sick and they had no money; instead he was to be brought before the magistrates for leaving his family unsupported. A drunken man (65) was refused help.

It is quite apparent that the people of the villages which made up the Stow Union depended very largely on agricultural work for their livelihood but there were too many for the available employment. A man of 30 and another of 18 each earned 5s. doing intermittent work in July when another man fully employed earned 9s. the same week. Work on the roads (parish employment) was even less well paid at 3s. and 4s. and with this there was no relief given. A family of nine illustrates underemployment for the young men and low wages for women and boys: the father (60) was sick, the mother (46) earned 3s., their daughters (24 and 15) earned 5s. and 3s., and their sons (22, 20, 11) earned 5s., 4s. and 2s. The two youngest (9 and 6) were not at work. Almost a third of the cases considered on 29th September were due to underemployment and two more were due to low wages. Most weeks the Guardians were presented with such problems.

At harvest time nearly everyone was out in the fields. A fortunate family had earned £1 one week. A woman's relief was discontinued as she earned "sufficient for her support" by looking after children. There are frequent references to harvesting, reaping, leasing (gleaning) in August but by mid-September significant unemployment was reappearing.

Other specified agricultural work was haymaking, bean cutting and hoeing, but "field work" was the general term. The other frequent

employment was "service". The area was well supplied with gentlemen's houses. This work took some away from home and they were not expected to contribute to needy relatives. Besides this, one went to work on the railway, there was a weaver (80) with defective sight, a slater and plasterer (63), a tailor, two silk winders (classified as "light work"). This does not represent the range of crafts of the area but rather indicates the greater security of those employed in other than agricultural work, except for cloth manufacture which had all but come to an end there.

The search for work or escape from insoluble problems took a few away from home particularly in the summer. Two went to America, seven absconded, but one came home within the week and another within a fortnight. Two young men of Great Barrington left to find work but they too were home by the next week, presumably they had explained their departure as those who had "absconded" were guilty of a punishable offence. Five others were sent to prison and two transported. A woman of 72 was removed some distance to live with her daughter who agreed to look after her. There was correspondence with the Poor Law Commissioners about the possible migration of four families, two from Lower Swell, and two from Evenlode, but there is no evidence of what came of this though the Commissioners sent forms (for two families) to be completed, which would then be forwarded to their agent in Manchester.

However, few who became chargeable to the poor rate had strayed outside the area of the Union and only six had gone more than ten

miles away. The exception was an elderly couple who were removed back to Westcote from Uttoxeter where they had earned their living by cleaning a dissenting chapel. Two of their children lived in London and another lived with his large family in Westcote. There was a similar number of people with their place of settlement outside the Union but only three were from a distance, Middlesex, Chilcombe (Hants) and a child travelling from Cambridge to Wales. A pregnant woman was helped but referred to the Magistrates for removal. Within the Union there were significantly more who did not live in the parishes to which they belonged, but generally they were allowed to stay where they were. The general picture is of considerable stability in spite of the absence of prospects, although it is important to remember that those who moved successfully would not be recorded in the Guardians' Minutes nor would those living away from their home village with an established claim to relief.

The Guardians appear capable and experienced men judging by their minutes and they were convinced of the need to make the new Poor Law effective at least in so far as it could limit the expense of the poor rate. They were very prompt to assess the financial result of the first three months of the new system. The comparison between the average expenditure for the three years before Lady Day 1835 which had been £4691 a year, giving a quarterly average of £1172 15s. Od., with the quarterly average from March to June, 1836, which amounted to £598 0s. 5½d., was extremely gratifying. They recognised that this was unduly low as various salaries had not been

paid. The following quarter's expenses amounted to £748 3s. 8d. and even though the initial expenditure on a temporary workhouse would push up costs still further they decided to adopt this expedient rather than wait until their permanent establishment was built. A dietary was drawn up which differed a little from that recommended by the Commissioners as the Guardians judged it was "well suited to the habits of the poorer classes in this District".

The attitude to the poor was paternal and authoritarian. The Chairman Rev. Witts was a J.P. and two other J.Ps were ex-officio Guardians so there was no difficulty in referring cases to the Magistrates. There was an unwritten assumption that the requirements of the poor were different from the rest of society. Even the humble Relieving Officers were paid £52 p.a. and the combined post of Clerk to the Guardians and Master of the Workhouse carried a salary of £120 p.a. The Guardians had an unenviable task in trying to maintain a distinction between the employed and those on relief, and they endeavoured to be impartial. Every now and then it is possible to detect sympathy for those who were particularly afflicted and who could be helped without going against their general rule. A family of seven, subject to a removal order, was treated with consideration as the father was in the final stages of cancer. The order was suspended, and though one was only a seven month old baby 5s. 6d. and seven loaves were given as well as 3s. 8d for necessaries, $\frac{1}{2}$ pint of porter and 3lbs. mutton. The relief continued until they were removed after the funeral, also provided, nor were they hurried off

immediately. However the decrepit old tinker who lived in a tent and earned 2s. 6d or 3s. making skewers and roasting jacks was sent away empty handed, an attitude towards gypsies which has not totally disappeared today.

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