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THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE  
1834 POOR LAW AMENDMENT ACT  
ON TYNESIDE

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 was a measure of major importance, both as an administrative innovation and because of its social effects.<sup>1</sup> The Ministry of Health archives in the Public Record Office include in the Poor Law Papers a very large and valuable source for the social history of nineteenth century Britain. Much more work on this mass of evidence will be necessary before any very reliable assessment of the effect of the New Poor Law can be made. This paper is an attempt to use a small selection of these papers to discuss the way in which the system prescribed by the 1834 Act was introduced into Tyneside, already an important region of economic growth in these years.

Such local studies are especially needed here, for one thing which is already clear is that the early impact of the 1834 Act was not uniform over the whole country, but showed considerable local variation. The nature of the local economic situation at the time the new administrative machinery was introduced, the calibre of the responsible agents involved, and the attitude of the local influential groups, were all factors which could produce important variations in the experience of different areas of Britain. In parts of the West Riding, for instance, all three elements combined to give the new system a rough passage in its early years. The experience of Tyneside is a useful corrective to

<sup>1</sup> The principal source used here is the Poor Law Papers in the Ministry of Health archives in the Public Record Office. I am grateful to the Research Fund of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne for a grant to facilitate study of these documents. The correspondence with local Boards of Guardians is contained in the MH 12 series. In addition I have drawn upon an undergraduate dissertation on the Hexham Union by Miss Gloria Cadman, BA in the Department of Modern and Medieval History, University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

The following papers may be cited as useful background material for the contents of this paper: David Roberts, "How cruel was the Victorian Poor Law?", in: *Historical Journal*, Vol. VI, 1963, pp. 97-107; Ursula Henriques, "How cruel was the Victorian Poor Law?", *ibid.*, Vol. XI, 1968, pp. 365-371; Mark Blaug, "The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New", in: *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. XXIII, 1963, pp. 151-184; Mark Blaug, "The Poor Law Report Reexamined", *ibid.*, Vol. XXIV, 1964, pp. 229-245.

the better known accounts of the textile districts. It is perhaps unreasonable to expect that the legislators of 1834 should have anticipated the economic tribulations of the textile districts in the later 1830's, or the violent opposition to the New Poor Law of men like Oastler and the Fieldens; the story on Tyneside in the first years of the new system demonstrates that the new system could be introduced and set to work reasonably smoothly even in one of the developing areas of the North of England.

Although it was not until 1836 that arrangements were made to divide the North Eastern counties of Northumberland and Durham into the new local Poor Law Unions governed by Boards of Guardians, the new system exerted some influence in the area from its creation in 1834. In North East England, as elsewhere, the old poor law authorities were required to supply their new masters of the central Poor Law Commission with the statistics and other information needed to plan for the introduction of the new arrangements. Moreover, from the time it came into existence, the Poor Law Commission began to exercise a general control over the manner in which the existing authorities carried out their poor law duties. This early correspondence demonstrates clearly enough that the old poor law had not necessarily been administered in a benevolent spirit in North East England. Rather there is clear evidence that both in the growing Tyneside towns and in the neighbouring rural areas there had been in recent years a series of attempts to cut down the expenditure on poor relief. A letter from a South Shields overseer of the poor in November 1834 described the sufferings of a poor family of six, of whom three had died of cholera, while the surviving three had all been seriously ill; the letter shows clearly that the overseer is most moved by another consideration:<sup>1</sup>

“Here are coffins, funeral charges, surgeons and nurses attending, etc., to an enormous expense in parish expenditure...”

At the same time the parish authorities of All Saints, in central Newcastle, were taking steps for “establishing a more strict and economical system”.

An early interchange between a local official of the poor law in a rural area and the new Poor Law Commission sums up a great deal of the changes which were taking place. Anthony Watson, overseer of

<sup>1</sup> MH 12/3201. Thomas Wilson/Poor Law Commission (hereafter referred to in notes as PLC), 3/11/1834. For All Saints Parish, Newcastle, MH 12/9096, All Saints Vestry/PLC, 7/11/1834.

the poor for the village of High Callerton wrote the following letter in mid-November 1834:<sup>1</sup>

Gentlemen, I take the Libertey to inform you that we have at present *An able bodied man and his wife and Six Children in the Poor House in the Name of William Robson* which has put the Township to A great deal of troble and expence for he will neather work nor want for nobodey and if you wd have thegoodness to right to Let me no what corse to take with him I wold be much A blidge to you I remain yours most Abedent Seven

Anthony Watson Overseer  
High Callarton.

This ill-written communication bears firmly on it the bureaucratic formal stamp of the Poor Law Commission's office – "Received PLC Nov. 17 1834" – an illuminating conjunction. The draft of the Commission's reply is written on the back of Watson's letter:

Sir,

Your letter accompanying the return from High Callerton has been laid before the PLC for E. and W., and the Board conceive that if Willm. Robson is able to work, & will not do such work as you provide for him, the same being reasonable & proper, you certainly may refuse to give him relief of any kind, until such time as he becomes more tractable: an ablebodied man is not to be maintained in idleness at the expense of those who work hard to support themselves, & pay the parish rates...

This reply is typical of the spirit in which the directors of the new system regarded any parasitic attempts to take advantage of the relief facilities available.<sup>2</sup> However, this somewhat stark response does not give an adequate summary of the Commission's standpoint; there were in addition distinctly benevolent attributes too, where genuine need was involved.

The new administrative system laid down by the 1834 Act spread gradually over England and Wales, but it was not until the latter part of 1836 that steps were taken to set it up on Tyneside. From the

<sup>1</sup> MH 12/9002. Anthony Watson/PLC, bearing dated stamp of receipt 17/11/1834.

<sup>2</sup> A very similar spirit not infrequently appears in the columns of some of the more popular British newspapers of the present day. Even in the age of the Welfare State this attitude of the Poor Law Commission can command a sympathetic echo.

point of view of the supporters of the new arrangements the pauperised agricultural counties of the South presented the most urgent problems, and they were accordingly given priority. In North East England the old arrangements were less open to contemporary criticism. There was little in the way of regular out-door relief<sup>1</sup> to supplement wages; instead the local poor law authorities usually gave out-door relief readily when unemployment or other cause made it necessary for a time. In the later 1830s for the most part Tyneside did not suffer from serious recessions, so that in practice the problem of pauperism was not too formidable in the area at the time that the new system was introduced. Care of the aged poor, the chronically sick, and the high number of illegitimate children presented the local poor law authorities with their most serious tasks on Tyneside.

The smoothness of the changeover in poor law administration on Tyneside was due in part to the comparative prosperity of the area at the time – in contrast to areas like the West Riding<sup>2</sup> – but also to the personal qualities of the man principally responsible for introducing the new system. In the working of the new scheme a key figure was the Assistant Poor Law Commissioner, an important official who supervised the activities of the poor law authorities in a group of counties. In part the varying receptions given to the new arrangements can be attributed to the varying attributes of the Assistant Commissioners involved in the establishment and early working of the new machinery. In this respect Tyneside was very fortunate, for the Assistant Commissioner in the late 1820s and early 1840s concerned with Northern England was well suited to the task. Indeed a study of the activities of this man illustrates some crucial aspects of British society in these years of social strains and economic change. It is clear enough that the expansion of government machinery was one of the most important developments in Britain during the nineteenth century. This was not, however, the imposition of order upon chaos, but rather the expansion of formal bureaucratic techniques into a society in which cohesion and social disciplines had previously depended more on an essentially informal and unofficial system of controls, based on property, rank and personality, rather than upon the possession of public office. The imposition of the new Poor Law was a major stage in this transition, and on Tyneside this innovation was made very

<sup>1</sup> “Out-door relief” means the giving of relief in the form of doles, without stipulating that the recipient must enter the workhouse. The reports of both the Poor Law Enquiry Commission and the Poor Law Commission itself frequently stressed this regional difference.

<sup>2</sup> Michael E. Rose, “The Anti-Poor Law Movement in the North of England”, in: *Northern History*, Vol. I, 1966, pp. 70-91.

much easier by its being carried out by an agent of the central government who at the same time possessed an assured position in the old authority pattern.

Sir James Walsham, of Knill Court, Herefordshire, was a Deputy Lieutenant of Herefordshire and Radnorshire, and a county magistrate in both these counties. If his baronetcy dated only from September 1831, it had been conferred because Walsham was the nearest heir to a much older baronetcy recently extinct. On his mother's side Walsham claimed descent from ancient Princes of Wales. More immediately relevant, his wife was a sister of Matthew Bell, Esq., of Woolsington, near Newcastle upon Tyne; Bell was a very important local figure, Tory MP for South Northumberland from 1832 until 1852, prominent in Tyneside coal and railway developments, but also an influential and popular member of local landed society.<sup>1</sup> Walsham therefore brought to his work as Assistant Poor Law Commissioner in North East England a secure personal *auctoritas* derived from his strongly entrenched position in the upper reaches of contemporary society.

In addition Walsham was an eminently sensible man, and his own common sense and flexibility combined with his personal status to make him an outstandingly successful agent of government.<sup>2</sup> He was on very good terms with his superiors on the Poor Law Commission. Indeed in status, age and attitude to social problems he was very similar to Cornwall Lewis and Shaw-Lefevre, two of the first Commissioners. Walsham was on particularly good terms with Shaw-Lefevre, and their semi-official correspondence was one of the main channels for poor law business in the area during Walsham's tenure of this post. A very typical endorsement in the Poor Law Papers reads: "Follow the course suggested by Sir J. Walsham – *vide* his private letter to Mr. Lefevre of the 22nd. inst."

Sir John Walsham, Bart., was not at all likely to be over-awed by local Poor Law Guardians, rather they were likely to be impressed by his rank. In addition he possessed a marked capacity for easy personal relations, finding it possible to communicate amicably with men from very varying social positions. He was viciously attacked by local

<sup>1</sup> Some information about Bell appears in N. McCord and A. E. Carrick, "Northumberland in the General Election of 1852", in: *Northern History*, Vol. I, 1966. An aunt of Walsham was the wife of Sir Francis Burdett.

<sup>2</sup> The first baronet inaugurated a tradition of family service; the son of the Assistant Poor Law Commissioner enjoyed a diplomatic career of modest distinction, while I fear that some readers may derive a grim satisfaction from the circumstance that the Poor Law Assistant Commissioner's grandson was an Inspector of Chinese Labour in the Transvaal.

left-wing radicals, but such journals as the *Northern Liberator* do not seem to have been widely representative, and there is evidence to suggest that Walsham obtained a genuine local popularity.

His first task in introducing the new administrative machinery for poor law purposes was to furnish his superiors with statistical information about the areas in which new Poor Law Unions of existing parishes and townships were to be created. In this way the central Commission became possessed of information drawn from all over the country, describing the economy and social situation of each area, its population and wealth, and the way in which its poor law problems had been tackled.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes these reports contain comment or argument from the Assistant Commissioner, and in the early example from South Shields Walsham indulged himself with a lengthy digression which illustrates the standpoint, not entirely a practical one, with which he approached his task on Tyneside:

“The seaport of South Shields itself, like its opposite neighbour, North Shields, enjoys all the advantages of trade and commerce in common with Newcastle, particularly in the coal trade – and the pauperism, consequently, is confined almost exclusively to the aged and infirm (of whom a vast proportion are decayed seamen) and to the widows of keelmen and pitmen .... although ... very little reduction is immediately to be anticipated from the establishment of the Union, I look forward with much confidence to the period when, under your guidance, the future Boards of Guardians will have guarded against the replacing the present paupers as they die off from age, by another generation, aged and infirm as their predecessors though they may be. Pauperism in these districts in any shape is inexcusable, and although by presenting itself here under the guise of decrepitude and age, it shows a far less revolting front than in the southern counties, it is not the less to be firmly, however gently, resisted – for, I believe, that could the working classes of the North be convinced that their squandering the comparatively large surplus of their weekly earnings in drunkenness will lead them eventually not, as they now fancy, to an easily obtained maintenance, idle and unrestricted, from the parish, but to a workhouse where they will be passably supported, under conditions, and no more – I believe that such a conviction gradually forced upon them on one side, whilst the reverse of the picture exhibits the facilities and ad-

<sup>1</sup> These statistical reports appear in the MH 12 series for each Union; for example, the South Shields report quoted here is in MH 12/3201, Walsham/PLC, 16/30/1836.

vantages of savings' banks and friendly societies, may, in time, lead to the entire – or nearly entire – destruction of pauperism in the North of England. Time to effect such a change must necessarily be given, but when you see a working community, naturally orderly and industrious, earning habitually double their outgoings, it is impossible not to feel both anxious and sanguine in wishing to force them, if force be necessary, to lay by a part of those now wasted earnings against the days of sickness, or age, or misfortune, rather than to connive, as it were, by overstrained humanity to paupers because they are old, at their adhering in youth & manhood to the fatal but common practice, which is inculcated by the maxim of 'eat, drink, and be merry', for tomorrow the parish will find us whatever we may stand in need of ... I ask pardon for this somewhat long digression."

Not the least of Walsham's good qualities was his flexibility, which soon made him realise that things were not in fact as simple as this. Moreover it is abundantly clear from the mass of the correspondence that Walsham was very much concerned to see to it that the new system was introduced and operated with the absolute minimum of suffering to the poor. Time and time again when he intervened in local poor law affairs, it was to ensure leniency or special treatment for some hard individual case.

Before the introduction of the new system poor relief on Tyneside cost each year roughly 7 shillings and 6 pence per head of population.<sup>1</sup> In the early years of the new Poor Law Unions this expenditure was reduced, mainly by greater efficiency in operation, by some 10-15%, although in the more difficult local economic situation of the early 1840s, expenditure increased again.

The Assistant Commissioner recommended to the Poor Law Commission plans for the establishment of the local Poor Law Unions, and the electoral arrangements for the Boards of Guardians. For example, the Tynemouth Union was made up by combining the existing local area of jurisdiction known as the East Division of the Castle Ward of Northumberland with the chapelry of Cramlington, and the "wealthy and populous parish of Longbenton". This Union was to be administered by a Board of 47 Poor Law Guardians, 7 from Tynemouth itself, 5 from North Shields, 5 from Longbenton, 4 from Chirton, 4 from Wallsend, 2 each from Hartley, Newsham, South Blyth and Cowpen,

<sup>1</sup> The figure cited for South Shields in the report mentioned in note 9 was an average recent annual expenditure of £9049, or about 7s. 6d. per head. For the predominantly rural Castle Ward Union, Walsham cited £5744 and 7s. 5d.; MH 12/9002, Walsham/PLC, 24/8/36.



and one from every other parish in the Union. The elections of Guardians were carried out by the existing parish authorities. Each ratepayer received a voting paper bearing the names of the candidates, and the duly completed papers were collected from the voters' homes – a half-way house between open voting on the hustings and the later secret ballot.

An interesting point arose in connection with the formation of the Gateshead Union. In these years that town was effectively controlled by a party of moderate liberals headed by W. H. Brockett, which monopolised most of the local channels of influence.<sup>1</sup> Newcastle had been created as a Poor Law Union by itself, and the Gateshead leaders seem to have wanted a similar arrangement for their town. Walsham was adamant, however, and insisted that the Union should be larger and include the neighbouring areas of Ryton, Winlaton and Whickham, for he considered it “*seriously undesirable* that Guardians of the same *clique* should have the *sole* control of a Union”.<sup>2</sup> After a little experience, however, Walsham came to appreciate that the Brockett group were the best friends of the new Poor Law, and his attitude was modified accordingly, as we shall see.

In the order establishing each Union, the Poor Law Commission stipulated a property qualification for Guardians; in the Gateshead Union, for instance, only men rated to the poor rates at a valuation of £25 per annum or more were eligible. In the early elections of Guardians, the returns seem to have regularly reflected the existing pattern of influence in each area; Walsham reported of the first Tynemouth Board that “The Guardians elected are, without exception, the most influential persons in their respective parishes.”<sup>3</sup>

The Boards of Guardians included in addition to elected members, a small but important *ex officio* minority of magistrates. These men were usually possessed of considerable local influence, and the first Chairmen of all the local Unions were county magistrates. The tendency later, however, was for these *ex officio* Guardians to drop out more and more from the day to day routine administration of the affairs of the Union.

From the beginning the Poor Law Commission exercised a meticulous supervision of the activities of the Unions, from its headquarters in Somerset House. Their Secretary, the indefatigable Edwin Chadwick, devised ever more complicated bureaucratic forms and procedures. By 1837 letters to be issued from Somerset House might be produced

<sup>1</sup> N. McCord, “Gateshead Politics in the Age of Reform”, in: *Northern History*, Vol. IV, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> MH 12/3068, Walsham/PLC, 18/10/1836.

<sup>3</sup> MH 12/9156, Walsham/PLC 7/9/1836.



on a printed form, with places for initials under the headings "Draughted by", "Copied by", "Examined by", "Dispatched by". Separate forms were to be used by Unions for each class of official to be appointed. Considerable care was taken to see to it that Unions used a standard set of books and forms approved by the Commission. Even the most minor appointment made locally required the sanction of the Commission, and every individual departure from the general orders of the new system must be immediately reported to Somerset House and required the Commission's approval. In practice the Commission relied heavily on advice from the regional Assistant Commissioner in its handling of local problems, and Walsham was regularly consulted and his advice taken on questions involving North East England; in the documents consulted for this paper there is no example of the Commission over-ruling his opinion, even when doubts were expressed. A complex triangular correspondence was involved between individual Boards, Walsham and Somerset House. Although the Commission's administrative machinery was over-centralised, the system worked tolerably well during these early years on Tyneside. The good-will and informal contacts existing prevented the over-centralisation from producing confusion, although it may well be that in later years the structure tended towards administrative atrophy, and perhaps played a part in impairing the usefulness of the 1834 system as an effective system of relief.

One problem which bedevilled the poor law system, as it did the other expanding organs of government, was the difficulty of finding and keeping reliable and efficient staff at the lower levels. On a number of occasions lesser officials had to be dismissed for either dishonesty or neglect of duty. One category which caused anxiety was the Relieving Officer; each Union was divided into districts for the purpose of the actual distribution of relief in cash and in goods. A Relieving Officer was appointed for each district, and attended at various points in his district at set times each week. Obviously trouble at this level could have serious consequences for the people dependent on poor relief. In October 1836 William Pickering was appointed Relieving Officer for the Newburn district of the Castle Ward Union; he had previously served for twenty years as assistant poor law overseer in a nearby district. Early in 1838 complaints reached the Board of Guardians that Pickering was neglecting his duties and drinking heavily. Some members of the Board and the Poor Law Commission were in favour of his instant dismissal, but other Guardians suggested that in view of his long services Pickering be allowed to serve until the end of his present engagement in March 1838, and then resign. Walsham eventually supported this plan, and the Commission agreed that "in

deference to the benevolent feeling of the Guardians towards this officer, they will permit him to resign”.

Other categories of officers could also give trouble, in an age when administrative efficiency was not an established tradition. Rowntree, the Clerk to the Gateshead Union and a close associate of Brockett, was severely reprimanded in December 1840 for irregularities in the way in which he carried out his duties, although he was acquitted of charges of actual peculation which had been made against him. Occasionally Walsham or the Clerks of individual Unions were able to complain of dilatoriness on the part of the staff at Somerset House, where the over-centralisation sometimes resulted in the accumulation of a back-log of work.

In many ways a cardinal point of the new poor law system was the Union workhouse. The Poor Law Commission and their supporters pressed for the construction in each Union of a workhouse so planned and equipped as to take its place as a key element in poor law administration. On Tyneside Walsham worked very hard to persuade the various Boards that it was vitally important to the success of the system to provide workhouse accommodation of a suitable kind. A fundamental principle of the new approach was the limitation of outdoor relief to the able bodied poor. It would still be granted in cases of “sickness, accident or other urgent necessity”, but apart from these emergencies entry into the Union workhouse was to be the only method of obtaining relief for the able-bodied adult worker. The system was deliberately designed to make independence and work more attractive than idleness and battenning upon the sources of relief. In the Union workhouse the inmates would be separated as far as possible into age and sex groups. The diet, discipline and work were to be monotonous and unattractive, so as to induce the poor to exert themselves to obtain and keep employment outside the workhouse. This principle of “less eligibility” in workhouse arrangements, was one feature upon which opposition to the new system often fastened.

In practice, conditions in the Union workhouses were often better in many ways than conditions for many of the poor outside them. The planning and construction of the new workhouses were stringently supervised by the Poor Law Commission, who retained their own expert architect to advise on plans and materials. For example, when in the spring of 1837 the new South Shields workhouse was being planned, among the conditions the Poor Law Commission demanded before sanctioning the proposals was the replacement of the proposed  $2\frac{1}{2}$ " by 7" joists by stronger ones,  $2\frac{1}{2}$ " by 10"; all of the wooden floors were to be  $1\frac{1}{4}$ " yellow deal instead of the proposed whitewood, and the lining of the workhouse cistern should be 81b. of lead on the bottom

instead of the proposed 6 lb. Archaeological evidence comes to the historian's aid in establishing the stout construction of these Union workhouses built in the years around 1840; the Tynemouth, Newcastle and Hexham Union workhouses are still working as parts of local hospitals.<sup>1</sup> In a letter of 5th September 1841<sup>2</sup> Walsham mentioned as an established fact that

“you supply the ablebodied inmate of a workhouse (not merely with sufficient, but) with superior food clothing fuel & lodging; few small ratepayers and fewer independent labourers can obtain for themselves and their families such food clothing fuel & lodging as are the portion of the inhabitants of ‘Starvation Bastilles’...”

In these circumstances the discipline and monotony of the workhouse regimen was the only way in which in practice the principle of “less eligibility” could be applied. In some ways the application even of that sombre principle could be flexible. For example, when it was made clear to them by Walsham and some of the local poor law officials that the ordinary diet of the working classes on Tyneside was better than in some other northern districts, the Poor Law Commission sanctioned correspondingly better diets for the local workhouses.<sup>3</sup> Of course these dietaries were not worked out with careful regard to dietetics by modern standards, and there were faults in them. That for Newcastle, for instance, provided a sufficient food intake for the elderly and for young children – who formed by far the majority of those affected – but may well have been inadequate in some respects for adolescents or the able-bodied worker; there are, however, a number of uncertainties in the descriptions given in the relevant documents, which prevent complete accuracy in assessment. It is difficult to

<sup>1</sup> Cadman, *op. cit.*, for detailed description of building of Hexham Union workhouse. MH 12/3201, draft of PLC/South Shields Board, 23/3/1837, for the insistent detailed corrections cited here in text.

<sup>2</sup> This passage occurs in a very illuminating letter – MH 12/9002, Walsham/PLC, 5/9/1841 – in which Walsham argues against a scheme for the employment of workhouse inmates in the fields. In this letter Walsham sets out at considerable length many of his conceptions of the proper principles on which the poor law should operate.

<sup>3</sup> MH 12/9096, contains a lengthy correspondence of the spring of 1837 on this question. Many of the local dietaries of these years exist in the MH 12 series and elsewhere; in general they support the idea that the workhouse diet, though monotonous and far from Lucullan, nevertheless was better than the food of many of the “independent” poor outside. I am indebted to D. Bird and J. Nightingale of this University for their comments on the Newcastle workhouse dietary.

know how to evaluate the usefulness in practice of vegetables included “when in season”.

During the establishment of each Union there was a breathing space for transition, during which the full regulations of the new system were not enforced. Then, when the regional Assistant Commissioner was satisfied that this could be done without too much hardship, the Poor Law Commission would issue a formal document placing the Union concerned under such of its general regulations as were considered appropriate. The operation of the new workhouses, and the limitations of outdoor relief to the able-bodied, all came into operation in this piece-meal fashion. When the general regulations were brought into force, there was still provision for concessions to meet difficult individual cases. This provision was by no means a dead letter, and there were many cases of exceptions from either the out-relief limitation or the stricter aspects of workhouse life. Each of these individual exceptions required the sanction of the Poor Law Commission, but that power was exercised regularly on the advice of the local officials and the Assistant Commissioner.

At local level too the administration of the new system was not harsh. In these early years the Tyneside Boards of Guardians seem to have taken their responsibilities seriously, and set about the work systematically. The interviewing of applicants for relief was not abandoned to the subordinate officials; in response to a circular in 1839,<sup>1</sup> Walsham informed the Poor Law Commission that in all the Unions of his district

“it is the custom of the Guardians to see each individual applicant for relief; as a matter of course generally speaking, but invariably upon his (or her) expressing a desire for an interview...”

The Boards normally worked through a system of committees. The standing orders of the Newcastle Board prescribed a number of standing committees, which included one for out-relief, a visiting committee for the workhouse, a finance committee, and a committee of general superintendence, which met before each full Board meeting and scrutinised the books of the various officers of the Union. At each Board meeting a series of standard questions designed to elicit the Union’s current state were answered by the spokesman of this last committee. Additional *ad hoc* committees were appointed whenever necessary.

<sup>1</sup> MH 12/9096, Walsham/PLC 23/2/1839. If dissatisfied by the reception given by the interviewing Guardians, the poor had a right to appeal to the general Board meeting.

Ample evidence exists to show that a genuine concern for the local poor existed among the members of local Boards. The Poor Law Commission's escape clause which allowed outdoor relief to be given to able-bodied poor in times of accident, sickness or other urgent necessity, was frequently invoked. Other forms of consideration also occur; the Hexham Board's records show a series of decisions to grant loans to various individuals to tide them over difficulties.<sup>1</sup>

In most cases Walsham's considerable local influence was strongly behind a liberal interpretation of the regulations of the new system. He was a keen supporter of the reformed workhouse principles, but equally ready to allow exceptions to be made in appropriate categories. He entirely agreed with the Poor Law Commission in regularly exempting from the principle of separation of the sexes in the workhouse elderly couples who wished to remain together. In a number of cases he obtained the Poor Law Commission's sanction for paupers to receive out-relief while living away from their own Union, where such a policy seemed in the best interests of the poor involved.

On the whole Walsham's relations with the local Boards were very harmonious. In view of the remarks made earlier on the importance of his personal status, it is noteworthy that the biggest thorn in his side in these years was an opponent of equivalent weight, Sir Charles Monck, Bart., of Belsay, who deployed his formidable local influence to thwart for some years Walsham's determination to see a well-regulated Union workhouse built in the predominantly rural Castle Ward Union. In the late 1830s there was constant friction on this issue between Walsham, backed by most of the Guardians who were active in administering the Union, and Monck, backed by his dependents and friends. Such disagreement, however, very rarely clouded Walsham's relations with the local Boards of Guardians.

The Assistant Commissioner's laudable determination to prevent the Gateshead Union from falling under the control of the clique of moderate liberals headed by W. H. Brockett proved short-lived. Brockett and his friends were staunch friends of the new poor law, while their enemies in Gateshead – the Tories and the extreme radicals – were also the enemies of the new poor law. Walsham soon discovered that the only practicable way of conducting poor law business in the Gateshead Union was by co-operation with the Brockett group. One of Brockett's collaborators became the first Clerk to the Union, while the Board contained many names already familiar in other channels of influence in the Gateshead district. An attempt by his political

<sup>1</sup> Cadman, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-100. One example must suffice here; in April 1838, Thomas Hedley of Chollerton was given a loan of £8 to replace a horse which had recently died, his business depending upon his having a horse.

enemies to disallow Brockett's election as a Guardian in the spring of 1838 was frustrated by Walsham, and at his prompting by the Poor Law Commission itself, standing firmly by Brockett in a rather dubious claim.<sup>1</sup> If the Brockett group's methods of political control were sometimes questionable, there is no suggestion that their influence produced any harsher treatment of the poor in that Union. Disputes about the control of the Union's patronage were more fierce than any disagreement on the Board about matters of relief.

Apart from these rather special cases Walsham's good nature and flexibility of approach helped a great deal in poor law administration. In a markedly unequal society he was able to combine a capacity for conciliating men of influence with a genuine concern and frank contacts with the poor of the area. One good example of Walsham's usefulness as a personal contact occurred in May 1837. In Tynemouth he met William Richmond, a prominent local Tory and secretary of the Tyneside shipowners' association. Richmond complained that he had received neither reply nor acknowledgement to a letter on the poor law which he had recently sent to the Poor Law Commission. Walsham soothed Richmond down, but the same day the Assistant Commissioner despatched an urgent letter to his superiors in London. He described Richmond as "a man greatly given to speaking speeches and writing pamphlets, and to being a great bore – we are however great friends"; however, since Richmond was also 'a somewhat important and stirring personage' Walsham pressed the Poor Law Commission to send off a respectful reply for Richmond immediately. As usual, his advice was immediately implemented. When Walsham helped to kill a scheme put forward ingenuously by the Castle Ward Board for the employment of workhouse inmates in agricultural labour, he advised the Poor Law Commission to make concessions on minor matters to that Board, in order to assuage resentment in that rather difficult Board.

When in the early 1840s there was a sharp increase in unemployment and consequently in poor law expenditure, the Poor Law Commission's enquiries were satisfactorily met by the local agents. In July 1842 Walsham's successor, Hawley, persuaded the Poor Law Commission to delay the issue of the full workhouse regulations for Gateshead, including the restrictions on out-relief to the able-bodied poor, until the local employment position improved. In a number of local Unions

<sup>1</sup> MH 12/3068 contains a lengthy correspondence on this matter; one point of interest which emerges is that the property of this town "boss" was rated at a lower figure than its true value warranted. The Brockett Papers in Gateshead Central Reference Library contain material on the administration of the poor law in that area.

the Boards provided employment on road-making or similar activities for the temporarily swollen numbers of unemployed. There does not, however, seem at that time to have been any general change in the attitudes adopted towards the poor by the local and central agencies of the poor law.

Ultimately any judgement on the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act must rest on the way in which it affected the actual treatment given to the poor. The overwhelming majority of cases were dealt with smoothly, and leave little trace in the record; it may be more illuminating to cite a few of the more difficult and serious cases which arose locally.

The tragic case of Elizabeth Graham was the occasion for bitter attacks on the local poor law administration in the summer of 1838.<sup>1</sup> Graham was an old Scots woman who had lived in Newcastle for some time, scraping a precarious living by the sale on the streets of tapes and ribbons. On a number of previous occasions she had been forced to apply to the local poor law agencies for relief. On the evening of Sunday, 8th July her drunken landlady ejected her from her lodging, despite the fact that Graham felt very ill. Monday, 9th July saw her refused relief by two alternative agencies in Newcastle. The local relieving officer of the Poor Law Union, Rutherford, refused to admit her to the workhouse on the grounds that she was a tramp; the proper place for relief in such circumstances was the Newcastle Mendicity Office, which existed for the relief of such people. The Keeper of the Mendicity Office, Robins, refused to take Graham in, declaring that as she was an inhabitant of Newcastle his orders positively forbade him to accept her. He added, in conversation with the policeman who brought the sick woman, "We have often been bothered with her". Rebuffed here, the police again tried to persuade Rutherford to admit Graham to the ordinary workhouse, but he again refused. The police provided the old woman with a cell at the police station, but she died during the night of 9th-10th July. Neither Graham herself, nor any of the officials involved in this sad affair, had appreciated just how ill she was.

The news of this tragedy caused a tremendous public sensation, reflected in both the national and the local press, and provided the enemies of the poor law with excellent ammunition. The inquest jury strongly criticised the actions of the officials involved, and gave their own fees as a present to the Newcastle police constable who had at least

<sup>1</sup> The Times, 17/7/1838, and a number of relevant letters of July 1838 in MH 12/9096. Letters of May 1840 are in same volume.



tried hard to do something. Walsham and the Newcastle Board of Guardians held a full enquiry, and concluded that Rutherford had broken his instructions, which clearly prescribed the giving of adequate relief in cases of urgency. Rutherford was dismissed from his post. In May 1840 the question of the respective functions of the workhouse and the Mendicity Office in connection with people found destitute arose again; in the resultant correspondence Walsham stressed that the over-riding consideration must be that immediate relief should be available for urgent cases at any time of the day or night.

In September 1837 the Tynemouth workhouse was the scene of an unpleasant little affair.<sup>1</sup> An 83-year old inmate, Isabella Marshall, became involved in a quarrel about a piece of cloth. Marshall refused to obey the orders of the workhouse master – whom a local doctor subsequently described as “a very humane man but a strict disciplinarian”. Marshall continued to create a disturbance, and the workhouse master was unable to induce her to be quiet. He accordingly ordered her to be put in a strait-jacket; the evidence as to whether or not she was also gagged is conflicting. Marshall’s daughter and son-in-law brought charges of brutality against the workhouse master. The result was a special meeting of the Tynemouth Board of Guardians, which Walsham attended; the plaintiffs were also present, and a number of witnesses were examined. At Walsham’s suggestion, the Board then appointed a special committee, which took further evidence in the workhouse. After these hearings Marshall’s family agreed that there was no real foundation for the complaint of ill-treatment, and at Walsham’s suggestion an arrangement was come to whereby Isabella Marshall left the workhouse and went to live with her daughter, the Board allowing her a small pension.

The third example of a difficult case is that of David Maddison.<sup>2</sup> Maddison lived in the Castle Ward Union, and he had been a school-master before he succumbed to a common social disaster of the day and became an alcoholic. His mind became seriously affected and by the late 1830s he had already spent one term in a lunatic asylum. His wife had also succumbed to the same temptation, but was not affected to the same extent. Maddison refused to enter the workhouse, nor would he do the light work which local farmers, who remembered him in better days, would gladly have given him. Instead he wrote a series of letters, gradually deteriorating in content and presentation,

<sup>1</sup> MH 12/9156, letters of September 1837.

<sup>2</sup> Maddison’s letters occur in the Poor Law Papers and in the Home Office Papers too, but the best source for this matter is MH 12/9002, Walsham/PLC, 1/1/1840. Maddison complained about both the Castle Ward and the Newcastle Boards of Guardians.

complaining in severe terms of misconduct on the part of the local poor law agencies. In its usual way, when these letters arrived at Somerset House, the Poor Law Commission wrote to Walsham and to the Union officials to demand a full account of the circumstances involved. On the first day of 1840 Walsham despatched a very full description of the situation. He had arranged some time earlier that his brother-in-law, Bell, would supply the Maddisons with a free cottage and free coal. In addition Bell gave Mrs Maddison employment, on condition that she refrained from drinking. The Castle Ward Board of Guardians gave serious consideration as to their best policy, and recognised that to give cash relief in these circumstances would be simply to place in Maddison's hands the means to drink himself into an asylum again. Instead the Guardians gave to Mrs Maddison a grant of relief in the form of food and other necessities, again on condition that she refrained from drinking. Walsham informed the Poor Law Commission that this had been the situation for some time, and that when last he had talked to Mrs Maddison she seemed to be making a genuine effort to keep her promises of abstinence. There is certainly no suggestion here of a harsh régime, but rather the application to a difficult case of a great deal of effort and concern on the part of the authorities involved.

Overall this is in fact the kind of impression which emerges from a consideration of the evidence relating to the administration of the 1834 system in this area in the late 1830s and early 1840s. There is, of course, evidence of hostility to the system on Tyneside, but much of the criticism can be shown to be exaggerated or unfounded. A political origin for many of the attacks can be clearly demonstrated. For the groups which disliked the Whig government the new poor law, and its administration, provided very welcome ammunition, which was used with a notable lack of scruple. On Tyneside radical groups led by men like Charles Attwood and Larkin soon became disillusioned with the aftermath of the reform triumph of 1832. Early attempts to discredit the Whig government met with little success; the first campaign launched for this purpose concentrated on the sufferings of Ireland under Whig rule, but Irish grievances rarely provoked enthusiastic sympathy in Great Britain, and a campaign against the poor law offered a better opportunity. It was certainly true that the new poor law administration faltered on occasion – indeed it would have been surprising indeed if an innovation on such a scale had not shown occasional weaknesses – but if the administration of the new system is looked at in its contemporary context, in a society which was frequently harsh and inconsiderate, then the record on Tyneside in these years at least must seem enlightened rather than the reverse.

It may well be that this enlightenment did not prove permanent. By the end of the nineteenth century at latest, the working classes of the area feared the Union workhouse, in a way which does not seem to have been the case in the early years of the new poor law. The poor law system may well have fallen into administrative atrophy in mid-century, losing much of its flexibility and becoming a much less satisfactory agency of relief. In addition the continuing campaign of political vilification of the poor law, and the very important changes in the condition and attitudes of the working classes, all contributed to different circumstances later in the nineteenth century. The working classes changed a great deal, while the poor law system certainly did not keep pace in this age of social transition. Nevertheless, in the critical years of the late 1830s and early 1840s, it seems clear enough that the administration of the poor law on Tyneside was sufficiently humane and efficient to make the system an important and useful element in local society.

Two comments from men who knew the system well may make an apt conclusion. In January 1838 a Newcastle poor law overseer informed the Home Office that<sup>1</sup>

“I can bear testimony to the fact that the Guardians are more humane & liberal to the Poor than ever the Select Vestry were...”

The first Chairman of the Gateshead Board of Guardians was a local magistrate, G. H. Ramsay; when he relinquished his office as chairman, he had this to say<sup>2</sup>

“I have done my best to serve the interests of the Rate Payers, at the same time keeping steadily in view, the comforts and necessities of the poor and destitute; and if the casting vote was necessary, I believe I always gave it to the weaker party. When the Poor Law Amendment Act came first into operation, I confess, I was but ill-disposed towards it, but the practical experience I have since had, has convinced me of the great benefits it will unfold to all interested.

Notwithstanding my private antipathy to the Bill, I thought it my duty to obey the call made upon me to officiate as a Guardian; and I had another motive, viz. – I felt that if the Law was harsh and unjust, by acting, I might help to soften its rigours and

<sup>1</sup> Public Record Office, HO 40/39, James Scott/Home Office, 5/1/1838. Scott describes Walsham as “humane as well as talented”.

<sup>2</sup> MH 12/9002; press cutting of Ramsay/Gateshead Board of Guardians, 27/3/1838. Ramsay also includes high praise of Walsham.

benefit the poor. Some persons, who shall be nameless, calling themselves the 'Poor Man's Friends', placarded before the public the most palpable untruths, without having the slightest knowledge of the system, or the wants of the poor whom they pretended to protect, but of whom they only wish to make tools, to work out their own sinister views; this will all fail, the working classes are sharp eyed, and are well aware that no dissolute idle Person has a just claim to live upon the industry and hard-earnings of others.

Gentlemen, my humble opinion now is, and I have not come to the conclusion hastily, that the really destitute are better fed, better clothed, and better lodged, than they were under the old system, and I have had not a little experience, having served every parochial office and been in active attendance on parish affairs for twenty-eight years in a populous parish ..."

There seems no reason to doubt the essential truth of these assessments of the new poor law in its early years on Tyneside.