

# Navigating the Nineteenth- Century Institution



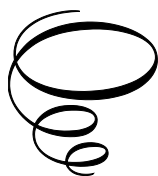
# Navigating the Nineteenth- Century Institution:

*Asylum and Workhouse*

Edited by

Carol Beardmore

**Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing**



Navigating the Nineteenth-Century Institution: Asylum and Workhouse

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This book first published 2024

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-0364-0441-2

ISBN (13): 978-1-0364-0441-3

This book is dedicated:

To all the Volunteers of *In Their Own Write*

To Caroline Walton whose research made us consider the value of gossip  
in the workhouse.

And to my cousin Helen who was lost and then found.

Thank you, Helen, for your friendship and long conversations, they  
have brought me such joy and pleasure. I will miss you.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables .....	ix
Acknowledgements .....	x
Chapter One.....	1
New Perspectives: The Victorian Workhouse and Asylum <i>Carol Beardmore</i>	
Chapter Two .....	20
Life-Cycle and the Navigation of the New Poor Law Workhouse: The Case of Casuals and Vagrants <i>Steven King and Megan Yates</i>	
Chapter Three .....	45
Institutional Landscapes of Welfare and Socio-Economic Crises in Nineteenth-Century England <i>Lewis Darwen</i>	
Chapter Four .....	71
Casual Wards of London: Vagrant, Poor Laws, and the Metropolitan Workhouse <i>Alistair Robinson</i>	
Chapter Five .....	97
Negotiating the Workhouse: The Voice of the Poor in the Poor Law Inquiry <i>Carol Beardmore</i>	
Chapter Six .....	122
'I never mentioned it to the visiting Committee I knew they would not attend to it' Workhouse Pauper 'Complaints Procedure' under the New Poor Law <i>Paul Carter</i>	
Chapter Seven.....	154
Rebels without Applause: Locating the 'Awkward Squad' in the Nineteenth-Century Workhouse <i>Peter Jones</i>	

Chapter Eight.....	177
Circulation, Circularity and the ‘Place’ of Institutions in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales <i>Elizabeth Hurren and Steven King</i>	
Chapter Nine.....	203
Resistance to Moral Treatment: Pauper Deviance in the Lunatic Asylum <i>Cara Dobbing</i>	
Chapter Ten .....	227
‘Scenes from the Life of a Sufferer’: Patient Writing in the Nineteenth-Century Asylum <i>Laura Blair</i>	
Chapter Eleven .....	250
‘Pity My Distress’: Barbadian Women’s Negotiation with the New Poor Law Authorities 1880-1895 <i>Ayshah Johnson</i>	
Chapter Twelve .....	270
Drawing Conclusions -What Next <i>Carol Beardmore</i>	
Bibliography .....	281
Index .....	311

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 .....	58
Temporary Fever Hospitals in Lancashire 1846-7	
Table 2 .....	62
Composition of the Pauper Population 1 July 1848-1 July 1851	
Table 3 .....	66
Manchester and Salford District Provident Society: Number of Applications, 1846-8	
Table 4 .....	192
Bolton Lunatic Applications 1882-1885	

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume owes a great deal of thanks to the authors of the individual chapters, which together bring a wide-ranging overview of the institution of the New Poor Law and the resulting workhouse created by it and the various Lunacy Acts which led to the asylums of the nineteenth century. Their patience and forbearance have both been much appreciated.

As with any academic work we are reliant on the goodwill and help from numerous archivists and record office staff, who provide the raw material from which historians work and who always do more than we ask.

I am grateful to my colleagues of *In Their Own Write*, to Professor Steven King the PI and to Dr Paul Carter CI. Using the staff reading room at TNA was a huge privilege. Both Steve and Paul's prodigious knowledge of the New Poor Law certainly made the project easier. To Natalie Carter and particularly to Peter Jones with whom I spent many hours poring over volumes of MH12 (the Ministry of Health archive which holds the correspondence between the unions and Poor Law Commissioners). I still miss the opportunity to end the day over a beer in a local hostelry discussing the revelations revealed, not least the moth which escaped from one of the boxes, or the file which at some point long before it arrived at TNA had provided a snack for a hungry mouse.

The biggest thanks must go the volunteers at TNA who gave freely of their time to plough through numerous documents and to those at Bromsgrove, Heanor, and elsewhere who then transcribed the letters, testimonies, newspapers, and other sources.

To Sue Hawkins, who not only oversaw the volunteers at TNA but who answered endless emails, investigated, and shared some of the stories of the people we uncovered. She on request went back and double-checked facts on demand as well as supplying extra photographs when asked. Her knowledge and attention were much valued.

And to Geoff Monks who puts up with having to read constant drafts of everything I write. At the end of the day though all mistakes are my own.

The final thanks must go to the paupers and their advocates, the mad, the bad and the downright awkward for without their letters, correspondence, and documentary evidence none of this would have been possible.

# CHAPTER ONE

## NEW PERSPECTIVES: THE VICTORIAN WORKHOUSE AND ASYLUM

### CAROL BEARDMORE

#### **Overview**

The framework which gave Victorian England its most iconic institutions, the workhouse and asylum is enshrined within two main Acts of Parliament. The workhouse and the consequent formation of its unions were the result of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. The county asylum was founded by the County Asylums Act 1845. In the same year, the Lunacy Act for the first time treated the insane as being of unsound mind, rather than social outcasts, a significant change in attitudes. Both Acts came out of a need to control unproductive members of society. The former sought to end out relief and to put usefully to work the able-bodied, particularly men, even if that work appeared aimless and with little purpose, such as breaking stones and picking oakum. The latter Act sought to have the same effect by incarcerating the insane. Two Commissions were set up to manage, administer, and set up the necessary rules and regulations to govern the day-to-day running of these institutions. The aim was to regulate life for both staff and inmates. Eventually, the Poor Law Amendment Act reached Caribbean colonies such as Barbados, where it had an impact in the creation in 1880 of its own poor law. By moving beyond the shores of England and Wales outwards it is possible to explore how the empire and legacy of slavery continued to impact the poor, and particularly poor black women.

Back in the metropole, even before the Poor Law Amendment Act had reached the statute books, three Poor Law Commissioners had been appointed: Thomas Frankland Lewis a former Tory MP, John Shaw

Lefevre a Whig barrister, and Captain George Nicholls.<sup>1</sup> Eight Assistant Commissioners were appointed in 1834, and to these were added three more the following year. Edwin Chadwick was bitterly disappointed not to have been appointed as one of the Commissioners. Consequently, he was never content with his position as Secretary to the Commission. This decision around his appointment was based partly on his 'station in society' which was classed as being too low to hold such a prominent position with its linked status.<sup>2</sup> Despite his subordinate situation, he still had considerable power, for example, he had a dislike of the vestries which had been the stalwart of relief organisation under the Old Poor Law and he was determined to take control away from these local bodies and move it to the centre. The first job of the Assistant Poor Law Commissioners was, therefore, to form parishes into unions and by 1840. the 15,500 or so parishes in England and Wales had been grouped into 531 poor law unions. Each union often had a large town at its centre and the ratepayers of each constituent parish funded the union by setting a property tax. Once formed, the power within the union passed from overseers and vestry to an elected Board of Guardians.<sup>3</sup>

From the two Lunacy Acts of 1845, the Lunacy Commission was established. This resulted in the appointment of eleven Lunacy Commissioners who were given the remit of supervising the treatment of 'lunatics' in England and Wales. From the eleven, six commissioners – three medical and three legal – were formally employed with a salary of £1500 per annum. The other five were honorary members whose main function was to attend board meetings.<sup>4</sup> One of the main roles of the Commissioners was to oversee the building of a network of publicly owned county asylums. It was, however, as an institution, fully integrated into the New Poor Law and from 1845 onwards Poor Law medical officers were required to visit and compile a quarterly report on those pauper 'lunatics' who were not held within the asylum itself.<sup>5</sup> The Commissioners

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<sup>1</sup> N. Longmate, *The Workhouse*, (London: Temple Smith, 1974), 60.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>3</sup> D. Green, *Pauper Capital and the Poor Law, 1790-1870* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 13.

<sup>4</sup> K. M. Burtinshaw and J. R. F Burt, *Lunatics, Imbeciles and Idiots: A History of Insanity in Nineteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2017), 42.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, P. Bartlett, 'The Asylum and the Poor Law: The productive alliance', J. Melling and B. Forsythe, *Insanity, Institutions and Society, 1800-1914: A social history of madness in comparative perspective* (London: Routledge,

of each governing body had a mandate to inspect either the workhouse or asylum at will, although their legal power to enact change was limited. For example, while they had some power to transfer patients between different institutions, they were not able to effect transfers from the workhouse until 1862. Under the Act, asylums were required to improve their record keeping and the rules around incarcerating individuals were tightened to prevent wrongful admission.<sup>6</sup>

Paupers and the insane as seen throughout this volume used the rules and regulations to navigate their way through two complicated and complex institutions and their resultant systems. There were several ways to do this, for example, writing to the central authorities, to newspapers, or getting an advocate to write on your behalf. For paupers, there was already a long history of letter writing under the Old Poor Law. Steven King and Thomas Sokoll, for example, have compiled considerable databases of such letters relating to the Old Poor Law.<sup>7</sup> Peter Higginbotham argues that historians have underestimated and failed to listen to the voices of workhouse inmates, and this has helped to create the idea of the 'oppressed pauper'. The same might be said of those in the asylum.<sup>8</sup> It was believed until recently that the pauper voice largely disappeared under the New Poor Law, and consequently, as Peter Jones and Natalie Carter argue, we are in the curious position of knowing far more about the lives of paupers under the Old Poor Law than we do the new.<sup>9</sup>

While the pauper voice might be harder to find, it is there and can be found in a myriad of places; for example, the Ministry of Health files (particularly MH12) which contain amongst other documents the correspondence between the Poor Law Commissioners and the Poor Law Unions<sup>10</sup>, in the admission and patient notes of the asylum and, as Laura Blair argues in chapter ten, in the various writings of the insane, including

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2005), 51; P. Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse* (London: History Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Burtinshaw and Burt, *Lunatics, Imbeciles and Idiots*, 42.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, T. Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letter 1731-1837* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2001); Peter Jones and Steven King, (eds), *Navigating the Old English Poor Law: The Kirby Lonsdale Letters 1809-1836* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, P. Higginbottom, *The Workhouse Encyclopedia* (Stroud: The History Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Jones and Carter, 'Writing for redress: redrawing the epistolary relationship under the New Poor Law', 376.

<sup>10</sup> The Ministry of Health archive is held at The National Archives in London.

their contribution to asylum publications. Many of the authors within this volume use the direct voice of individuals within the system to explore the lived experience of the poor and while this voice is not always loud, we can still find it as a clear and present narrative across all the chapters. It is this idea, that the poor had a choice in how they used their circumstances, the rules and regulations, and local conditions to negotiate a pathway through poverty, that is at the centre of this volume. Bringing together historians who work on different aspects of the two institutions brings greater depth and breadth to this voice and allows us to see how it worked in different localities and regions.

The New Poor Law and Asylum Acts meant that those who were confined both inside and outside the walls of its institutions after 1834 had to find different ways of negotiating relief whether it be from poverty, sickness, old age, or infirmity, both physical and mental. It was no longer a case of writing to the local vestry; the poor faced making their case to a group of unknown men in London, a daunting prospect. The idea of negotiation around unfamiliarity forms the basis of Lewis Darwen's contribution to this volume in chapter three as he explores how the workhouse was just one strand in the mixed economy of welfare that Irish immigrants fleeing from the Famine used to alleviate poverty. As he argues, guardians retained significant autonomy over who obtained relief, and this ensured that no two unions operated or made relief provisions in quite the same way. At the same time, while entitlement to assistance was an inherent part of the institution, poor law guardians were only required to provide relief for those in urgent need or who had the right of settlement. It was relatively straightforward to deport back to Ireland those Irish immigrants who came forward seeking relief. Once, however, they realised the ease with which they could be removed, a change in tactics was needed, and this meant they simply stopped coming forward because they feared the consequences. This type of action feeds into the huge variety of ways in which those who were poor or mad sought to negotiate a range of institutional functions, rules, and regulations and to manipulate what they found to their benefit.

The idea that the poor were able to understand the complexities of gaining relief or were able to manoeuvre around the complexities of different laws of the nineteenth century has been under-researched. Not least because the vast archives that exist for both the New Poor Law – some 16,000 or so volumes of MH12 alone – and for asylums a multitude of correspondence, admission, and discharge books as well as Lunacy Commission reports mean that it would be impossible for one historian to explore all the different mediums. Using a multi-author approach has

allowed each to pull out a range of methods and to examine the nuances of the procedures used by those who form the case studies of this volume to circumvent these goliaths. In turn, it is possible to assess the agency of those who fought daily against the officials who set the rules and regulations, to explore how gender affected punishment, to examine the ways in which the poor and insane protested, to analyse how the settled poor negotiated relief compared to vagrants and to consider how central authorities sought to enforce uniformity. This volume in its use of a wide variety of sources, argues that if the historian cross-reads newspapers, inquiry statements, letters, poems, or autobiographies, the voice of those who were affected by the great institutions of the nineteenth -century is there and can be heard loud and clear. Taken together, this volume brings to the fore a narrative that proposes the poor were far from helpless; neither were they prepared to acquiesce and remain silent. Indeed, the opposite is true, and defiance or fighting back against those at the centre who sought to rule from afar is evident in a range of resistance activities from small gestures that sought to maintain individuality to Peter Jones's 'awkward squad' in chapter seven. In the case of the insane, as seen in chapters nine and ten, this resistance pertained to their treatment as well as the conditions in which they lived. The historiography has tended to see resistance to these systems in the form of conflict between staff and inmates which manifested in workhouse riots and punishment regimes. Yet, as Jones and King argue over Great Yarmouth, it is the subtleties of behaviour and resistance that are important.<sup>11</sup> Workhouse and asylum were rife with complex layers of dislike, low-level unrest and obstreperousness which ran across the inmate-staff divide and this is sometimes seen in central and local inquiries.<sup>12</sup> The chapters of this volume create a narrative that neither the workhouse nor asylum were as draconian, controlled, or unyielding as previously assumed.<sup>13</sup> Instead, we are left with a sense that protest did not have to be overtly violent in the form of riots but could rumble away beneath the surface with small minor acts which kept alive a spirit of individualism and resistance. This sense of agency within the institution is something that we are only just beginning to fully understand. There is a general sense that incarceration within either of the institutions which are considered here stripped inmates of their

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<sup>11</sup> S. A. King and Peter Jones, 'Fragments of Fury? Lunacy, Agency and Contestation in the Great Yarmouth Workhouse, 1890s-1900s', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 51:2 (2020), 235-265.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

individuality and brow-beat them into compliance. Yes, this might have been the case for some or many but there were significant numbers who stood up to the authority of local and central officers. This volume begins to explore the extent to which resistance and negotiation were a central feature of being poor or mad after 1834.

## New Perspectives

The ongoing focus in the historical debate on the great scandals surrounding the workhouse, such as that at Andover, has fuelled the idea that workhouses were places of ‘dark confinement and harsh treatment.’<sup>14</sup> The argument, however, set out by Ian Butler and Mark Drakeford suggests that scandals were often constructed as a means of bringing into the public domain issues that existed within an institution or a given locality.<sup>15</sup> For those in the workhouse writing to the Commissioners in London could force them to send an Assistant Commissioner to the Union to investigate matters. The inquiries thus undertaken were not necessarily about discovering the truth around a certain event or complaint, but were more often the means of establishing the competence of those who oversaw local services. While the behaviour of some union staff was certainly reprehensible and warranted severe punishment, others committed more minor misdemeanours, but paupers often used the opportunity to get someone removed who was too strict, over punished them, or was generally disliked. As Peter Jones and Steven King have surmised, by examining workhouses through the lens of scandal, the institution continues to carry with it a ‘grim stain’ that links it with incarceration, punishment, control, and abuse.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the rare glimpse we get of the workhouse from contemporaries such as John Rutherford gives a somewhat different narrative. In his book, published for the first time in 1886, Rutherford stated that it was his ‘firm conviction’ that there was ‘no institution of which the public knew less of’ than the workhouse.<sup>17</sup> Rutherford argued that generally, people perceived the workhouse as being

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> I. Butler and M. Drakeford, *Social Work on Trial: The Colwell Inquiry and the State of Welfare* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> P. Jones and S. King, *Pauper Voices, Public Opinion and Workhouse Reform in Mid-Victorian England* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 3-4.

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous and Peter Higginbottom, *Indoor Paupers Life Inside a London Workhouse* (Workhouse Press, 2013), 58.

ruled by ‘stupid guardians and unamiable, not to say dishonest officials’.<sup>18</sup> Unsurprisingly, he suggested that the picture was much more complicated and argues there was instead ‘a great deal in the character and habits of certain classes of indoor paupers to try the temper of guardians and officers’. The workhouse was thus a world wherein the problems were created by *both* officials and inmates.<sup>19</sup> For Rutherford, the workhouse ensured that indoor paupers were freed from many of the ‘things’ which took up the time and attention of people on the outside. Inmates were thus free from ‘pecuniary troubles’, they were provided with food, shelter, and clothing for themselves and their children and by the late 1880s, education and a fair start in life for their offspring.<sup>20</sup> As explored in this volume, current research has revealed that paupers themselves would move in and out of the workhouse regularly which suggests they used the institution as part of the mixed economy of makeshifts and a method of avoiding abject desolation. Harriet Rodder was one such example; in 1843 she had been an inmate of the Birmingham workhouse for two years but stated she had been in and out at various times over the last twenty years.<sup>21</sup> The regularity of her visits and many other paupers like her indicate, that while conditions may have been harsh and daily activities strictly controlled, they were not intolerable. Instead, admission and discharge were part of a wider landscape of relief through which the poor sought and used relief as they needed it.

Our picture of asylums is equally as bleak. The over-riding image remains one of a day trip by the upper classes to visit the mad at Bedlam. In fact, increasingly across the nineteenth century there emerged an enlightened form of treatment for the mentally ill which was a response to a growing concern around the level of cruelty that existed in primitive asylums.<sup>22</sup> Other changes were also at foot and Dr John Conolly the third medical superintendent at Hanwell banished the use of mechanical restraints.<sup>23</sup> Robert Gardiner Hill the medical superintendent of the Lincoln Lunatic Asylum in 1835 was probably the first to run a pauper

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> TNA: MH12/13287, 14900/A/1843, witness statement by Harriet Rodder into the conduct and behaviour of the workhouse, Geoffrey Swift Hirst.

<sup>22</sup> C. Dobbing, ‘The Circulation of the Insane: The Pauper Lunatic Experience of the Garlands Asylum, 1862-1913’ (unpublished thesis, University of Leicester, 2019),

<sup>23</sup> Burtinshaw and Burt, *Lunatics, Imbeciles and Idiots*, 64.

asylum without the use of mechanical restraints. Instead, he believed in ‘vigilant and unceasing’ observation twenty-four hours a day as well as kindness, occupation, and attendance to health. This should be carried out in a properly constructed building.<sup>24</sup> For Sarah Rutherford, the asylum building, and its estate were seen as key elements in the therapeutic armoury.<sup>25</sup> She argues that, unlike the workhouse or prison, the asylum was a medical facility and was not intended to have either repressive or deterrent surroundings. Instead, many were built on the lines of country houses with central buildings containing a chapel, recreation hall, dining hall, and facilities for therapeutic work, such as farm and workshops for male patients, laundry, and kitchen for females.<sup>26</sup> For many asylum inmates, conditions were better than the average working home and might include water closets, running water, gas or electric light, clothes, and warm surroundings.<sup>27</sup> The patients were provided with wholesome and varied food. This seeming luxury was tempered by the regime and enforced proximity to other patients. There could be up to fifty patients in one ward. Privacy was thus in short supply. The daily routine as in the workhouse was strictly regulated and staff had varying degrees of competency. Visiting hours could be severely limited.<sup>28</sup> While not ideal the asylums of the mid and late nineteenth century were different institutions from those of the eighteenth. Both Laura Blair and Cara Dobbing seek to widen the debate around this allegedly rigidly regulated group. Both submit that as with the workhouse by moving away from the narrow lenses such as scandal, neglect, incarceration, and cruelty it is possible to build and create a much broader sense of life for the poor and insane inmates. Rather than meekly accepting their treatment this volume demonstrates that there was plenty of leeway to both rebel and negotiate the circumstances of their care.

Roy Porter’s premise that the patient has been neglected also rings true. He argues that the narrative often consisted of collective and statistical information rather than the human story, and this remains the case for both the poor and the mad.<sup>29</sup> The aim of this volume is to give the voice of both groups a central position in the growing debate around relief

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> S. Rutherford, *The Victorian Asylum* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2010), 22.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>29</sup> R. Porter, ‘The Patient’s View: Doing Medical History from Below’ *Theory and Society*, 14 (1985), 175-198.

after 1834. We argue that the bonds thus, created by the shared experience of negotiation feed into the broader picture around the lived experiences of these two groups of people, an idea which has often been ignored. It is the lack of understanding around how paupers and the mad mediated their way through the rules and regulations of workhouses and asylums that has led to the perception within the historiographical discourse that paupers and pauper lunatics were powerless. One of the main aims of this volume has been to dispel this myth. Thus, our authors have looked beyond the idea that paupers or the mad were without agency and instead advocate that no matter their setting and despite their poverty as a collective group, they never lost a sense of individuality. This is evidenced, firstly by Peter Jones in chapter seven, when he argues that pauper complaints, although unofficial, nevertheless meant that local guardians were forced by the central authorities to not only investigate but also to compile a report of their findings. Secondly, Carol Beardmore in chapter five suggests that paupers used the Poor Law inquiry as both a means of protest and a way in which to bring their plight into the public eye given that many local newspapers reported these events. Without a doubt, paupers understood the power of the newspaper and media in bringing out their perceived injustices of the system. Alistair Robinson in chapter four uses a variety of newspaper articles and novels to explore the different ways in which vagrants negotiated the casual ward system. Finally, Laura Blair in chapter ten reveals that despite the encouragement given to lunatic patients to write, the results were often detrimental to the reputation of their doctors as they used the medium to complain about their medical treatment. Even so, the practice was not discouraged.

David Englander accused historians of concentrating too heavily on the policies of poor law history rather than the people who experienced it.<sup>30</sup> Anne Crowther, in her seminal work on the workhouse saw it as a 'total institution' in which groups of people are isolated from wider society.<sup>31</sup> Yet, the idea of an institution taking control of a group of people was not new. The fundamental commitment of the Foundling Hospital in the eighteenth century, for example, was to care for and to educate children through to apprenticeship and often beyond.<sup>32</sup> Thus, part of the pattern of

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<sup>30</sup> D. Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Britain: From Chadwick to Booth 1834-1914*, (Abingdon, Oxford, 2013), 90.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>32</sup> For more on the Foundling Hospital see for example, R. K. McClure, *Coram's children: the London Foundling Hospital in the eighteenth century* (London and New Haven, CT, 1981); R. H. Nichols and F. A. Wray, *The history of the*

control in all institutions was for the bureaucracy to determine the daily routine of its inmates including when they should eat, sleep, work, and play.<sup>33</sup> For paupers in the nineteenth century, there is an overriding preconception that once admitted to either of the institutions under discussion here, the situation was for life and this is simply not true.

We know this because recent research has revealed that the voices of the poor and their advocates existed in large numbers after 1834 and allow us to debunk this myth. This volume will add to the growing debate and understanding of how the poor experienced the extraordinary changes in relief administration in England and Wales during the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> There is still a paucity of published studies which explore the lived experience of the poor although the new volume *In Their Own Write* will do much, as will, this collection of essays to address that gap.<sup>35</sup> Providing a conduit for complaint for those in the workhouse was established through the formation of local visiting committees. There was, however, a common perception that comments made in visiting books went unread (see Paul Carter chapter 6). There was less recourse to complaint for those in asylums and often their delusional state meant their claims were largely ignored. That did not mean that those who were classed as insane, did not write letters too, and the evidence can be found as many letters were attached to the entries made in the casebooks. Unsurprisingly, letters from the mad poor are rarer than pauper letters but nonetheless, those that exist provide a first-hand account of their experiences and provide a sense of the networks which were created by inmates of the different institutions.<sup>36</sup>

As King et al argue, there is a need to understand the New Poor Law as a network of individuals working together within loose societal and legal frameworks.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, the groups formed and the association between individuals gave the poor the means to circumvent poverty,

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*Foundling Hospital* (London, 1935) and outside of London A. R. Mitchell, *Westerham and the Foundling Hospital in the Eighteenth Century*.

<sup>33</sup> Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Britain*, 90.

<sup>34</sup> The AHRC funded project 'In Their Own Write' has discovered more than 12,500 documents from 104 unions in letters, witness statements and advocate submissions.

<sup>35</sup> S. King, P. Carter, N. Carter, P. Jones & C. Beardmore, *In Their Own Write* (Montreal: McGill Queens, 2022).

<sup>36</sup> C. Dobbing, 'The Circulation of the Insane', 19.

<sup>37</sup> S. King, P. Carter, N. Carter, P. Jones & C. Beardmore, *In Their Own Write* (Montreal: McGill Queens, 2022).

sickness, old age, mental and physical infirmities. Networks incorporated family, friends, neighbours, clerics, local officials, and other inmates. The vast majority of those who wrote were male and serial female writers were rare with Frances Land and Juliana Cox, at Great Yarmouth being one of the exceptions. Both women were serial complainers and were found in the same domiciliary house in the 1851 census, suggesting that their friendship formed an important part of their coping mechanisms both inside and outside the workhouse. More evidence of the relationships formed inside the workhouse are visible through petitions; when groups of paupers banded together and sent to the Poor Law Commissioners a group entreaty. One such document was sent from seven inmates of Bethnal Green workhouse complaining that they had been poorly treated. They alleged that they were kept locked in the cell yard to break stones and kept on bread and water every other twenty-four hours because they could not break five bushels of stones per day. As part of their petition, they insisted that the stones were so bad that even men who had been used to earning their living through hard labour could not meet the quota.<sup>38</sup> In this instance, all of the petitioners had signed their name with an X. Consequently, the paupers demonstrated considerable agency. Not only had they grouped together to exert more pressure on the central authorities, but they had simultaneously used their networks to find someone with the paper, writing implement and willingness to write the petition on their behalf. Corresponding with those outside the walls of the institution was just one point of contact but how those who became inmates forged links, networks and contacts is equally important.

## Movement and Circulation

Workhouses and asylums were porous in many ways not just from the frequent comings and goings of inmates and patients but through the interaction with visitors including administrators, managers, philanthropists, priests, and other church ministers, as well as members of visiting committees and in the case of asylums family and friends. For those in asylums, visits from family were an important link with the outside world and provided both emotional and practical support.<sup>39</sup> Official visitors, for

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<sup>38</sup> TNA: MH12/6845, 5591/1850, petition sent from Bethnal Green inmates to the Poor Law Commissioners, 6 February 1850.

<sup>39</sup> Graham Mooney and Jonathan Reinartz, 'Hospital and Asylum Visiting in Historical Perspective: Themes and Issues', Graham Mooney and Jonathan

example, assistant poor law and asylum inspectors were part of the monitoring processes as were the visiting committee. Their role was to examine the workhouse or workhouses of the Union at least once a week and to inspect the latest reports from the Chaplin and Medical Officer, inspect the stores and provide the inmates with the opportunity to make any complaints.<sup>40</sup> As Paul Carter demonstrates in this volume the visiting committee was devised as part of the administrative process through which grievances could be aired. In truth, they often failed to carry out their duties and did not always have the best interest of paupers at heart. That said the quality of visiting committees varied and where they did make regular visits formed part of the contacts made between paupers and the outside world. Part of the interconnectedness between the workhouse and the outside wall and the workhouse and asylum resulted in the movement and circulation of paupers. For those in the workhouse, entry and exit might coincide with seasons of the year, economic downturns, or other exogenous shocks.

The perceptions around movement and circulation of paupers are not new although the extent to which such movement occurred is becoming better understood. As Alistair Robinson contends the movement of vagrants highlights wider Victorian ideas around circulation. These concepts were fuelled by an interest in the movement of matter such as people, traffic, water, air, and sewers within cities. Moreover, the nineteenth century was a time of movement more generally in the shift from rural to urban living and in migration, particularly from Ireland. Cara Dobbing argues elsewhere that this transfer was reflected in the institutions that were constructed to move the criminal, the poor, and the insane out of society.<sup>41</sup> In *Indoor Paupers* the anonymous author<sup>42</sup> picks out those who transited through the workhouse as a specific class whom he called the 'Ins and Outs'. They were seen as a 'troublesome class', who would leave the workhouse at regular intervals, and put the officers 'to an infinity of trouble' as they were required to fill out lengthy forms each time.<sup>43</sup> This group the author contended were mostly men who varied in age from 21 to 45 and were generally, as alleged, perfectly capable of maintaining themselves in employment. The pattern of release and

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Reinarz, *Permeable Walls: Historical Perspectives on Hospital and Asylum Visiting* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2009), 18.

<sup>40</sup> *The General Consolidated Order* (William Cunningham Glen, 1847), 80

<sup>41</sup> Dobbing, 'The Circulation of the Insane', 147.

<sup>42</sup> As already suggested the anonymous author is believed to be John Rutherford.

<sup>43</sup> Anonymous and Peter Higginbottom, *Indoor Paupers Life Inside a London Workhouse* (Workhouse Press, 2013), 41.

readmission meant that this group avoided the cost of common lodging houses. Admission was used to acquire clean clothes which thus saved their own from wear and tear. It was also a means to acquire medical treatment for foul diseases and a ready meal despite the frequent poor quality and plainness of the food.<sup>44</sup> Thus, as John Walker argues, families with no savings or possessions moved in and out of the workhouse often intending to leave again as soon as possible.<sup>45</sup> Vagrants too, were part of this cyclical motion as they moved between workhouses or into large cities during the winter months searching for nightly shelter and food.<sup>46</sup>

While the above anonymous writer makes it appear a relatively simple process of leaving and re-entering the workhouse the reality was not always as simple as Frank Burge (a serial letter complainant and letter writer in Poplar) was to discover. In September 1884, he complained that he had taken his discharge alongside his wife and four children from the workhouse. Knowing that in all probability he would have to return that evening, he made sure that he had obtained a form for readmission, particularly for his wife and family. His plan had not worked and when he returned late in the evening, he found them sitting outside the gate in some distress. It transpired they had been refused readmission because Burge was not with them.<sup>47</sup> Much of the rest of the letter berated the Commissioners as to the lawfulness of this action. There is thus some confusion as to what Burge thought he was entitled to against a local interpretation of the rules. Charles Dean at Bethnal Green Workhouse demonstrates the extent to which paupers might circulate between institutions and the local community. He had in 1871 been in and out of the house eight or nine times over the last two years and nine months. He was suffering from a bad foot which healed when he rested but broke down again after he had walked on it for a few weeks.<sup>48</sup> He, therefore, found that he was forced to enter the workhouse for treatment and rest.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>45</sup> J. Walker, *Out of Sight Out of Mind: Abuse, Neglect and Fire in a London Children's Workhouse, 1854-1907* (London: Riverdesignbooks.com, 2021), pp. 43-46

<sup>46</sup> H. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Those That Cannot Work and Those That Will Not Work*, 4 vols (London: Griffin Bohn, 1861-2), II, 138.

<sup>47</sup> TNA: MH12/7698, 9148/1884, Letter from Frank Burge to the Local Government Board, 18 September 1884.

<sup>48</sup> TNA, MH12/6862, 50369/1871, Letter from Charles Dean at Bethnal Green Workhouse to the PLC, 12 November 1871.

As seen above, the able-bodied, the old and the physically sick moved in and out of the workhouse as necessary to deal with poverty, illness, and life-cycle crises and this is evident across many of the contributions to the current volume. The same was also true of those who were mentally ill. For this latter group movement was often between workhouse and asylum and usually relied on the local interpretation of the Poor Law legislation.<sup>49</sup> As Catherine Cox and Hilary Marland argue, the General Workhouse Rules of 1842 allowed for those who were classed as being of unsound mind but not dangerous to be kept within the workhouse.<sup>50</sup> Lorina Bulwer who is discussed by Elizabeth Hurren and Steven King in chapter eight fell into this category. Essentially someone had to deem who was a risk and who was not. For those classed as incurable the rules noted that it was 'inappropriate' to keep such persons within the workhouse and they should be moved to specialist accommodation.<sup>51</sup> It could, thus, be argued that the asylum and workhouse worked alongside other Poor Law institutions to care for and remove the pauper insane from society.<sup>52</sup> A sense of the level of movement between workhouse and asylum can be seen in the work of Peter Barlett who discovered that admissions to the Leicester and Rutland asylum between 1845 and 1870 revealed a significant number of inmates were admitted directly from the workhouse. In the years 1861 to 1865, this amounted to some twenty-seven percent of pauper admissions. Paupers who became troublesome or a danger to other inmates seem to have been a noteworthy reason for the transfer. Essentially, the asylum acted as an escape valve for the workhouse.<sup>53</sup> As discipline within the workhouse was often delicately balanced between control and insurgence sending those who were rebellious elsewhere helped to maintain an orderly house. Thus, neither the workhouse nor the asylum were static institutions but were changed and shaped according to both the central state and the individuals who both entered and left.

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<sup>49</sup> C. Cox and H. Marland, 'A Burden on the County': Madness, Institutions of Confinement and the Irish Patient in Victorian Lancashire, *Society of Medicine*, 28:2, 2263-287.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Bartlett, 'The Asylum and the Poor Law', 53

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 56.

## Conclusion

This volume feeds into the wider landscape of recent research into the pauper experience after 1834. As King et al. argue, the poor are usually understood as being subject to the power of the state whether central or local, and victims rather than negotiators of the system.<sup>54</sup> What can be seen here is that increased literacy, wider access to newspapers and the growing expansion of the law into both social and working life ensured a greater understanding of how those in authority could be challenged and or persuaded to improve conditions. It is true, the vast majority of those who became inmates of either the workhouse or asylum left no record apart from their names in admission and discharge registers, but many did write, some for therapeutic reasons, others for complaint, some to provide evidence at a range of inquiries while others published their experience in autobiographies. By using a range of sources, it has been possible to take a broad overview of how the poor navigated their way through different institutions. In doing so, we find that paupers exhibited agency, understood the medical treatment to which they believed they were entitled, exhibited a knowledge of the rules and regulations, (this is particularly seen in complaints against dietary requirements and clean clothing), knew what punishments were acceptable and more generally, how they could circumnavigate the system. Not always easy when rules and regulations could change.

Both asylum and workhouse aimed to create docile inmates who would be amenable to ‘the reforming power’ of those in authority whether at local or state level.<sup>55</sup> What is both clear here and elsewhere, however, is that the poor did not always acquiesce to this idea and the feistier amongst them strove to make their opinions heard, even though they might be punished for doing so. While this volume aimed to explore the methods by which the poor negotiated both workhouse and asylum, it provides evidence for a much wider range of debates such as movement and the circulation of people, cities, and their services, how the poor interacted with local communities, who advocated for whom, the rise of the ‘big state’, changes in local government, a history of institutional abuse, changing attitudes to mental health and its treatment and debates around

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<sup>54</sup> King, et al, *In Their Own Write*, 13.

<sup>55</sup> David Green, ‘Pauper protests: power and resistance in early nineteenth-century London workhouses’, *Social History*, 31:2 (May

what constituted welfare. These themes and ideas are explored further in the following chapters.

In chapter 2, Steven King and Megan Yates explore how life-cycle events impacted how casuals and vagrants negotiated the New Poor Law. Together, they argue that the modal form of relief in Victorian England was temporary and for vagrants, this included stays within the workhouse. Historians have failed thus far to give vagrancy the attention it deserves and so this volume begins to address this gap. Together, they argue that workhouses were more about movement than stasis and should be understood by reference to the outside communities of which they were a part. They argue that it is essential to understand why people chose to stay or leave and part of this is recognising the role of friendship, networks, and shared identities in the process.

Chapter 3 by Lewis Darwen continues to explore vagrancy and begins to consider the impact of movement and circulation particularly among Irish immigrants who came to Britain following the Potato Famine. He argues that while the mixed economy of welfare has attracted considerable attention in recent years it has been largely overlooked as to how it or indeed if it functioned during social and economic crises. Darwen takes Lancashire as a case study during the years 1847-48 and how the Irish who arrived in England sought to navigate their way through the New Poor Law, the workhouse, and different forms of relief. The combined welfare needs of the Irish put tremendous pressure on the New Poor Law and voluntary sector and he concentrates on how public and private welfare institutions coped; at the same time considering how the poor navigated the welfare landscape to make ends meet.

The narrative around vagrancy is continued by Alistair Robinson in chapter 4 when he considers the casual wards of London. He argues that questions around the social utility of casual wards were particularly fraught in London where the Poor Law authorities sought to provide humane relief for the deserving poor. At the same time, there was a sense that professional vagrants and mendicants particularly in the winter months exploited the system when it became too cold to tramp in the country or sleep outside. Despite the legislative and procedural roles becoming more punitive Darwen explores how the vagrants, wanderers, and wayfarers responded and developed strategies that allowed them to manoeuvre or even out-maneuvre the casual ward system.

Carol Beardmore in chapter 5 moves away from the question of vagrancy to explore how paupers in the workhouse used legal means through the Poor Law Inquiry to negotiate their position. It is more usual to see these investigations through the lens of different scandals but that is

not the approach taken here. Instead, she contends that paupers in the workhouse clearly understood how these official probes into a specific incident might be manipulated to their own ends. By reading across the statements and letters relating to inquiries, this chapter suggests that the poor clearly had both agency and understood their rights under the New Poor Law.

Paul Carter in chapter 6 explores the visiting committee as part of the state's mechanism for pauper complaints. It illustrates how visiting committees were part of the Central Authority and were tasked with the regular inspection of and reporting on their workhouses. It was planned by the Central Authority that the visiting committee would be the first line of complaint and thus formed part of the process of negotiation and manoeuvrability around the institution. Carter argues that there were obvious faults in the complaints system not least the problem that those who complained were often punished or that visiting committees simply did not fulfil their perceived role. To circumnavigate this problem, paupers would instead send written complaints directly to the Central Authority. Nevertheless, the visiting committee formed part of the planned administrative channels through which grievances could be aired.

In chapter 7, Peter Jones takes up the story of the 'awkward squad'. This group was made up in the nineteenth century of those who disrupted the smooth running of the institutions of the state. Jones investigates some members of this group in the semi-cloistered institutional context of the nineteenth-century workhouse. Unsurprisingly, workhouses provided a fertile ground for the discontented, especially as these buildings and spaces were not designed to incarcerate individuals but insisted that they abide by punitive rules. Workhouses were highly regulated spaces much affected by local resourcing issues such as recruiting staff, training or expertise and this Jones argues meant there was plenty of room for the awkward squad to be troublesome.

Elizabeth Hurren and Steven King in chapter 8 explore the ways in which the walls of the workhouse and asylum were permeable and how the poor could use this for their own end. Once again, they pick up on ideas of movement and circulation suggesting that circulation between institutions, families and communities was the normative experience for the 'mad poor' rather than a sustained stay in one place. Like the awkward squad, the 'mad poor' were susceptible to local problems such as changes in administrative personnel, a shift in the meaning of public spaces, a change in ideological perspectives, and the opening or closing of opportunities for useful work. This chapter begins the shift in this volume away from the workhouse to the asylum.

In chapter 9, Cara Dobbing argues that the traditional assertions that placed the asylum as an isolated entity constructed to segregate the socially deviant continue to be challenged. It is, therefore, important to examine how individual acts allow closer scrutiny of the pauper experience of insanity. It is thus clear that despite the limitations caused by mental illness those in asylums could possess considerable agency even while being institutionalised. This was often demonstrated through patient actions including resistance to treatment, wilful acts of disobedience, refusing to work, and rebelling against enforced rules. In other words, their illness did not stop them from demonstrating their agency or using it to navigate the control placed upon them.

Laura Blair the author of chapter 10 investigates how asylums began to place importance on the occupation of patients and in the form of writing. For some patients, this meant simply copying from other manuscripts perhaps in itself a therapeutic exercise or constructing their own compositions. Letter writing offered patients the chance to advocate for themselves and provided an important connection to loved ones in wider society. Autobiographical writing expanded in the nineteenth century, and this too was regarded as part of the patient treatment, especially as it allowed medical officers to glean an insight into the pathology of their patient's conditions. Using a variety of different forms of writing Blair explores patient motivations and how these were utilised to negotiate both the institution and their experience within it.

Chapter 11 turns its attention beyond the metropole as Ayshah Johnson explores the impact of the New Poor Law in Barbados. The writers here were mainly women and she investigates how the experience of being poor was driven by colour, gender, and status. White women were often kept out of the colonial equivalent of the workhouse while women of colour had to fight to avoid admission. This chapter puts pauper agency and how the poor experienced poverty into a much wider landscape than has previously been considered.

Chapter 12 brings this volume to a close by considering the lived experience of those who resided within the workhouse and asylum. It considers how each chapter creates a sense of continuing individuality and pauper agency and examines the importance of listening to the pauper's voice both explicitly and by cross-reading across a variety of sources. It melds together the vast range of voices which can be heard across the different chapters to expand the discord and to draw new and expanded conclusions.

The last word of this introduction belongs to the awkward squad, in this case, Frances Land from Great Yarmouth, who wrote complaining

about her treatment and the behaviour of the master and the schoolmaster. She threatened to send the inedible food to the mayor, and at other times stated that women were fainting from hunger while working in the laundry. Her opening sentence reveals that she was a serial complainer and in doing so hoped to bring about an improvement in both the attitude of those in charge and her own circumstances.

Gentlemen I am extremely Sorry that I am again compelled to apply to you to interfere on behalf of myself and others who were deprived of the liberty of going after work or any other business the Guardians compelling those to whom they will now allow a few hours leave of absence to take their children and will not admit them again for a fortnight what then are the poor and chrushed inmates to do are they to commit felony to support their children and alot to the strings of poverty the disgrace of crime ...<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> TNA: MH12/8635, 7233/1853, Letter from Frances Land to the Poor Law Commissioners, 10 March, 1853.

## CHAPTER TWO

# LIFE-CYCLE AND THE NAVIGATION OF THE NEW POOR LAW WORKHOUSE: THE CASE OF CASUALS AND VAGRANTS

STEVEN KING AND MEGAN YATES

The New Poor Law of 1834 refigured (at least in the minds of its architects) the landscape of nineteenth-century welfare. The parishes that had largely administered poor relief prior to 1834 were grouped into much larger ‘unions’ with elected officials to oversee welfare policy and a raft of new paid staff to deal with the day-to-day considerations of who got what and for how long. Both officials and staff were to work under and through a new central authority which had the power to inspect and direct the broad levers of welfare policy, and level the previously regionally distinct practices of welfare.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of this new Act were totemic and iconic workhouses. These were to confine particularly the able-bodied, who would be made to labour. Standards of food, clothing and life were to be monotonous at best.<sup>2</sup> Initially at least, newly formed poor law unions were enjoined to use existing workhouse and workhouse-like buildings to achieve the ideals of sex and age segregation, sustained work and less eligibility, all ideas framed in the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Shortly after this law passed onto the statute books, elected local guardians

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<sup>1</sup> From 1834 to 1847 the Central Authority was styled the Poor Law Commission (PLC), between 1848-August 1871 the Poor Law Board (PLB), and from 1871 to 1919 the Poor Law Department within the Local Government Board (LGB). For a summary of the historiography see S. King, ‘Thinking and rethinking the New Poor Law’, *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), 104-18.

<sup>2</sup> For the most recent review of workhouse historiography see P. Jones and S. A. King, *Pauper Voices, Public Opinion and Workhouse Reform in Mid-Victorian England – Bearing Witness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2020), chapter one.