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***‘INDIVIDUAL, ILLEGAL, AND UNJUST PURPOSES’:
OVERSEERS, INCENTIVES, AND THE OLD POOR
LAW IN BOLTON, 1820–1837***

ROBERT DRYBURGH

University of Oxford

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**‘INDIVIDUAL, ILLEGAL, AND UNJUST
PURPOSES’: OVERSEERS, INCENTIVES, AND
THE OLD POOR LAW IN BOLTON, 1820–1837**

ROBERT DRYBURGH

(St Edmund Hall, Oxford)

Abstract

This paper assesses the role of overseers' vested interests in shaping local poor relief provision under the Old Poor Law. The Relief Order Books of the 1820s are examined for the industrial town of Bolton. These reveal an unusual emphasis upon the payment of paupers' rent by the parish. It is argued that this policy is a result of self-interest. Many members of the Relief Committee owned substantial quantities of residential property. Such rent payments ensured that these landlords would receive a subsidy from other ratepayers. It is also suggested that a desire to preserve this type of relief, frowned upon by the 1834 Report, may be a contributory factor in the Board of Guardian's later resistance to the Poor Law Amendment Act.

‘INDIVIDUAL, ILLEGAL, AND UNJUST PURPOSES’: OVERSEERS, INCENTIVES, AND THE OLD POOR LAW IN BOLTON, 1820–1837

i. Administrators’ incentives under the Old Poor Law

Like many other towns in the industrial north of England, Bolton opposed the attempted implementation of the New Poor Law when a poor law union, centred on the township of Great Bolton, was formed in 1837. Knott has noted that, unlike the rural unions of the south, in the north an important feature of the campaign against the Amendment Act was the opposition of ‘respectable inhabitants’.¹ This was certainly true in Bolton where the ratepayers elected a Board of Guardians that was opposed to the new law and whose first action was to write to the Poor Law Commission demanding that ‘the administration of the poor be administered as heretofore.’²

A variety of suggestions have been put forward to explain middle-class opposition to the New Poor Law. Rose highlighted ‘economy’ and ‘humanity’ as the main reasons to prefer the old arrangements.³ Knott emphasised an opposition to the centralised bureaucracy put in place by the Amendment Act.⁴ However, self-interest could also be a powerful consideration and the new law posed a considerable threat to existing forms of relief which, in Bolton, worked to the benefit of local employers and landlords. Many of those responsible from administering the poor law before the Amendment Act profited from the old system and had an incentive to preserve it after 1837.

Prior to the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, which attempted to enforce a standardised system based upon the principle of the workhouse test, there were major geographical differences in the way in which poor relief was administered. As Brundage has noted these were ‘not simply local variations in applying statutory law, but because much of the Old Poor Law was not statutory at

¹ J. Knott, *Popular Opposition to the 1834 Poor Law* (Beckenham, 1986), pp. 92–3.

² Bolton Metropolitan Borough Archive, GBO 1/1 (Bolton Board of Guardians’ Minutes), p. 15.

³ M. E. Rose, ‘The Allowance System under the New Poor Law’ *Economic History Review*, vol. 19 (Dec. 1966) pp. 612–13.

⁴ J. Knott, *Popular Opposition to the 1834 Poor Law* (Beckenham, 1986), p. 94.

all, a collection of customs and practices which, in the absence of a central controlling administration, sprang up and flourished in luxuriant profusion.’⁵ More recently, King has argued that these differences were so large that it is necessary to ask, ‘Is “the English Poor Law” a red herring?’⁶

The majority of these differences resulted from variations in local needs. For example, the pioneering work of Blaug argued that the Speenhamland allowance system, which began to spread across the southern arable counties in the late eighteenth century, was the consequence of structural changes in the economy of English agriculture in this period.⁷ Boyer supports Blaug’s conclusions, arguing that a reduction in the number of allotments for labourers and the decline of cottage industry were the main causes of rising demand for relief, leaving a proletarianized workforce dependent upon wage payments which exhibited large seasonal variability. Boyer, however, extends his argument to ask why this rising demand for relief was satisfied in the way that it was, with outdoor cash payments in aid of wages. He concludes that this system came about as a consequence of farmer controlled vestries which pursued a policy to suit their vested interests. The allowance system allowed labour-hiring farmers to pay below subsistence level wages, in the expectation that these would be made up to the level required to maintain labour efficiency by a subsidy from the rates. As not all ratepayers hired labour, those that did effectively had their wage bills subsidised by those that did not. ‘The importance of outdoor relief was a function of the share of the poor rate paid by tax-payers who did not hire labour, such as family farmers, artisans and shopkeepers.’⁸ In industrial areas the allowance system acted in a similar fashion, acting as an unemployment insurance scheme, maintaining the industrialists’ workforce in times of recession at the expense of other rate-payers.

The work of Boyer suggests that the precise form of local relief provision under the Old Poor Law was determined primarily by the interests of those who administered the system, rather than the needs of the paupers. Allowances were not the only distinctive feature of the old regime and not the only form of relief

⁵ A. Brundage, *The Making of the New Poor Law* (London, 1978), p. 2.

⁶ S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England, 1700–1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000), p. 259.

⁷ M. Blaug, ‘The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New’, *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 23 (1963), pp. 151–83.

⁸ G. R. Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 266 See also A. Digby, ‘The Labour Market and the Continuity of Social Policy after 1834: The case of the Eastern Counties’, *Economic History Review*, vol. 28 (1975), pp. 60–83.

that could be abused for the benefit of the local relief authorities. Relief in kind was particularly open to abuse. If relief was given as cash then the pauper would be free to spend it with any supplier of his or her choice. However, if relief was given in a specific form, for example food or clothing, then the poor law authorities could determine who would benefit from ratepayers money by their choice of official suppliers. Erith's work on Ardleigh in the late eighteenth century suggested that the local overseers tended to select businesses operated by their friends or relations to provide the goods distributed as relief.⁹ King has discovered the same process at work in rural Lancashire during the early nineteenth century. In most of the communities he studied a high proportion of relief in kind was given in the form of clothing. In many of these townships, but particularly in Parr and Calverley, those providing the clothing were the overseers themselves or their relatives.¹⁰ Once again the precise form of poor relief was determined, at least partially, by the interests of those operating the system. According to this analysis, the words of Sir George Crewe about the New Poor Law, 'not for the protection of the poor, but for the protection of the rich' could as easily be applied to the pre-1834 poor law.¹¹

This article assesses the extent to which pre-1834 relief policy in the town of Bolton was shaped by the interests of overseers rather than those of the paupers. The system of relief in the 1820s is reconstructed and evaluated in the light of research into the business interests of the members of the Great Bolton Poor Relief Committee.

⁹ F. H. Erith, *Ardleigh in 1796* (East Bergholt, 1978), p. 26 for example of overseers' business being favoured by the parish vestry. See K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor* (Cambridge, 1985), pp.105–6 or L. H. Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 52–3 for description of payments in kind.

¹⁰ S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000), p. 201.

¹¹ Sir G. Crewe, *A Word for the Poor and Against the Present Poor Law* (1843), p. 7.

ii. The Old Poor Law in Bolton: 'A Culture of Making Do'¹²

The starting point for any investigation into the poor laws in the textile town of Bolton must be the work of King, who made it one of the major foci of his work on regional variations in the welfare system. He concluded that, in common with most other communities in north-western England, the area fell into a category of strictly run, ungenerous relief administration, what he described as 'a culture of making do'.¹³ King revealed that, under the Old Poor Law, in Bolton out-relief pensions were more generous than was the norm for the other north-western communities he studied, and indeed, were more generous than they were to become after the formation of Bolton Union in 1837.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the level of relief payments was lower than was the case in the southern authorities used for comparison. In 1830 the townships which were later to form Bolton union had a mean pension of 9s 3d per month. This compares unfavourably with the levels in the New Forest (King's main southern study area) where pensions in 1834 were 2s 9d per week (approximately 12s 4d per month), a level which tallies with Snell's conclusion that in southern agricultural areas early nineteenth century pensions 'were generally from 2s 6d to 3s per person.'¹⁵ He notes that the harsh new systems associated with the New Poor Law must have seemed like 'business as usual' to Bolton's poor, the legislation merely acting to reinforce pre-existing conventions in relief policy.¹⁶

¹²S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 244–5.

¹³S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000), p. 221.

¹⁴*Ibid.* pp. 244–5.

¹⁵*Ibid.* p. 240; K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*. (Cambridge, 1985), p. 131.

¹⁶S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000), p. 247. See also E. Midwinter, *Social Administration in Lancashire 1830–1860* (Manchester, 1969).

iii. Great Bolton Relief Committee Order Books 1820–1825

Whilst King's *Poverty and Welfare in England* provides important insights into the operation of the Old Poor Law in Bolton, there is still scope for further work in this area. A wide range of sources exists for the individual townships of Bolton, beyond the Union records and Halliwell Vestry Minutes utilised by King. Some of these may prove fruitful in examining a number of issues only raised in passing by King's work. These questions include the role of irregular payments both in cash and in kind.¹⁷ Furthermore, a number of the township records can help extend Snell's analysis of the effect of the Poor Laws on social relations in the agricultural counties to a northern industrial town.¹⁸ The main source investigated here is the Relief Order Book of the Poor Relief Committee for the township of Great Bolton, the future core of Bolton Union.¹⁹ This document is a fine copy of the rough notes kept at the committee's monthly meetings between 1820 and 1825. Apart from two missing months, these form a continuous ledger for five years, giving the name and demand of each relief applicant, as well as the resulting decision of the Great Bolton Relief Committee, set out in a uniform style, as seen below.

DATE	NAME	DEMAND	RESULT
7/12/1820	Parkinson, John	Some linen	Not Granted

The record contains detail of the level of pension payments for a period not covered by King's data set and also includes irregular payments in cash and kind. This allows a calculation of the relative importance of the various forms of relief in Great Bolton's relief regime. Comparing the type of relief demanded with the response of the authorities will help reveal which types of relief were most favoured by the Committee.

The demands made by applicants for relief varied greatly. Some were vague (William Hulme, 6 December 1821, 'wants something done for him') whilst others were very precise in what they wanted (John Parkinson 9 November 1825, 'two blankets, two shirt and two flannel waistcoats'). Some asked for very little (Catherine Garstang 7 December 1820, 'a petticoat') whilst others were

¹⁷S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 246–7.

¹⁸K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 114.

¹⁹Bolton Metropolitan Borough Archive, PGB/6/11–13 (Great Bolton Relief Committee Order Books 1820–1825, fine copy).

extremely ambitious (Ralph Ward, 3 May 1821, ‘rent £10 15 shillings). Despite this variety, however, most applications fell within a relatively small number of categories, making it possible to construct a relief typology, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Classification of Relief Applications

Class Number	Relief Application Type
0	Non-specific Demand
1	Demand for Weekly Cash Payment.
2	Demand for Payment of Rent
3	Demand for Work-Related Goods (eg Looms)
4	Demand for Non-Work Related goods (eg clothing)
5	Demand to Enter Workhouse.
6	Demand for Help in Leaving Bolton.
7	Demand for Remission of Poor Rates.
8	Multiple Demands.
9	Other.

The responses to these demands are also formulaic and can be grouped into a small number of classes. The majority of applications were either immediately granted or turned down. A substantial minority, however, were referred to other bodies for examination, particularly the overseers of the poor or the townships visiting officer. These response types have been classified as follows in Table 2.

Table 2. Classification of Responses

Class	Committee’s Response
0	Granted
1	Not Granted
2	Referred to Overseers
3	Referred to Viewing Officer
4	Other

iv. The Poor Relief Regime in Great Bolton 1820–1825

Taken together these classification systems will allow the assessment of the relative importance of the different types of relief in the later years of the Old Poor Law. Table 3 shows the relative frequency of each relief type, as well as the likelihood of each class being accepted, rejected or referred by the Relief Committee. In the period between December 1820 and November 1825 (excluding two absent months, September 1821 and April 1823) the Great Bolton Relief Committee received 2048 applications for relief, from at least 838 different individuals.

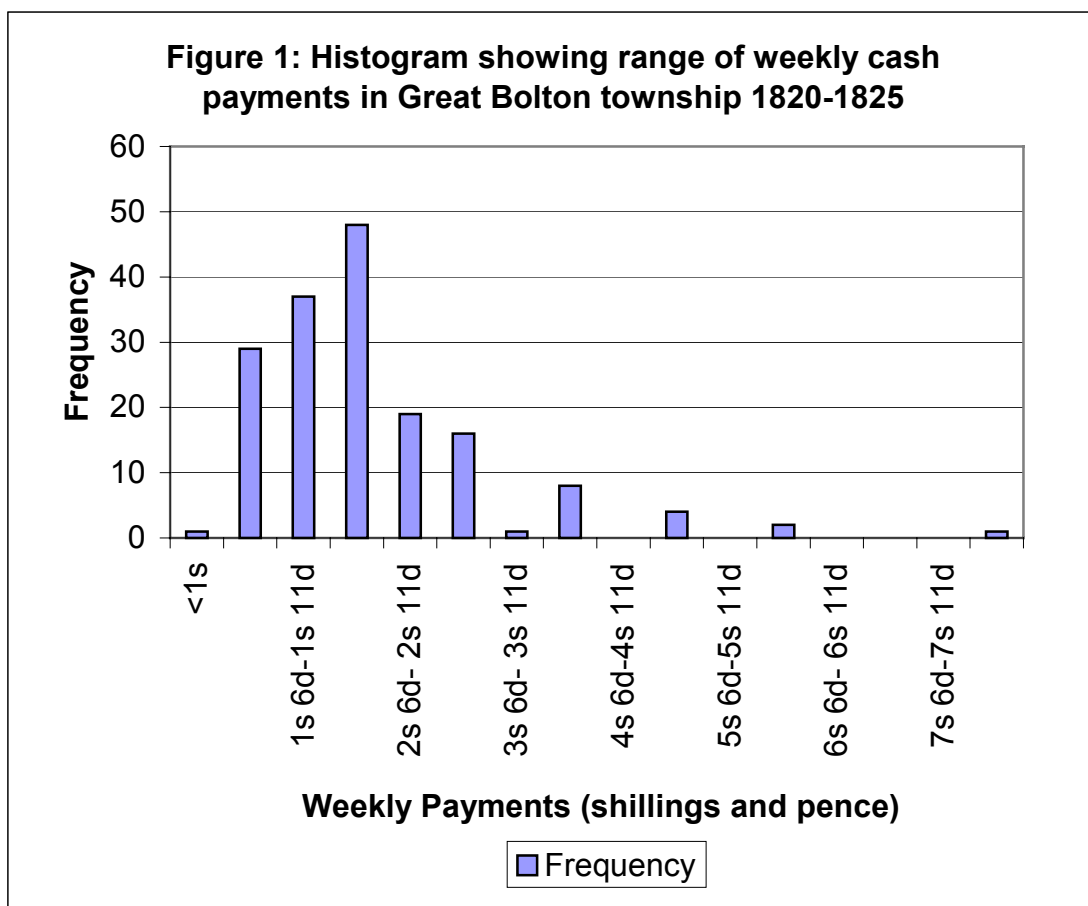
Table 3. Relief Application Success Rates

Demand Type (See Table 1)	Applica- tions	Result of Applications				
		Granted	NG	Referred to Overseer	Referred to Viewing Officer	Other
Non-specific	298 14.7%	11.4%	20.8%	37.9%	16.4%	13.5%
Weekly cash payment	344 17%	37.5%	23.0%	22.7%	6.7%	10.1%
Payment of rent	899 44.5%	44%	26.3%	11.7%	12.1%	5.9%
Work-related goods	54 2.7%	27.8%	27.8%	22.2%	11.1%	11.1%
Non-work- related goods	277 13.7%	41.5%	23.8%	17.7%	8.7%	8.3%
Enter Workhouse	30 1.5%	30%	33.3%	16.7%	0.0%	20%
Help leaving Bolton	12 0.6%	75%	8.3%	0.0%	8.3%	8.4%
Remission of poor rates	40 1.9%	37.5%	30%	22.5%	2.5%	7.5%
Multiple demands	24 1.2%	50%	20.8%	20.8%	8.4%	0.0%
Other	44 2.2%	22.7%	15.9%	27.3%	4.5%	29.6%
Total	2022 100%					

It is uncertain how great a proportion of Bolton's population actually sought relief. Because of the likelihood of several people sharing the same name, it is probable that the 838 separate names listed in the order books represent a larger number of individual applicants. Furthermore many of these applications would be made by an individual on behalf of a family unit. However, it can be extremely difficult to judge the size of this unit. This is particularly true in this case where only a minority of entries (ninety-five cases) record the address of the petitioner, making it difficult to reveal family size by cross-referencing with the census returns. Of twenty-two households which were successfully traced to the 1821 census returns the mean household size was 7.1 people. This figure is, however, unlikely to be an accurate representation of household size at the time of the relief application. The applications were made at various points between 1820 and 1825, and it is likely that household size could have significantly changed between the time of the 1821 census and a later relief application. If the household size suggested by this sample was accurate, it would suggest that 838 applicants would equate to 6018 people seeking poor relief, in the township of Great Bolton alone. With such a small, and probably inaccurate sample, however, it would be unwise to rely on such an estimate, or attempt to calculate a proportion of the population dependent upon relief. It is, however, safe to note that behind the number of applicants themselves lurks a far greater number of dependants.

v. Cash Payments

The levels of relief given to these 1820s applicants confirm King's conclusions about the low level of regular cash payments in the town, tallying closely with the sums paid to applicants in the 1830s. In the 166 cases where the pension level is recorded the mean figure of 2 shillings 1 penny per week (approximately 9s 1d. per month) fits almost perfectly with King's findings of a mean pension of 9s 3d per month in 1830.²⁰ Weekly pensions appear to have risen by very little in the intervening years. The histogram (Figure 1) suggests there is little variance in the sample of pensions, most payments were very close to the modal value of 2 shillings, with a standard deviation of 1.09 shillings. It is likely that a number of the largest outliers (8s.) were intended to support a number of people and therefore should not be treated as payments per capita.



²⁰ S. King. *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: A Regional Approach* (Manchester, 2000), p. 244.

This level of weekly pension payment is notable for its relative lack of generosity. It was substantially lower than most local wages. The one case where the former income of an applicant is known (Mercy Blackburn, 6 May 1824) reveals that he earned fourteen shillings per week, whilst even his fourteen-year-old son received seven shillings.²¹ Furthermore, the Bolton pension was lower than those discovered by Snell or King in southern parishes. Most importantly, it appears to have been lower than the minimum sum required for subsistence.

Estimating costs of living is not an easy task, particularly given variations in prices from region to region and the difficulty in deciding upon an appropriate basket of goods. Even amongst contemporaries, the issue was controversial. In 1840 a long running debate in the letter pages of the *Bolton Chronicle*, entitled ‘What is effectual relief?’ discussed this very issue. Perhaps the most appropriate measure to use in the context of Bolton derives from a private survey cited by King and Timmins.²² This 1833 study of the household expenditure of handloom weavers in thirty-five Lancashire towns estimated the cost of rent, fuel, clothing, food and basic repairs to weaving machinery, and viewed 2s and 6d per capita as a minimum subsistence income.²³ This survey was taken only a few years after the grants described in the Great Bolton Relief Order Books were made; its subjects occupied the same county, and given the number of impoverished handloom weavers in Bolton, it is likely that many on the Order Book lists were of the same occupational group. For this reason the figure of 2s and 6d per week is likely to be a good estimate of the cost of living for those seeking relief. Of the 166 cases where the weekly pension figure is available from the order books, 116 applicants (69.9%) received sums below this figure. Furthermore of the remaining fifty cases many are likely to be intended for several recipients. This is almost certainly the case with the most extreme outliers, where the payments reached six or eight shillings per week. If these could be converted into per capita figures it is likely that these too would translate to levels of payment below the subsistence line. Even those that did receive 2s and 6d or more would only be able to afford the most basic rudiments of life. It is worth noting that at the same time, the prisoners in Bolton gaol were receiving meals costing 6d per head. Even if only being fed once a day, this would come to a

²¹ Bolton Metropolitan Borough Archive, PGB 6/12 (Great Bolton Relief Order Books, 6th May 1824 meeting).

²² S. King and G. Timmins, *Making Sense of the Industrial Revolution* (Manchester, 2001), pp. 309–310.

²³ Bolton Metropolitan Borough Archive, ZZ/250/3 (Survey of Handloom Weaving Districts, 1835 pamphlet).

weekly bill of 3s and 6d on food alone, a figure that puts into context the purchasing power of the poor law pension.²⁴ In a substantial majority of cases, the cash payments from the Great Bolton Committee would not pay for the basic necessities of life. Even with a successful application for poor relief, the recipient would require a further source of income to keep body and soul together. The Dickensian answer that met Thomas Morris' request for relief on 3 January 1822 is a fitting summary of the spirit guiding cash payments: 'Not granted until you appear leaner.'²⁵

²⁴ Bolton Metropolitan Borough Archive, PGB 6/12 (Great Bolton Relief Order Books, 5th June 1823).

²⁵ Bolton Metropolitan Borough Archive, PGB 6/11 (Great Bolton Relief Order Books, 3rd Jan 1822).

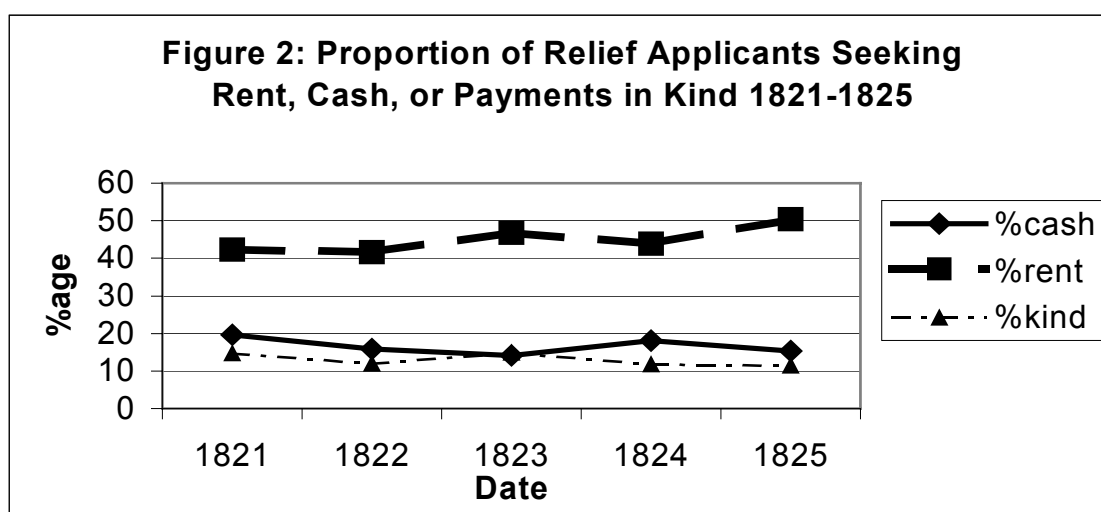
vi. Payments in Kind

Notwithstanding these low levels of cash relief the most distinctive feature of outdoor relief in Great Bolton was the rarity of such payments compared to the numbers of applicants receiving irregular relief either in kind, or particularly as rent. In Bolton under the Old Poor Law less than half the money spent on poor relief was expended on pension payments.²⁶ In terms of the proportion of applicants who received this kind of relief the picture is even more skewed. Of 2022 applications where the relief type is known, only 16.8% sought weekly payments. Even if we assume that many of those in class 0, who do not specify the type of relief sought, were seeking weekly payments, the figure cannot rise above 31.4%, and is unlikely to be that high. Attempting to assess the likelihood of each relief type being accepted by the Committee is problematic, not least because in most cases the result of referrals to overseers and viewing officers are unknown. However, for the most favoured applications, the 36.5% immediately accepted by the Committee, the frequency distribution of relief types tells a similar story as the distribution for all the applications. Cash payments comprise only 17.2% of the accepted applications. Furthermore, only 4.5% of the accepted applications can be categorised as non-specific (class 0). There is little chance that a large number of pension payments were concealed in that category. Only a minority of those coming before the Relief Committee could expect relief in the form of a weekly cash dole. Applicants to the Relief Committee generally sought other forms of relief apart from cash payments. 60% of applicants, and 70.3% of those who had immediate success, sought some form of irregular relief, either rent, material goods such as clothing, or something to help them support themselves (mainly looms).

²⁶S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: A Regional Approach* (Manchester, 2000), p. 246.

vii. The Payment of Rent as Relief

The most important of these forms of irregular relief was the payment of paupers' rent out of the rates. Individuals asking solely for the payment of rent comprise 44.5% of the total number of applications. If requests for multiple forms of relief, one of which was rent, are included then this figure rises slightly to 45.1% of total applications. The predominance of rent applications was consistent over the period in question. Figure 2 shows the proportion of applicants asking for rent each year compared to the next two most popular application types, those for cash payments and other payments in kind. The importance of rents in the make-up of the poor relief system in Bolton is also highlighted by Figure 3 which shows an interesting periodicity in the levels of applications. The number of monthly relief applications peaks every six months in May and November each year. This was due to the fact that rent was paid in twice yearly instalments, with the majority of applications arriving in those months. In the months when few or no rent applications were received the number of requests received by the Committee was far lower.



Another notable feature of Figure 3 is that the peaks in applications, corresponding to the biannual rent requests, corresponds in most cases with an increase in the proportion of applications that met with immediate success. Requests for rent seem to have been the form of relief most favoured by the Committee, a fact that may explain why they were the most popular kind of demand. A chi-squared test reveals that the application outcomes for rent requests are significantly different from those of other request types.

Figure 3: Monthly Relief Applications and Percentage of Applications Accepted Immediately by Relief Committee 1820-1825

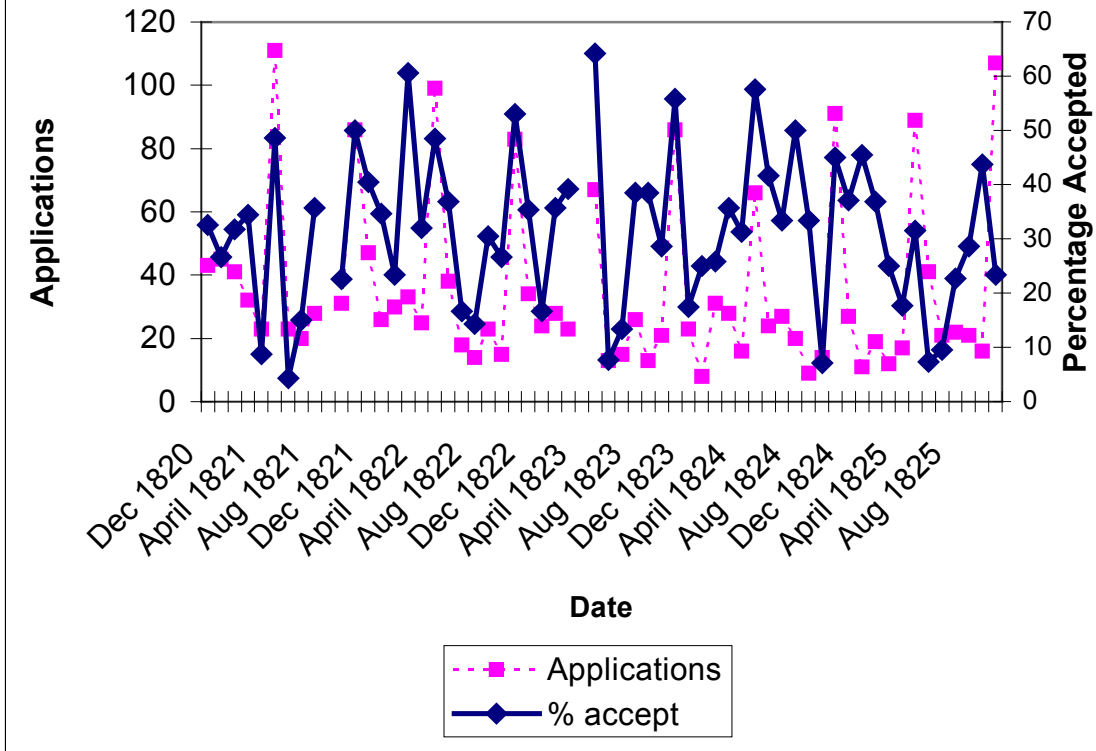


Table 4: Contingency table showing success of rent applications compared to success rates of all other request types

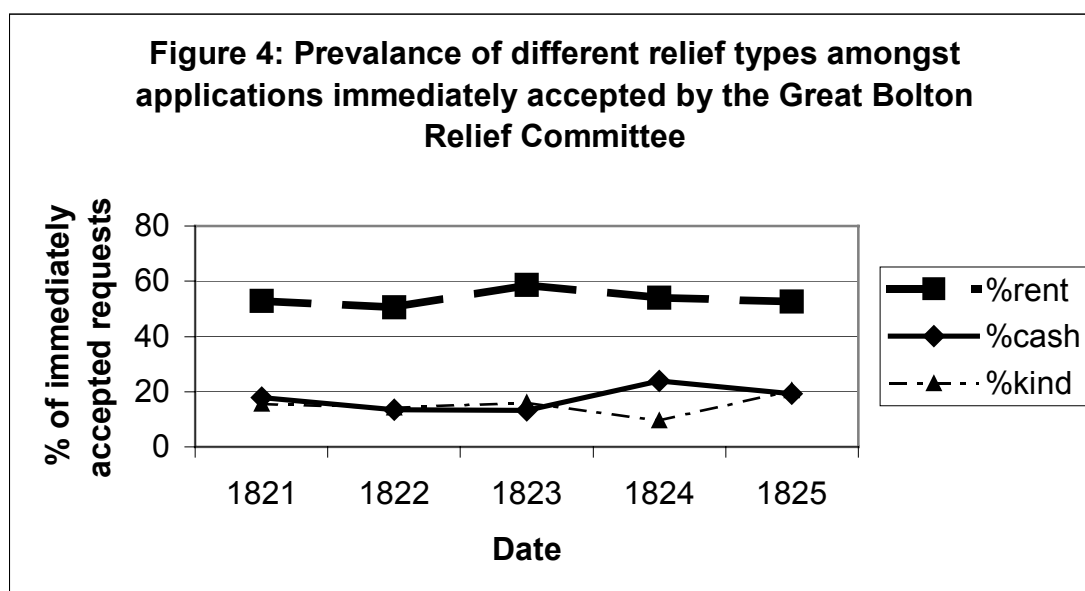
	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
0	396	280.9	115.1
1	236	207.4	28.6
2	105	229.2	-124.2
3	109	86.4	22.6
4	50	92.1	-42.1
Total	896		

Test Statistics

	Granted?
Chi-Square ^a	143.565
df	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 86.4.

The contingency table generated for the test (Table 4) shows the expected frequency of the potential outcomes were the rent applications to conform to the same pattern as all other application types. Interestingly, immediate refusals are proportionately more common amongst rent applications than is true of the other application types. The biggest difference, however, appears to be in the case of applications accepted immediately by the Relief Committee. Rent applications seem to have been more likely to meet with immediate success than was the norm for other sorts of demands. This category of relief comprises 54% of all of those accepted by the Relief Committee itself. This proportion remained fairly constant during the years under consideration, as figure 4 shows.



Rent applications also seem more likely to receive an immediate response, either yes or no, than was the case with other requests and were referred to other authorities much less frequently than was the case for other relief types. Notes by the Clerk of the Committee carrying instructions to the overseers, for example ‘overseers, up to £2 2s.’ in the case of William Yates’ rent application (3/5/1821), imply that many of the cases referred by the Committee to overseers or viewing officers would still end in success. Even without knowing how many of these referrals eventually resulted in the granting of relief, however, the importance of rent payments is interesting. King says that ‘the northern and western communal welfare system became heavily involved with the payment of rents during the latter part of the eighteenth century, with rents accounting for

almost one third of cash payments by 1820'.²⁷ By the mid-1820s the situation in Bolton appears to have surpassed even that. It is difficult to compare the figures for expenditure on rent with the proportion of applicants receiving relief as rent. The mean value of the rents paid is £1 16s (for six months), equivalent to approximately 1 shilling and 5 pence per week. It is lower than the mean pension value of 2 shillings and 1 pence but, given the far larger number of paupers receiving relief as rent rather than weekly doles, it seems reasonable to suppose that the amount expended by the Relief Committee on rents greatly exceeded that spent on regular cash payments. It seems that Great Bolton's relief policy relied upon the payment of rents to an unusual degree, a fact which requires explanation.

²⁷ S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: A Regional Approach* (Manchester, 2000), p. 199; also S. King, 'Reconstructing Lives: the Poor, the Poor Law and Welfare in Calverley, 1650–1820' *Social History*, 22 (1997), pp. 318–38.

viii. ‘A key goes to each set of mules’: Employers, landlords and overseers

In the two decades prior to the passage of the Poor Law Amendment Act there was a hard fought contest between Bolton’s Tory and Whig factions for the control of local political institutions. In the course of this struggle it was frequently alleged that the poor law authorities were unfairly manipulating the relief system for their own benefit. In the most extreme cases, it was claimed that the overseers were engaged in outright corruption and embezzlement.

William Naisby, a Radical draper, and opponent of the incumbent Tory vestry, suggested that that money was being appropriated for the benefit of those administering the Poor Law. The poor rates rose dramatically in Bolton during the 1820s, from 6s. in the pound between May 1823 and May 1824 to 15s. by December 1828.²⁸ Naisby contended that little of this money reached the poor of Great Bolton, who as has been described, received extremely meagre pensions during this period. He asked of this money: ‘Was it spent in relieving the poor and distressed? No, it was spent on good eating and drinking. Between the years 1826 and 1827 there were spent for these purposes, at the Three Arrows, the Three Tuns and the Commercial and Flag Inns £200 11s 3d. That was the use these friends made of the public money.’²⁹ The Governor of Bolton Workhouse was alleged to enjoy ‘more feasting at that House, than in any Gentleman’s house in Bolton.’³⁰

Naisby’s accusations must be viewed with some caution. A Radical local politician, determined to achieve reform in Bolton’s mode of governance, he stood to make substantial political capital by discomfiting the existing regime. It is notable, however, that his views achieved considerable support. The Leypayers’ Committee decided that the wage bill for the township officials of Great Bolton should be reduced from £1000 per annum to £380. In particular, they recommended that the Workhouse Master’s salary and board should be reduced from £250 to £100.³¹ The *Bolton Chronicle*, admittedly itself a radical organ and opponent of the status quo, wrote of ‘the manner in which the public money of this town has lately been appropriated to individual, illegal, and unjust purposes.’³²

Partisan as this criticism may be, it is supported by a number of suspicious

²⁸ *Bolton Chronicle*, 6th December 1828.

²⁹ *Bolton Free Press*, 18th January 1840.

³⁰ *Bolton Chronicle*, 11th August 1827.

³¹ *Bolton Chronicle*, 11th August 1827.

³² *Bolton Chronicle*, 15th October 1831.

looking entries in the workhouse accounts. Much later these were cited at a meeting of the town council in 1840, to the amusement of the Mayor, Charles Darbishire. The following extract from these accounts was carried in the *Bolton Chronicle*.

‘Sundry Accounts from the Workhouse

Date	Item	Cost
11 April 1825	Two gallons brandy	£2 10s 0d
	Two gallons gin	£1 7s 6d
	One gallon rum	£0 15s 0d
9 July 1825	One gallon Gin	£0 13s 6d
	One gallon brandy	£1 5s 6d
September 1825	Rum, brandy and gin	£2 16s 0d
9 February 1826	One gallon brandy	£1 5s 6d
	One gallon rum	£0 18s 0d
1 March 1826	One gallon gin	£0 13s 6d
	Brandy and gin	£1 18s 6d

Mr. Darbishire: “Perhaps those liquors were used as medicine, and ordered by the doctor?” (Laughter)³³

Whilst the evidence for outright corruption and misappropriation of public funds is far from conclusive, it is clear that there was a substantial body of opinion in Bolton that believed that such activities were taking place. However, even without spending the rates on gin, there were several other, more subtle, ways in which the poor relief system could be manipulated to the benefit of those operating it.

One of the greatest complaints of those trying to unseat the existing town’s existing officers, ‘the Junta’, was that the rate burden was not assessed in an equitable manner. In particular, it was claimed that the bulk of the rating burden fell upon ‘the middling ranks of rate-payers, such as shopkeepers, owners of cottage property, and other small property owners’ rather than upon the very wealthiest rate-payers.³⁴ William Naisby cited two examples of this. First: ‘One gentleman who had two shops in a principal street, and a large mansion in which he himself resided, rated the whole of them at £11, and at the same time,

³³ *Bolton Free Press*, 20th June 1840.

³⁴ P. Taylor, *Popular Politics in Early Industrial Britain* (Keele, 1995), p. 30.

a poor man, for a small shop in a back street, was rated to the same amount.’³⁵ Second, Naisby’s own situation, as he claimed to own seven shops worth £4,000 but to pay rates equal to those levied on some properties worth £60,000.³⁶

It is impossible to test Naisby’s claim that the rates were assessed unfairly. It is clear, however, that the bulk of the rate burden in Great Bolton fell largely upon smaller rate-payers such as householders. No rate books survive for the early 1820s. However, the books for 1829, the closest surviving year, shows that 5,643 out of 5,927 rate assessments in Great Bolton (95.2%) were on property valued at less than £20. Of £3,673 12s 0d raised in poor rates that year, £1,431 19s 0d (39%) were paid by those with property assessed at more than £20. However, it cannot be assumed that all of those businesses assessed above this level were major employers of labour. A number of the +£20 assessments were public houses worth only slightly more than the cut off point. It is assumed that these pubs were either family run, or employed outsiders only on a small scale. Excluding these assessments one is left with only 51 major labour-hiring businesses, mainly cotton mills, bleach works, foundries and unspecified factories. These major labour-hiring businesses between them contributed only £507 18s 8d to the poor rates (13.8% of the total raised).³⁷ Whilst there is no evidence to support Naisby’s suggestion that these large employers were having their rate bills unfairly reduced, it is true that the majority of the rates collected were paid by those who employed little or no labour. As in the case of Boyer’s labour-hiring farmers, any relief in aid of wages given to the employees of the largest businesses would constitute a subsidy to the employers mainly paid for by smaller rate-payers.

If Great Bolton’s major employers had the same incentive as southern labour hiring farmers to ensure that their wage bills were subsidised from the rates, then it is important to ask why cash payments from the Relief Committee were as small as they were and why they comprised a relatively small proportion of successful relief applications. The most plausible explanation seems to be that in Bolton, the payment of rent could benefit employers in the same way.

Following his visit to the town in 1828, the French sociologist Gustave d’Eichtal noted what he called a flagrant abuse. ‘The employers build rows of houses and force every one of the spinners, even lads of sixteen living with their

³⁵ *Bolton Free Press*, 20th June 1840.

³⁶ *Bolton Chronicle*, 15th September 1827.

³⁷ Bolton Metropolitan Borough Archive, PGB 9/45 (1829 Rate Assessment Book for Great Bolton).

parents, to rent one.’³⁸ In Bolton, where the main employers were also the main landlords, the payment of rents as a form of relief would therefore result in a net flow of income from other tax-payers to the manufacturer/landlord. However, the extensive payment of rent as a form of relief would push up the poor rates. For this reason, some writers, such as McCloskey, have questioned whether paying rents from the rates was really in the best interests of the landlord. McCloskey argued that, because tenants are mobile and property is not, ‘landlords in a parish with high poor rates ... would have to charge lower rents to attract farmers with alternative employment for their capital in parishes with low rates or elsewhere in the economy’.³⁹ Blaug and Boyer have both disputed the accuracy of this argument, even for agricultural areas, but for industrial Bolton in particular the theory is problematic. McCloskey’s model relies upon the assumption that the tenant has the freedom to take his money elsewhere, and can thus bargain the landlord down to a lower level of rent. Such a strong bargaining position is lost if the landlord is also the tenant’s employer. The landlord is insulated against competition, as under such a contract the tenant cannot take his business elsewhere without jeopardising his employment. Such contracts were difficult to escape. Almost all of the major employers in Bolton, with the exception of the Ashworths of Egerton, used this system.⁴⁰ Furthermore, those tied to such contracts could not rely upon the law to release them. In 1830, Mr. Doherty, an employee of Bolling Brothers, appeared before the local magistrates complaining of ‘3s 6d deducted from wages due to him, for the rent of a cottage which he never occupied. During the whole time of his being employed by them this deduction was regularly made from his weekly wages it was the uniform practice in their mills.’⁴¹ His case was dismissed. Landlords in Bolton were therefore in a strong position under the Old Poor Law. The link between employment contracts and tenancy contracts meant that the individual tenant was in no position to negotiate a rent reduction even if poor rates increased, as they did in the 1820s. The willingness of the overseers to pay rent as a form of relief meant that the ratepayer guaranteed the landlords’ rental income in the event of the tenant being too poor to pay.

The distinctive nature of the Old Poor Law in Bolton was to the advantage of the employer/landlord. Many of the town’s most influential figures certainly had

³⁸ G. d’Eichtal, W. H. Challoner, and B. H. Ratcliffe, *A French Sociologist looks at Britain* (Manchester, 1977), p. 96.

³⁹ D. McCloskey, ‘New Perspectives on the Old Poor Law’ *Explorations in Economic History*, 10 (1973), p. 423.

⁴⁰ A.B. Reach, *Manchester and the Textile Districts in 1849* (Rossendale, 1972), p. 67.

⁴¹ *Bolton Chronicle*, 22nd February 1830.

an incentive to ensure that rent payments took priority in the distribution of relief. However, the fact that these individuals profited from the administration of the poor law does not prove that the system was being manipulated for their benefit. To argue such a case convincingly it would be necessary to assess the linkages between the poor law authorities, employers and landlords to show that Great Bolton's landlords had a large degree of influence over the workings of the overseers. This task is fraught with difficulties. A particular problem is the question of indirect influence. It is possible for interested individuals to influence the course of poor law policy without holding an administrative post themselves. Those with friends, relatives or business contacts who acted as township officers could potentially affect policy without ever appearing in the records themselves. Indeed, it is this kind of indirect influence which was one of the main concerns of William Naisby and other local Radicals. When discussing the question of inequitable rating, Naisby spoke of 'a good deal of property left out of the rating altogether; chiefly property belonging to persons who had friends sitting in judgement at that time.'⁴² However important contemporaries considered such indirect influence, it is likely to be difficult to detect from the historical record.

Fortunately, the occupations and interests of the township officers themselves are less difficult to investigate. The phrase township officer, rather than overseer, is used in this context because of the complicated division of labour at Great Bolton vestry meetings during this period. Scholes noted that 'the functions of overseers and town's committee became frequently mixed.'⁴³ The Order Books themselves do not seem to contradict this, with each month's decisions being accompanied by a list of those in attendance, a list which always includes officials other than the overseers themselves. Indeed the body considering applications for relief was referred to as 'the Overseers and Committee for the management of the affairs of the poor.'⁴⁴ For this reason it is necessary to examine all those present at these meetings, as opposed to just the township's overseers.

Among the overseers themselves, the evidence does not conclusively show how great the influence of employers was. In some cases it is possible to make out a relationship between overseer and employer, as noted by Boyer.⁴⁵ John Bolling, for example, was the brother of E. and W. Bolling, the owners of one

⁴² *Bolton Free Press*, 20th June 1840.

⁴³ J. C. Scholes, *History of Bolton* (Bolton, 1892), p. 462.

⁴⁴ Bolton Metropolitan Borough Archive, PGB 6/12 (Great Bolton Relief Order Books, 25th March 1825).

⁴⁵ G. R. Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 81.

of the largest textile factories in the town, and was highly involved in the administration of the Poor Law. John, and another relative Thomas, both appear on the list of committee members and John became overseer in 1827, before later going on to become Chairman of the Board of Guardians.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the Poor Relief Order books, used in conjunction with the census returns and the 1824 Bolton Directory, do indicate that the Committee was not solely comprised of representatives of the major manufacturing interests. A number of important figures on the committee were employed in what might be described as lower middle-class commercial positions. John Hamer, first an overseer and later assistant overseer, is described as a shopkeeper, whilst two other overseers, Michael Tudor and David Hewitt were, respectively, a grocer and an ironmonger.⁴⁷ For this reason one should not overstate the importance of the manufacturing interests on the committee. As the occupation of so many members is unknown it is difficult to assess the balance of trades in the committee and how much influence various groups had. Even in many cases where their occupation is known (for example John Baxendale, muslin manufacturer) the scale of the operation remains unknown, making it difficult to tell how great an influence was wielded by major employers. The town's manufacturing sector seemed to be represented at the relief committee, but it is impossible to assess how strong a faction they formed.

Rather more information is available concerning property ownership amongst those operating the poor law. Between 1820 and 1825 fourteen men held the post of overseer. Of these three at least, John Baron, Ellis Yates, and Johnson Lomax, were owners of multiple rented properties in Great Bolton. The Great Bolton rate books list these three names as owners of nine, five and six rented houses respectively, and as the 1821 census shows that each name was unique in Great Bolton, there seems little doubt that the house-owners and overseers were one and the same.⁴⁸ However, it is likely that there were more than three overseers with rental property. It is also possible that the preceding figures understate the property holdings of Baron, Yates and Lomax. In cases where a number of individuals in the town share the same name, one cannot be so certain that the overseer and the landlord are the same person. For example, as well as the six properties listed as belonging to Johnson Lomax, there are another twenty-four properties belonging to a J. Lomax. As it is already known that

⁴⁶ *Parliamentary Papers 1846*, xxxvi, pp. 12–17: A Copy of Reports received by the Poor Law Commission respecting the states of the Macclesfield and Bolton Unions....

⁴⁷ Bolton Metropolitan Borough Archive, Bolton Directory 1824.

⁴⁸ Bolton Metropolitan Borough Archive, PBG 9/43–7 (Great Bolton Rate Books 1829), and Census Enumerators' Books 1821, 1831.

Johnson Lomax was a substantial property owner, it is likely that some or all of these houses belonged to him. However, due to the proliferation J. Lomaxes in the census returns, this is far from certain. Six is merely the lower bound for the number of properties potentially owned by this man, which could reach as high as thirty. Although there were six J. Heaton's in Great Bolton at that time, one could also potentially add John Heaton to the list, as the owner of up to eleven properties.

Broadening the perspective to take in other poor law officers, such as the rate collectors, and all others cited in the committee minutes, takes the total number of committee members over this period to thirty-six. However, it also adds another five uniquely named landlords to the total, William Bamber (four properties), John Baxendale (five), John Olivant (four) and Thomas and John Bolling (eleven between them). Another four share the same names as local landlords, in one case an extremely important one. John Stanton, charged by the Committee in 1822 with the task of securing new premises for the overseers, was one of only two men in the town with that name; a name listed as the owner of no less than fifty houses in Great Bolton alone. In summary, of the thirty-six members of 'the Overseers and Committee for the management of the affairs of the poor', at least eight men, and possibly as many as thirteen (22.2%–36.1%), received rental income from more than one property in the township of Great Bolton.

It is also notable that in some cases the link between employer and landlord noted earlier is in evidence. This would seem to be true of Ellis Yates; overseer, owner of five houses and proprietor of 'Ellis Yates and son, manufacturers of plain and fancy muslin, shawls, Marseilles bed-quilt etc.'⁴⁹

Their level of representation upon the committee would suggest that the landlords of Great Bolton held substantial influence over the operation of the poor law in the town, even without taking into account the manner in which they might indirectly sway proceedings through friends or acquaintances on the Committee. Whilst it is difficult to detect such favours from the historical record it is not impossible that they took place. John Bolling, as we have seen was the brother of E. and W. Bolling, major employers and owners of a large portfolio of rental properties, Another overseer, John Bamber, shared a name with one of the confirmed landlords, William Bamber, and is conceivably a relative. Furthermore, Matthew Butcher, the market overlooker, was listed in the rate books as being the tenant of Johnson Lomax.

Correlation does not equate with causation, and one cannot infer firm conclusions about the committee's decision making process from the occupations

⁴⁹ Bolton Metropolitan Borough Archive (Bolton Directory, 1824).

of its members. It does seem, however, that even without the kinds of favours to friends condemned by Naisby, a substantial proportion of the committee's members stood to benefit personally from Bolton's unusual emphasis upon rent as a form of relief.

ix. The New Poor Law and the decision to prevent Boards of Guardians paying rent for the paupers

The incentive to pay rents as a form of relief may cast new light on Bolton's opposition to the Poor Law Amendment Act. The Poor Law Report attacked the payment of rent as a form of relief, believing it forced up costs for the independent labourer. 'It is evident that when the landlord has such an easy remedy for securing his claim, he can command any rent he chooses to ask.'⁵⁰ For this reason, the Particular Orders issued to individual unions by the Poor Law Commission between 1834 and the formation of Bolton Union in 1837 usually stipulated the abandonment of rent as a form of relief. If this were to happen many involved in Poor Law administration in Bolton would have been aware that they stood to lose a great deal.⁵¹

Many of those who stood to lose most from the abolition of the payment of rents were still in positions of influence. The *Bolton Free Press* complained that 'too many of the new Poor Law Guardians are neither more nor less than the old overseers of the poor'.⁵² Throughout the early years of the New Poor Law in Bolton the Board of Guardians was Tory controlled, as the Relief Committee had been in the 1820s, and indeed contained many of the same individuals. For example, John Bolling was Chairman from 1840 until shortly before his death in 1846. Furthermore, many of the old allegations of corruption and misappropriation of funds persisted into the new era. Guardians were accused of receiving 'gifts' of food and drink from the workhouse, and allocating union contracts in ways that benefited their friends and themselves.⁵³ Ironically, the only individual against whom such accusations were proven was Naisby, the former scourge of corruption, now Guardian himself, who was found to be selling his own goods to Great Bolton workhouse.⁵⁴

Given that the Board of Guardians bore such a similarity to the Relief Committee it is perhaps unsurprising that this body fought so hard to preserve the old system. Assistant Commissioner Mott declared that he had 'seen few instances in which the discretionary powers vested by the legislature in the Board of

⁵⁰ S. G. Checkland and E. O. A. Checkland, *The Poor Law Report of 1834* (London, 1974), p. 86.

⁵¹ N. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement* (Manchester, 1971), p. 108.

⁵² *Bolton Free Press*, 13th June 1840.

⁵³ *Bolton Free Press*, 18th February 1843.

⁵⁴ Bolton Metropolitan Borough Archive, GBO 1/1 (Board of Guardians' Minutes 1837–1841) fo. 253.

Guardians has been used with more mischievous tendencies'.⁵⁵ Most of the practices the Poor Law Commission described as abuses, for example the allowance system of relief in aid of wages, continued after 1837.⁵⁶ Perhaps most importantly paupers continued to have their rent paid by the poor law authorities. In 1841 the union paid £754 in rent and by 1844 this had risen to £900.⁵⁷ The report of Assistant Commissioner Mott on the nature of relief provision in Bolton suggests that these policies were primarily used for the benefit of the Guardians, and in particular their chairman, John Bolling. A selection of the questions asked to Mott's informants suggest the Assistant Commissioner believed that the Guardians were abusing the relief fund as a way of subsidising their own businesses:

'Are the persons to whom you make up wages mostly engaged in the cotton or silk manufactory?'

'The present chairman is a manufacturer, is he not?'

'Are there other Guardians, employers of labour, members of the Board?'

'Have this class of Guardians in general been very attentive to the business of the Board?'

'Were not these Guardians charitable with their own money?'⁵⁸

Such character assassination must be taken with a pinch of salt. Bolton Guardians and the Poor Law Commission had an adversarial relationship, and the Guardians regarded this as a smear campaign designed to undermine their authority. 'The whole of his report ... will serve for something to be pointed at at all times to show that Government Commissions are not intended to elicit truth, but to serve a party and a special purpose.'⁵⁹ The accusations of personal stinginess seem to be unmerited, the subscription lists for local charities such as the Poor Protection Society show significant contributions from Guardians such

⁵⁵ PRO, MH 12.5594 (Mott to PLC, 30th April 1841).

⁵⁶ *Parliamentary Papers 1846* xxxvi, p. 12: A Copy of Reports received by the Poor Law Commission respecting the states of the Macclesfield and Bolton Unions.

⁵⁷ S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: A regional perspective* (Manchester, 2000), p. 247.

⁵⁸ *Parliamentary Papers 1846* xxxvi, pp. 12–17: A Copy of Reports received by the Poor Law Commission respecting the states of the Macclesfield and Bolton Unions.

⁵⁹ *Parliamentary Papers 1842* xxxv, p. 74: Distress in Bolton.

as John Bolling.⁶⁰ Furthermore, there were alternative reasons for persisting with forms of outdoor relief such as allowances and rents. In the context of the mass distress in Bolton in the 1840s there was a need to administer relief as cheaply as possible. The union's finances were in a parlous state, with 10,000 people unable to afford to pay their rates in November 1840.⁶¹ It was cheaper to relieve an individual pauper outside the workhouse than inside. By permitting the allowance system, or the payment of rent, the Board could contribute to the upkeep of the workers on short-time and inadequate wages without having to pay the full cost of their maintenance. Nevertheless, Assistant Commissioner Mott was correct to suggest that some of the Guardians would also be beneficiaries of such a system, as indeed they had been since the 1820s. 'Economy' and 'humanity' may have been seen as valid reasons for preserving the old system of poor relief in Bolton, but for many of the town's biggest employers self-interest was a powerful third factor.

⁶⁰ *Bolton Free Press*, 4th April 1840.

⁶¹ *Bolton Free Press*, 21st November 1840.

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All Souls College, Oxford, OX1 4AL

Siobhan McAndrew

Nuffield College, Oxford, OX1 1NF

Avner Offer

All Souls College, Oxford, OX1 4AL

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