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# Introduction

Then, shall we grumble at the Parish Rate,
If it's the Poor that makes so many great;
For sure, for them, Provision should be made,
To which the Wealthy ought to lend their Aid,
To succour those, that fall into Distress,
And chasten those, who're prone to Idleness:
For Idleness is ever a Disgrace,
And more so, if it's in a trading Place;
Yet, if Disorder has amongst them crept,
They merit Gain, who do the Fault correct;
And as it seems that some do now devise,
To build a WORKHOUSE of the largest Size;
In which the Poor may Health and Comfort find,
And forc'd to work – those lazily inclined;
When filching skulks, who stroll, or lounging lie,
By Labour there, may well their wants supply;[1]

Near to the bottom of Lichfield Street stood Birmingham parish workhouse, its clock-tower proclaiming the hours to all who dwelt on the east side of town. From the middle of the eighteenth century the building remained for more than a hundred years, until reorganisation in the 1850s removed the institution to Winson Green. There is no indication of its presence in the area today, and, indeed, the street name itself was erased from the map by the redevelopment we know as the Birmingham Improvement Scheme, under the terms of the Artisans' Dwellings Act (1875). An equally grand edifice, the Victoria Law Courts, occupies the site today; it is still a place for social control, but of a different kind.

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1    Anon., 'Local Remarks: A Poem', *Aris's Gazette*, 21 April 1783.

Here, it would appear, in one of the most successful and progressive of towns – 'toyshop of Europe', 'first industrial city in the world' – there was an Achilles heel, a clear demonstration of inadequacy. In this new world of capitalist advance, commercial progress evidently sat cheek-by-jowl with household misery; the town that sped forward left others behind, and with credit came debit. Yet, for the town's wealthier citizens, the Lichfield Street workhouse was a symbol of pride, a manifest embodiment of their care for the poor and huddled masses, who crowded into Birmingham's ever more teeming streets. They might resent the regular visits by the collectors of levies, always demanding more of their hard-earned money, but the workhouse itself was a physical representation of where their rates were going. It was a constant reminder of those ordnances preached at them from the pulpits, both Anglican and nonconformist, each Sunday morning: to feed the hungry, tend the sick, and clothe the naked. And if there was no longer any guarantee that such behaviour would speed the donor towards heaven, the English Reformation having put paid to that promise, the values of care and responsibility still fitted well enough with the new ideas of civic pride and community.

For the poor, however, the workhouse had a very different meaning. To them the workhouse dealt with the ends of things: the end of hope, the end of independence, the end of life, the end of the line. It was the place that took them in when all else failed. If our lives are lived in light, the workhouse cast the darkest of shadows, a place where the forlorn and the bankrupt, the penniless and the dispossessed – 600 or more of them in Birmingham in bad times – slept side-by-side within its stark and comfortless wards. Charles Dickens, who knew Birmingham well, ably described the negative attitude of many of the poor towards the workhouse, when he put these words in the mouth of Betty Higden in *Our Mutual Friend*:

> Kill me sooner than take me there. Throw this pretty child under cart-horses' feet and a loaded wagon, sooner than take him there. Come to us and find us all a-dying, and set fire to us all where we lie, and let us all blaze away with the house into a heap of cinders, sooner than move a corpse of us there![2]

Yet the workhouse was also the place that gave shelter to the homeless, the one establishment that cared for the sick and the aged who had nothing. It was both infirmary and maternity hospital, school and crèche, asylum and care home. For a society that had no National Health Service, no state provision for the unemployed, no long-term plan or pension for old age and no state education for the poor, the workhouse picked up the bill.

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2    C. Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, Vol. 1, London, 1865, p. 242.

For twenty years or so I have found the workhouse a fascinating place; from the safe distance, that is, of the early twenty-first century, when it could no longer threaten to take me in. Part of the attraction, as a historian, is the challenge to reconstruct the life of an institution from its official and often highly impersonal records. Since I first took an interest in them, workhouse literature and websites have proliferated, catering for a burgeoning interest among social historians and genealogists, who have found that their families were born into, or ended their days, in one. There are also now a growing number of former workhouses, at Gressenhall, Ripon, Northwich and Southwell, which have opened their doors to the public. The evolution of the Northwich museum at Weaver Hall in Cheshire is an interesting reflection of increasing public engagement with the subject. What began some years ago as a museum of the town's important salt industry, which happened to be accommodated in an old workhouse building, has more recently been re-modelled to reflect its former use more directly. The clear shift in public history away from industry and towards such social institutions is nowhere better illustrated.

Much of this attention, however, has concentrated on the period after 1834, when the Poor Law Amendment Act or 'New' Poor Law created the sprawling institutions (with equally sprawling records) known as Union workhouses, which still form the core of many of our NHS hospitals even today. The smaller parish workhouses which preceded them are often dealt with in a paragraph or two. This emphasis on the Victorian and Edwardian workhouse, perhaps inevitably, reflects where the surviving sources are richest. Poor Law Unions maintained vast quantities of records, while their humbler predecessors kept relatively few, or kept them haphazardly, and what they did keep often did not survive the take-over by the Union or the depredations of the following 180 years of change, reorganisation and war.

It is equally true that the enduring image of the workhouse, as the gateway of tears or the 'Bastille' of the poor, has diverted popular attention too much away from the wider application of the Poor Laws by the state. The workhouse was but one aspect of its work, only the tip of a much bigger iceberg. Under its various provisions the parish dealt with apprenticeships and vagrancy, with medical care and out-relief, even with work schemes for the unemployed. The workhouse may have been the first port of call for applicants, but it was, in most cases, far from the final destination. Most of the poor applicants for relief were not directed to the workhouse, much as overseers and the Poor Law Commissioners might have wanted them to be. In 1833, for example, at a time when around 1,000 persons were in residential care in the Birmingham workhouse, workhouse infirmary or Asylum for the Infant Poor, 'the number more or less dependent upon the parish', was estimated as between 16,000 and

17,000.[3] On top of that, though beyond the reach of the records, were those many thousands who would not dream, or dare, to apply directly for relief, but struggled on as best they could in the fashion of Dickens' Betty Higden.

By the late 1700s Birmingham was already growing into a mighty metropolis, dwarfing its neighbours in ambition, and in the size and speed of its growth. In the range of its institutions too, including the Poor Law, it was of a different order. While the paupers in many of the nearby parish workhouses might number no more than twenty or so, those housed in Lichfield Street were in their hundreds. In 1803–4 one third of all the indoor paupers in Warwickshire were domiciled either in the Birmingham workhouse, or in the Asylum for the Infant Poor.[4] As one of the most extensive workhouses in one of the largest (and fastest growing) towns in nineteenth-century Britain, Birmingham tells a national, as well as a local, story. It wrestled with the problems of poverty and disease, pauperism and education, in its own individual way, but in a manner which reflected (and sometimes contradicted) national trends and attitudes too. The history of the workhouse in Birmingham is not a micro-study of the national or even of the West Midlands history of workhouses. Birmingham, after all, saw the consequences of industrial change earlier than most. But, as Felix Driver wrote in his ground-breaking study of the Huddersfield Poor Law Union 'it would be quite wrong to divorce the local experience of the … Poor Law from its broader context'.[5] The effects of national Poor Law legislation were far-reaching in Birmingham as elsewhere and the shifting of attitudes and of policy priorities among those responsible for the poor in Birmingham were influenced by broader cultural and social changes across Britain and Western Europe. And the workhouse inmates themselves were far from parochial: migrants arrived from all corners of the British Isles (and beyond) to seek work in this industrial giant and (later) found themselves washed up on the stony shore of poor relief.

The story of the Poor Law, then, is of a state institution with a local heart, struggling to meet the ever-increasing demands of an ever-increasing society. We might see some of the solutions as inconsistent, sometimes unkind, overtly moralistic and often ill-informed. But the problems it addressed are no less pressing in the twenty-first century. Indeed, every time I turn on the radio I find myself back in the guardians' boardroom, and the agenda has not changed.

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3    In 1833 C.P. Villiers found 439 inmates in the Lichfield Street workhouse, *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*, Appendix A, Parliamentary Papers, XXIX, 1834, p. 32a.

4    'County of Warwick', *Abstract of answers and returns made pursuant to the Act of 43 George III relative to the expense and maintenance of the poor in England*, Parliamentary Papers, XIII, 1803–4, pp. 533–48.

5    F. Driver, *Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System 1834–1884*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 131.

How do we solve the problem of homelessness? How can we provide affordable care for our elderly and infirm? What is the right balance between incentives to work and social support for the unemployed? How do we get people off welfare and into work? Can we improve the ways we treat mental illness? How do we break the cycle of what the Victorians called 'hereditary pauperism'? What level of public and social services are we prepared to pay for? How does local support survive when central funding is squeezed? How should we address the challenge of childhood poverty? How can we improve the life chances of children in care? And what role should the private and charitable sectors play in all of this?

When I began compiling the evidence for this book, some years ago, Great Britain was considered to be a rich country. Now it does not appear quite so affluent. Recession, the credit crunch and a series of cold, relentless winters seem to have turned the clock back to my childhood, and to the even tougher childhood of my parents. We are not so poor, so crushed by unemployment and deprivation as ordinary people were in the 1790s or the 1830s, yet the people who inhabit this book feel a little closer to me than they did a year or two ago. I can hardly say that I'm grateful for this, but the problems they wrestled with – finding a home, getting a job, paying the rent, feeding a family and securing a future for their children – still reach out from the pages of history. Ultimately, the challenges of providing for the elderly, encouraging the able-bodied into work, breaking family cycles of dependency and protecting the poor have not changed or gone away. We may surely learn from the past as we prepare for the future.

I would like to thank all those archivists, librarians and museum curators who have helped in the making of this book. The staff of Birmingham Archives and Collections, Library of Birmingham, have dealt with a constant barrage of request slips for three years and more, and have done so with a cheery professionalism at all times. My wife, Fiona Tait, has read through all the chapters in this book, as always a touchstone of its accuracy and readability. With their help, I hope that I have brought life to an ancient institution, helped its inmates and its staff to walk in the daylight once more. Wherever I have been able to, I have given them names; it is the least I could do. You may not care to live in the same world, but it merits our attention and our sympathy nonetheless.

<div align="right">Chris Upton, 2015</div>