The Poor Law Amendment Act 1834-1865: A Case Study of Caistor Poor Law Union

Charles Rawding

The Elizabethan poor-law system remained largely unchanged in basic principle from 1598 to 1930, a staggering length of time. It is worth briefly considering these underlying principles, before looking in more detail at the policies which directly affected the period under study. There were four main tenets of the 1598 Act:

a) ‘Setting to work of the children of all such whose parents shall not be thought able to keep and maintain their children’, together with ‘all such persons married or unmarried, as, having no means to maintain them, use no ordinary and daily trade of life to get their living by’,

b) providing a convenient stock of materials ‘to set the poor on work’,

c) ‘the necessary relief of the lame, impotent, old, blind and such other being poor and not able to work’,

d) ‘the putting out of children to be apprentices’.

The problems caused by bad harvests and the French Revolutionary wars resulted, during the 1790s, in the development of what came to be known as the Speenhamland system. This system provided supplements to wages at times of economic depression. One interpretation is that the system became little more than ‘a conspiracy among the employers for the reductions of wages’. Discontent with the system, and particularly with rising costs, led to the establishment of a Royal Commission in 1832. The subsequent report resulted in the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. However, the Elizabethan principles outlined above remained intact.

The new elements introduced by the 1834 Act were; the principle of national uniformity; the principle of less eligibility and the extensive use of the workhouse. At a national level, the system was initially administered by the Poor Law Commission in London, but this was replaced by the Poor Law Board in 1847. By introducing a national system, it was hoped to avoid the local anomalies that had occurred in the past.

Less eligibility basically meant that any assistance provided by the Poor Law Union had to be at a level that was lower than that of the poorest worker not dependent on poor relief. This was a deterrent to the ‘idle and dissolute’. Exceptional circumstances apart, out-relief was to be abolished and all relief was to be given in the workhouse.

As the 1834 Report was aimed principally at the able-bodied poor, there were only cosmetic changes to the status of children, the elderly and the sick (although there were significant changes to the concept of bastardy). The overriding aim was to keep poor rates and expenditure as low as possible.

The biggest change, especially in rural areas, was the setting up of Unions of parishes each with their own workhouses. The majority of Unions were in effective operation by 1840. Workhouses were established either through conversion from earlier Houses of Industry or, more usually, by the construction of new buildings. The administrative machinery was brought into being with varying degrees of smoothness. Rural protest did occur, particularly in the poorer agricultural regions, but was on a very small scale compared to urban protests against the ‘bastilles’.

From the beginning the rural Unions in agricultural districts were controlled largely by farmers, the gentry being only occasionally involved. The gentry and aristocracy could afford to ignore the Poor Law entirely in their own estate villages because poor rates could be controlled indirectly through the regulation of cottage accommodation. Although parishes were now organised into Unions, they remained financially responsible for many categories of their poor until the 1860s. It was the tenant farmer and the smaller freeholders who had the greatest interest in controlling poor law expenditure and the poor rate. Of course, the unseen hand of the gentry could also be applied through their tenantry.

A superficial look at the north Lincolnshire Wolds would suggest that this was an area where the Poor Law would operate smoothly. The replies by the Caistor churchwarden to the 1834 Rural Queries were remarkable only for their complacency at a time when the rest of rural society was reeling from the shock of the Captain Swing disturbances. Wages, by national standards, were high, and there was a marked seasonal shortage of labour. Thus, unlike other rural areas, particularly in the south, poverty was nowhere near so chronic, nor was there the spectre of mass, cyclical, unemployment that faced many in the manufacturing towns. However, as we shall see, even within a relatively affluent rural area, there were considerable tensions.

The Implementation of the Act.

The 1834 Act ensured that the Board of Guardians was made up of the wealthier and propertied classes. Guardians were elected by the ratepayers and owners on a sliding scale which gave the richer owners six votes, the less wealthy one, and the ordinary labourers, none. To be eligible for election, a candidate had to occupy land to the value of £25 per annum. As might be expected, the Board of Guardians was dominated by the larger tenant farmers. The major landowners were not actively involved in the running of the Unions.

Caistor Union (see figure 1) came into being in December 1836. At the inaugural meeting, all the major landowners apart from Lord Yarborough, were present. They were titled ‘Guardians ex officio’, but only J.G. Dixon who owned a sizeable estate based at Holton Le Moor became an active member of the Board, as one of the Vice-Chairman.

The operations of the Union can be loosely divided into three main areas; in-relief, that is to say, relief given in the workhouse; out-relief, and other areas of policy and practice such as relations with other unions and relations between parishes and the Caistor Union.

The Workhouse.

At the time of the formation of the Union there were two workhouses in the area, one at Grimsby and one at Caistor. By the end of 1837 the Grimsby workhouse had been closed and all the paupers moved to the newly expanded workhouse at Caistor. This was in line with national policy. Caistor being the central, long-established market town, whilst Grimsby was not yet the major fishing port it became in the second half of the century. The considerable
distance that the potential pauper would be removed was also considered as an additional deterrent to claiming relief.

In the workhouse itself there were to be four classes of inmates: the aged and really impotent, children, able-bodied females and able-bodied males. It was hoped that: 'the two latter will be the least numerous classes.'

This appears to have been the case at Caistor; where over the period 1841-1861 there was a heavy bias towards the young and the elderly. A more detailed analysis of the 1851 Census Returns provides a further insight into the inmates of the workhouse. Only 66 out of the 164 inmates are given any occupation: of these, 16 are over the age of 60. Of the remaining 50, 11 are listed as agricultural labourers, and 37 as domestic servants. Thus only 30 per cent of the inmates can be considered able-bodied.

By the end of 1837, standardised clothing had been introduced for the eight categories of inmates; these being: men over the age of 17, boys and youths 10-17, boys 5-10 and boys 1-5. There were similar categories for the females. Each group had a distinctive uniform, for instance:

The first class of males wear coats, waistcoats and breeches made of drab beavertong, with cotton linings, white low crowned hats, blue and white handkerchiefs, cotton shirts, brown drab worsted wool stockings and wooden soled shoes.

The principle of less eligibility was certainly applied rigorously within the workhouse. A sample diet from 1857 illustrates the point (see table 1). Against this backdrop it is worth relating the character of the administration at the time. In May 1856 there was a special extraordinary meeting into conditions in the workhouse. In particular, questions were raised about the unauthorised purchase of sherry and gin, as well as the very poor quality food supplied, the Guardians referring particularly to the soup and gruel. The enquiry showed that the governor and matron of the workhouse had been feeding their families there, whilst the cook had been watering down the food. The sherry and gin were supposedly purchased for medical purposes! The governor and matron were severely reprimanded whilst the cook was sacked.

The regime was unquestionably a strict one. With regard to vagrants:

The Guardians were unanimously of the opinion not only that it would be reasonable to confer on them a power of detaining an able-bodied vagrant for six hours during working time on the day following the day of his or her admission therein but that they should be invested with the power of compelling the party to work or have the power of detention until he or she should work. Secondly that such a power of detention and compulsion would be effectual in preventing the abuse of workhouse relief by vagrants which takes place under existing law.

Failure to comply with the regime was dealt with severely. In 1855 three boys stole books in the workhouse, their punishment was a reduced diet.

Conditions remained harsh throughout the period under study. The able-bodied were required to work during the day. In 1859 the Master of the Workhouse requested a horse for general transport on the land farmed by the workhouse, but he was at pains to stress:

We do not wish to substitute horse labour for the spade, but to keep the spade constantly at work and employ the horse in drawing such things as necessarily take the men or boys from their diggings.

In 1863 the men had 'to pick three pounds and the women two pounds of Oats a day and each.'

There can be little doubt that the workhouse merited the reputation it had amongst the working classes. In October 1837 there were several cases of typhoid fever caused by 'the very crowded state of the bed chambers.' Four months later, the Visiting Committee found the several paupers in a 'dreadfully filthy state.' By 1853, these problems appear to have been solved, at least to the satisfaction of the Poor Law Inspector, who found the workhouse to be 'in a very clean and healthy state.' However he did list several defects which make it clear, certainly to modern eyes, that the place was still far from perfect. He pointed out, one 'very offensive drain', not enough water in one WC, a reservoir in the neighbouring field giving off a 'very offensive odour' and also the poor quality of the bread and potatoes.

These elements of workhouse policy reflected the attitude of the nineteenth century ruling classes to the problems of pauperism. The aim was to deter, in order to minimise expense, whilst at the same time reiterating the dominant self-help ethic of the time. In many ways this was one of the darkest periods for the under-employed rural labourer, removed from any paternalist protection and exposed to the chill winds of a labour market where all the odds were stacked against him.

Ironically the principle of less eligibility could have some unforeseen consequences, as shown by a letter from the neighbouring Louth Union to the Commissioners in 1840. The letter concerned the inadequate punishment of three months imprisonment for deserting the workhouse:

In consequence of several able-bodied men and boys of bad character having at various times committed this offence the Guardians deemed it advisable to order them to be taken before the Justices to be committed to prison . . . in the hope that this would have a salutary effect upon them and prevent the Commission of a similar offence by others. Instead, however, of a three month imprisonment having the desired effect upon the offenders - they all declare that they prefer the prison to the workhouse and don't care how soon they get back to it, for in the former, the women having bastard children state, that they spend the day in nursing their children, mending their clothes and sitting by a comfortable fire, whilst in the latter place they can only suckle their children at stated times, are obliged to work hard and cannot have the sight of a fire (the room being heated by hot air). And the same comparative ease is experienced by the Boy Offender for he here has no school, or schoolmaster and no labour to perform and it would be well if illness were the only evil that he is subjected to he here becomes acquiesced with those well seasoned in crime.

A second strand of thought, which strongly influenced poor law policy, concerned the upholding of Victorian 'morals'. This concern was highlighted for rural areas by the 1867 report on the employment of women and children in agriculture. The presence of men and women working together in the fields was greeted with abject horror by Victorian moralists. These same values preoccupied the Caistor Guardians for much of the period. They were concerned about the contamination of the Girls' dormitories by the Adult Women whilst similar 'contamination' lurked beyond the walls, on the public footpath through the workhouse grounds:

We are troubled with many Visitors on Sundays and weekdays too, who claim the right to parade around the
House outside . . . As a proof of how little respectable people value the alleged right or road I may assert that where one of this class uses this road 15 or 20 of the lowest characters may be set against the mill. Prostitutes from Caistor come regularly and the communications between those in and those out is complete.\textsuperscript{29}

Moral concerns were also reflected in religious provision. By the 1850s concern for the spiritual well-being of apprenticed children was being expressed. It was resolved that:

\begin{quote}
each pauper child going out to service from the Workhouse or any parish in the Caistor Union shall, in addition to the usual outfit, be supplied with a Bible and prayer book.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

It was later resolved that:

\begin{quote}
when there is no service in the morning (the children) shall be taken to the parish church at Caistor and when there is no service in the workhouse in the afternoon they shall be taken to the Church if there be a service.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

Children were apprenticed out of the workhouse whenever possible, this of course being the least cost solution to the problem of pauper children. In 1837 the overseer for West Ravendale asked for permission to take William Maw, aged 13, out of the workhouse and board him with the foreman of Mr Harnett at Thorganby for 5s per week, thus saving the parish rates.\textsuperscript{32} Subsequently, the Guardians ordered that 25s.1d be allowed for clothes for Maw to enable him to go out into service.\textsuperscript{33} Further payments were made to keep Maw out at service in 1839.\textsuperscript{34}

In the late 1860s, the Union, encouraged by Miss Boucherett, the landowner at North Willingham, adopted a system of placing children out with families, despite considerable opposition from the Poor Law Board.\textsuperscript{35} The reasoning was the usual Victorian mixture of the virtues of family life, the instilling in the young of a sense of the natural order of things and, last but not least, minimising costs.\textsuperscript{36}

For the pauper there was, on occasion, a more acceptable side to workhouse life, as the following letter reveals:

\begin{quote}
Caistor Union December 27-29

Gentlemen,

We the male paupers of the Caistor Union Workhouse beg leave to return you our humble and hearty thanks for the sumptuous manner you treated us on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and in return we wish you all the happiness this world affords and remains your obliged and grateful servants.

To the Gentlemen of the Board of Guardians

William Thornhill
(Master of the Workhouse)\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

However such relatively isolated instances have to be placed alongside the frequent examples of people absconding from the workhouse. Robert Hilton of Keelby was just one example of an absconder who was prosecuted, whilst the Constable of Caistor was paid £3.7s.0d. reward for capturing three workhouse absconders of whom Hilton was one.\textsuperscript{38} Joseph Kneave of Tealby, after absconding twice, was sentenced to three months in the House of Correction.\textsuperscript{39}

Out relief.

Out relief was strictly controlled by the Union. There was an out-relief prohibitory order in operation for most of the period,\textsuperscript{40} and the Guardians applied the letter of the law as rigorously as possible. Only where the workhouse was impractical was out-relief given. This happened in January 1861, when the men's ward was full. As a result of the 'present severe weather' permission was granted by the Poor Law Board to give relief temporarily.\textsuperscript{41}

Relief was distributed by the three relieving officers of the Union. The Union was divided into three districts (see figure 1), each officer being responsible for a district. Figure 2 shows the circular tour taken by John Gabbitis, the relieving officer for Caistor District during each week in 1831.\textsuperscript{42} These journeys were probably done on foot. In 1852 George Hepworth, the relieving officer for Market Rasen district for the previous sixteen years, asked for and received a rise of £10 in salary in order to buy a horse, advancing years making it impossible for him to continue on foot. However, the adequacy of the system was, of course, dependent on the overall policy much more than on the individual efficiency or otherwise of the relieving officers.

The poor, unquestionably, had a rough deal, as is shown by a letter sent to the Stamford Mercury of 12 June 1863 concerning the treatment of the poor in the parish of Rothwell, the author was later identified as the Rev. I.G. Overton (printed as an appendix).

The various responses to Overton's letter throw considerable light on contemporary attitudes. In the following edition of the Stamford Mercury, the 'Overseer, Guardian and Employer' responded in kind:

\begin{quote}
I have employed him [the pauper], . . . because he belonged to the parish and no other farmer would give him work. He never has been a strong able-bodied labourer in proof of which I may state that except in harvest his wages for a considerable period had not been more than 9 shillings per week. I consider that I have given him three shillings a week more than his services have been worth for many years because I have boys on my farm who did more work every day than the man in question was capable of performing. He was not a yearly labourer he frequently left my service staying away sometimes weeks and occasionally months and returned again at his own request because he could get no employment elsewhere.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

This was followed by a detailed defence of his actions as an overseer (incidentally, the pauper in question had for many years been the parish clerk!). Finally he turned on the Reverend:

\begin{quote}
I am sure your readers will not dispute your correspondent's claim to be the guardian of the temporal as well as the spiritual wants of the poor when they know that the annual value of his living is upwards of £500 and the population at the last Census amounted to little more than 250 souls.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

So much for the unity of the ruling class!

The Board greeted the publication of the original letter with something barely short of appoplexy. They were ultimately advised that they had no redress from a court of law, but more telling from the point of view of attitudes to out-relief and the poor generally was their defence, as contained in the minutes.

The case has been dealt with in the ordinary mode and such an amount of relief ordered as in the exercise of the discretion of the Board was deemed necessary, when
the sickness of the wife rendered additional Relief necessary as were recommended by the Medical Officer were supplied, on her recovery the Relief was reduced as in cases of a similar nature."The overall impression gained is that of a strict rural Union. Attempts at a more generous approach were rigorously opposed. In December 1838, Mr. W.F. Holgate of Keelby gave notice of his intention of suggesting that the amount of weekly out-relief be increased due to the high price of flour. A fortnight's notice was needed for such proposals. At the meeting there were 15 present, the following week there were also 15 present, but when the motion came to be discussed the next week, the attendance was 41 and the voting was 18 to 14 against the motion.

Relations with other Unions.

Caistor appears much stricter in its dispensing of relief than the neighbouring Unions. The 1847 Returns show a marked contrast in Poor Rates between similar Wold parishes in the Caistor Union and Louth Union, Louth rates being consistently higher (see table 2). This impression is reinforced by an extract from the Caistor Union Minute Books in 1861. Louth Union increased the amount of out-relief to a non-resident pauper from Caistor. When Caistor objected, the reply stated that:

the Guardians of the Louth Union had increased the relief because in their opinion the required it and further that they did not require the Caistor Board's or any other Board's reasons for increasing or diminishing the relief given to their Non-Resident Paupers and further stating that if the Board did not fall in with their suggestions they had better take their Non-Resident Paupers into their own Union.

However, even within a strict Union such as Caistor, the Act was far from watertight and its policing was never totally effective. The Poor Law Inspector, in presenting the 1849 accounts pointed to increases in expenditure and strongly recommended the more rigorous application of the workhouse test.

The often war-like nature of relationships with other Unions was very apparent:

The Guardians of this Union having received numerous notices from other Unions that in consequence of the Act 9 & 10 Vict. c.66, they would discontinue relief to their non-resident poor, are compelled in self defence (my emphasis) but with reluctance to come to the same conclusion.

Generally speaking poor law policy conformed with the national picture. Husbands were pursued for deserting their wives putative fathers were compelled to maintain bastard children where proof of parentage existed. Thus, Caistor Union can be regarded as a good example of a rural poor law union.

The relationship between Parish and Union.

Poor Law policies were applied by the Board of Guardians. At the parish level, however, things were not quite so clear-cut. For instance, the overseer of Tealby obviously had a far less strict line than the Board concerning payment of relief. In 1839, there was a clash over the keeping of children in the workhouse when the father was in employment. The Guardians ordered the Tealby overseer to compel the father to maintain the children outside the workhouse. In this instance the Tealby Guardians appealed to the Poor Law Commissioners. This appeal being unsuccessful, they sought the intervention of the clergy, and then they tried to ignore the Board. The Board reprimanded them and threatened them with the consequences of the 1834 Act. Nevertheless, five months later the Board had still not achieved their aims. Once more, in January 1841, the Tealby overseer was reprimanded for sending an able-bodied man to the workhouse.

At Keelby, dissent from the accepted policy appears rather greater. It is worth quoting the instance at length. In November 1843 the Keelby overseer was brought before the Board for giving payments to two families regularly without the authority or knowledge of the Board, leading to an irregularity in his accounts. The December minutes note:

the overseer appeared with his books from which it appeared that he had relieved Elizabeth Hilton and her three illegitimate children for 29 weeks with 5s per week and Mary Blanchard and her two illegitimate children for 29 weeks with 2s per week without any order from the Board of Guardians and that the condition was allowed the same - and that the balance of £41 18s 6d which appeared to be due from the late overseers in March last had not been paid over to the present overseer. The overseer stated that according to a private account kept by the overseers, there really was no balance payable to the new overseers, the amount having been exhausted by the private rate and that the parishioners had agreed to abide by the private book. The Guardians of Keelby frankly admitted that a family had been taken out of the workhouse and allowed out-relief without the knowledge of the Board by which a saving of 8s or 9s a week had been effected.

This quite clearly was contrary to the conventional wisdom, and cannot be dismissed as the operations of a maverick overseer. Keelby was an 'open' village, and although the presentation to the Board was couched in terms of saving money, the existence of an unofficial private rate book clearly indicates that paying money out for the poor was not considered utterly undesirable. There is evidence that, throughout the period, Keelby extensively used the highway rate for expenditure on poor relief. Keelby was frequently at odds with the Board and the Commissioners during the period. In 1848 the Union tried to claim back £13 6s 1/2d from Thomas Bowtell the former overseer, he told them that he had used the money in various ways including 'paying the rents of paupers and the lodgings of vagrants etc."

Complaints concerning the independent administering of relief by the Keelby overseer appear again in 1855. However, we should avoid the danger of presenting the 'open' villages as spendthrift revolutionaries completely out of step with the dominant ideology. The overseers of Tealby, another 'open' village, wrote to the Poor Law Board concerning:

Mary Bullen, upwards of 40 years a pauper in this parish whose daughter lately died leaving property to her Mother who instantly took herself off the Parish and lives retired.

The overseers wanted to know if they could claim the money back! 'Your answer will allay a deal of ill feeling on the subject.' The reply was 'no' unless the money had been loaned.

In Keelby, the same Elizabeth Hilton who benefitted in 1843, came to a rather sorry end in 1861. At the age of 78 she was living with her son-in-law and daughter, the
Guardians paying her 3s a week with a further 1s a week to her daughter for looking after her. Age and incontinence led to the son-in-law demanding she be removed. As a result of discussions between the Relieving Officer and the Medical Officer:

On the 8th (January) the pauper (Hilton) was taken to the workhouse by the Assistant Overseer accompanied by her daughter in a covered open cart open in front, and although it was one of the coldest days during the late frost, she had no covering or wrapper over her ordinary dress except a little cotton shawl - There was no rug or blanket in the cart and when she arrived at the Workhouse she appeared quite benumbed with cold - she could neither speak nor walk - and her excrement was running from her.

She died on the 17th. The inquest held no one to blame and refused to censure either the Medical Officer or the Assistant Overseer, only a belated request from the Board for greater care in the future suggested anything slightly abnormal about the case.

Simmering beneath the surface manifestations of the Poor Law in operation was a constant conflict between providing for the poor and keeping the poor rates as low as possible. This money had to be taken regularly to enforce the payment of poor rates. Resistance came to a head in Grimsby in 1849. The Grimsby ratepayers, led by the Mayor, refused to pay the poor rate, and they took the overseers to court over the alleged illegality of the rate. Their claim was based on the unfairness of the assessment. Grimsby at that time was experiencing rapid industrial and dock development associated with the newly opened railway line. Unfortunately for the overseers, none of this new development was rated, hence the anger of the residents. The problem of course was that new assessments cost money, something which the Board was most anxious to avoid spending. After considerable correspondence with the Poor Law Board in London, a new assessment was agreed to, and the subsequent valuation calmed the situation.

The way in which the 1834 Act was financed led to considerable inter-parish conflict. Briefly, the parish in which a pauper had a ‘settlement’ was responsible for his or her upkeep in the event of them needing relief. Money was raised at the parish level to pay for the parish poor, this money was then centrally administered by the Union. It was therefore in the interests of each parish to keep the potential number of paupers as small as possible by preventing ‘settlement’. Where no settlement could be proved, the pauper was charged to the Common Fund, to which parishes contributed according to their acreage. Overseers regularly requested removal orders and at the same time vigorously fought off attempts by other parishes to have people removed to them.

The potential for abuse of the system also laid it open to attack. The Acts of Settlement were unquestionably manipulated by a few (although it is hard to believe the more extreme accounts of farmers’ actions). A concerned Board of Guardians wrote to the Poor Law Board in 1849:

A labourer whose settlement is not in the parish of his residence is refused settlement by the parties who have hitherto employed him and he is compelled to seek work in the parish of his settlement or elsewhere, or to apply to the Relieving Officer for Relief the intention of the ratepayers being to rid the party out of their parish and as far as practicable to employ only such labourers as have a settlement in the Parish. The motive for this is to prevent the Non-Settled labourer from becoming a charge upon the parish which it is thought he otherwise ultimately would and as the cost of Relief if given, is to be charged to the Common Fund the parish has not such an Interest in the matter as to induce the ratepayer to check such residents from becoming chargeable.

In reply, the Board said they were powerless to do anything about it, although they did suggest that there was some exaggeration on the part of the Guardians. This sort of response was unlikely to quellpopular unrest at the system. Similarly the legal niceties of who signed the admission ticket to the workhouse would be lost on the average ratepayer.

An Irishman has this day made application to the Overseers of this parish (Caistor) for and received a Ticket of Admission to the workhouse. It appears from his statement that he has been in the employ of a farmer residing in the parish of Swallow upwards of a week that three or four days since he was taken ill and remained in the barn of his employer until this morning when at his suggestion he got into a Miller’s cart in which flour had been conveyed to the House and rode part of the way to this place and walked the remainder when as directed by the person sending him he applied to the Workhouse Medical Officer who finding him very ill directed him to the Overseer.

The Guardians wanted to know who paid. The answer came back that Caistor should be responsible rather than Swallow, because the Caistor Overseer had signed the ticket.

In addition, other less legal methods might also be used for reducing rates in parishes. The overseer of West Ravendale was called to task on several occasions for consistently understating his poor expenses, something obviously aimed at keeping the poor rates as low as possible for his particular parish, at the expense of the other parishes in the Union.

Summary.

It has been shown that in many respects Caistor was a good example of a law abiding Union. The Board of Guardians certainly did all in their power to implement central policy. This acquiescence was assisted by the relative affluence and consequent low poor rates of the area. However, this does not mean that the law operated smoothly and without opposition. There was conflict between Unions and between parishes within the Union, between ratepayer and Board of Guardians and indeed between parish officials and the Board of Guardians, all of which suggests a far less straightforward picture than might at first seem likely.

Appendix

The Rev. I.G. Overton’s letter to the Stamford Mercury of 12 June 1863.

To the Editor

Sir,

We have heard and read a great deal lately respecting the distresses state of the operatives in Lancashire and elsewhere: let it not be supposed, however, that such distress is confined to those localities: there is in many agricultural districts enough, and more than enough, of poverty. Though in the former case the provisions of the law have been inadequate to meet the emergency, in the latter, the poor law (in jestly and honestly carried out) is fully adequate to the call, I beg to lay the following statement before the public:— In a village all but
contiguous to the Union House of one of the wealthiest agricultural districts in the kingdom lives (or rather exists) an aged couple, each going on towards 70, of whom the husband has been for some months incapacitated for work by the rapid inroads of cancer in the lip, and the wife is and has been at all times a puny weakly woman. For several weeks, if I may not rather say months, these poor creatures have been condemned by the Board of Guardians to drag on their miserable existence upon the sum of 2s 6d per week between them (15d each), with two pounds of mutton. I do not speak of rent, clothes and coals, because the rent is paid, I believe, by a son living with them (a widower with one child), out of 12s a week, three of which were lately lost to him by illness. About three or four weeks ago the old woman fairly broke down with low fever, produced (as a medical officer avers) by the tainted atmosphere of a close cottage, and by an insufficiency of food. Who can wonder. Of course neighbours cried out against such inhumanity; and when nearly too late the guardian and overseer, living close by, sent for the doctor, who by dint of some additional support has continued to raise her at least for the present; and an additional two pounds of mutton, a gill of port wine and medicine at discretion (God save the mark!) have been laid on for, I presume, the present distress, but take away the fallow and the bone, and what remains of the mutton? I find that their dole of money is not entrusted to themselves to expend, but Mr Relieving Officer lays it out at the adjoining shop. Can you, sir, or the public believe that the guardian of the poor for the parish was at the Board when this case was discussed and never raised his voice against this wretched proceeding! The man had been a labourer of his for 18 or 19 years. Surely a rope, or knife or a cup of poison is a merciful method of dispatching human life when in the way, compared at least with its lingering gradual extinction by the pangs of hunger. I shall probably be told that as a minister of the gospel I have no business with the parish affairs, but if the guardian will not guard and the overseer does not (in this case the two offices are held conjointly), who is to interfere? I feel myself bound to watch even them in this parish, for without such vigilance over the doings of the Board the paupers here will be likely to suffer, several other cases of age and decrepitude coming amongst us?

I enclose my card and remain, Sir,

Your Obedient Servant, but not a Guardian as by Law Appointed.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>A STANDARD DIET IN THE WORKHOUSE, 1859 (MEN)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meal</td>
<td>Sun</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breakfast</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bread (oz)</td>
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<td>Gruel (pints)</td>
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<td>Potatoes (lbs)</td>
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<td>Other veg (lbs)</td>
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<td>Bread (oz)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suet or rice pudding (oz)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Supper |     |     |      |     |      |     |     |
| Bread (oz) | 6  | 6  | 6  | 6  | 6  | 6  | 6  |
| Cheese (oz) | 1½ | 2  | 1½ | 1½ | 1½ | 1½ | 1½ |
| Broth (pints) | 1½ |     |     |     |      |     |     |
| Gruel (pints) |     |     |     |     |      |     |     |


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>1847 POOR RATES.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parish</td>
<td>Rateable value (£) (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAISTOR UNION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Open” parishes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keelby</td>
<td>2832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nettleton</td>
<td>3300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tealby</td>
<td>3200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially “open”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hatcliffe</td>
<td>1694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rothwell</td>
<td>2646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Close” parishes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beelsby</td>
<td>2796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brocklesby</td>
<td>3220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabourne</td>
<td>2242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croxby</td>
<td>1400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuxwold</td>
<td>1700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawerby cum Bessby</td>
<td>1402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irby</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirmond Le Mire</td>
<td>1186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Limber</td>
<td>4586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normanby Le Wold</td>
<td>1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Ravendale</td>
<td>1012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Ravendale</td>
<td>871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riby</td>
<td>3309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stainton Le Vale</td>
<td>1658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swallow</td>
<td>2555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swinhope</td>
<td>1557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thornesway</td>
<td>2503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thorganby</td>
<td>1450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walsby</td>
<td>3068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Willingham</td>
<td>2720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wold Newton</td>
<td>2537</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LOUTH UNION

“Open”

| Binbrook St Gabriel | 2550 | 1s 7½d | 765 |
| Binbrook St Mary | 3312 | 8½d | 520 |
| Ludford Magna | 1248 | 3s 7d | 386 |
| Ludford Parva | 553 | 4s 4d | 376 |

“Close”

| North Elkington | 1174 | 1½d | 104 |
| South Elkington | 2181 | 1s 1½d | 281 |
| Kelstein | 2656 | 10d | 195 |
| North Ormsby | 1800 | 6½d | 131 |
| Wyham cum Cadeby | 973 | 1s 6d | 128 |

Fig. 1 Caistor Union showing places mentioned in the text.

Notes.
2. Bruce (1968) p.32.
3. Dr. Kay quoted in Bruce (1968) p. 92.
4. In fact this was never the case, despite the efforts of the Poor Law commissioners.
6. The 1838 Report of the Poor Law Commissioners stated that 13,560 parishes were in Unions with only 1063 remaining to be incorporated. Nicholls (1998) p. 335.
7. For a contrast with the urban situation see, for instance M. E. Rose (1965) Poor Law Administration in the West Riding of Yorkshire (1820-1855), Oxford University, D. Phil.
10. See for instance Towle's answer to question 46.
11. For a more general view of the impact of the Poor Law in rural areas see A. Digby, 'The Rural Poor Law' in Fraser Ed. (1976) and in urban areas see M. E. Rose (1965).
Fig. 2 Journeys undertaken by John Gabbetts, Relieving Officer for Caistor District, 1851.


16. The 1841 Census provides names and approximate ages only, there is no mention of occupation, whilst the 1861 Census provides the same information as the 1851 except that inmates are identified by initials not names - only the 1851 Census provides both names and former occupations.
17. PL3 / 102 / 1, 2nd December 1837.
18. PL3 / 102 / 7, 8th May 1856.
20. PL3 / 102 / 6, 10th February 1855.
21. MH 12 6680 24th May 1859.
23. PL3 / 102 / 1, 7th October 1857.
24. PL3 / 102 / 1, 6th January 1838.
26. PRO HO 73.56. 1840.
29. MH 12 6680 22nd October 1859.
30. PL3 / 102 / 5, 16th July 1853.
31. PL3 / 102 / 6, 10th June 1854.
32. PL3 / 102 / 1, 2nd December 1837.
33. PL3 / 102 / 1, 9th December 1837.
34. PL3 / 102 / 2, 18th May 1839.
35. MH 12 6683 11th May 1868 et passim.
36. Ibid and see Memorial to Poor Law Board 22nd June 1868.
37. PL3 / 102 / 2, 28th December 1839.
38. PL3 / 102 / 1, 4th August 1838.
40. Webb 1963b, p325.
41. PL3 / 102 / 8, 12th January 1861.
42. PL3 / 102 / 5, 23rd August 1851. It should be noted that the only parish not visited by Gabbetts was Brocklesby. The overseer explained: 'The Earl of Yarborough is the sole owner of all the property within the parish and maintains the poor at his own expense.' MH 12 6677. 31st January 1849.
43. MH12 6681 3rd July 1863 quoting letter in LRSM 19th June 1863.
44. Ibid.
46. PL3 / 102 / 1. 10th December 1838.
47. PL3 / 102 / 8. 23rd February 1861.
48. MH 12 6677. 11th September 1849.
49. MH 12 6677. 29th January 1847.
50. For example: PL3 / 102 / 1. 12th August 1837. PL3 / 102 / 2. 29th June 1839.
51. For instance: PL3 / 102 / 2. 20th July 1837.
52. PL3 / 102 / 2. 21st December 1839.
53. PL3 / 102 / 2. 18th January 1840.
54. PL3 / 102 / 2. 30th May 1840.
55. PL3 / 102 / 2. 2nd January 1841.
56. PL3 / 102 / 2. 2nd December 1843.
57. Very briefly, 'open' villages were characterised by fragmented landownership, whilst 'close' villages were entirely owned by only one or two landowners who were, therefore, in a position to exert more extensive social control. For a more detailed discussion see D.R. Mills (1980) Lord and Peasant in Nineteenth Century Britain.
59. MH12 6677. 10th January 1848.
60. MH12 6678.
61. MH12 6680 4th February 1859.
62. MH12 6680 22nd January 1861.
63. MH12 6680 11th March 1861.
64. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between poor rates and poor relief see: Rawding (1986)
65. PL3 / 102 / 1. 9th December 1837.
66. MH 12 6677. 13th March 1849, 5th November 1849.
67. For a more detailed discussion see R. Pasheby (1852) Pauperism and the Poor Laws, and Rawding (1986)
68. MH 12 6677; 31st January 1849.
69. PL3 / 102 / 1.
70. MH 12 6677. 24th April 1849.
71. MH 12 6677. 17th April 1848.
72. PL3 / 102 / 1. 8th July 1837 & 20th January 1838.